

Light

Autobiographical Sketches

by

John Allison



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~ Part One ~

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Preface

Let us not seek for something behind the phenomena — they themselves are the theory.

~ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

To see what comes to light: that was the originating principle when I began writing about my life in 1999. I also wanted to practise writing non-fiction prose in relation to my English-teaching; we were studying Janet Frame's *To the Is-Land*, and I asked my students to write a chapter of autobiography about their earliest memories. I wrote also, drafting what became the first sections of this present work. But as the work progressed, my attitude to it changed; other factors began to influence the process. I now wanted to complete the task. However, I had no intention of publishing it — the decision to keep writing resulted from a personal need to put my affairs in order.

Subsequently, I wrote about more than childhood, completing the narrative up to the (then) present. I found it a remarkable experience. In his novel *Love and Garbage*, the Czech novelist and poet Ivan Klíma, reflecting on Franz Kafka's attitude to writing, says the following:

Writing was, to him, prayer — this is one of the few statements he ever made about what literature meant to him. He switched the question to another sphere: what was prayer? What did it mean to him, who had so little faith in any revealed or generally accepted God? Most probably it was a way of personal and sincere confession of anything on a person's mind. We turn to someone whose existence and hence also whose language we can scarcely surmise. Perhaps just that is the essence or the meaning of writing: we speak about our most personal concerns in a language which turns equally to human beings as to someone who is above us and who, in some echo or reflection, also resides in us.

Many writers are aware of some *Other*, for whom the work is intended; and this invisible yet inevitably-sensed 'reader' has affected my writing in various ways. Most notably, I became conscientious about what was written. *I have had to become true to myself.* In fulfilling this inner necessity, I still felt no immediate impulse to publish this narrative.

However, the other outcome of this writing has been a recent realisation that this particular part — which spans just the first 21 years of my life — constitutes a useful accompaniment to all my published poetry and prose. It is about those early experiences which have shaped my life, and especially my mind. The events I narrate here illuminate many of my ideas, attitudes and motivations. So, having set out to articulate myself to my Self, as it were, I have concluded that these pages might also provide a context for those other works.

In general, I have not attempted to explain or interpret my experiences, only to present what 'came to light', trusting that *what is seen is significant in itself.* This narrative remains a sketch — or rather, a series of sketches — offering pictures of a child's and a youth's and a young adult's world, and of the emergence of that other world that lives in me. If this proves interesting, then I am pleased to have shared it.

~ John Allison, March 2009

Prelude ~ First Light

As a child I knew light. It played everywhere upon the surfaces of things. I never noticed there were shadows until I was older.

When do children first know shadows? Is it when they leap exuberantly on the shadow of a friend, knowing it is sinister while pretending it is just a game? Or do they first try to avoid shadows, stepping between / across / around that heart of darkness? Realising for the first time that I was in shadow, a chill went up my spine. Was it that first time that I was also told that someone had just stepped on my grave?

There was awareness that the shadow was inhabited. I would shudder as if something had touched me between the shoulder-blades, and hurry into sunlight. However, light is what I remember most. I felt not so much a sense of place, but rather a state of place. There was light. Blenheim, where I was born just after 5 o'clock on the morning of the 7th of October, 1950, often records the top sunshine levels in New Zealand, so objectively there was a lot of it. Not knowing that, I simply dwelt in it, the light of Blenheim, the light of the Marlborough Sounds, the light of the Kaikoura coastline. I loved the way light became visible in touching things, the world, the motes of dust floating in space, and the surfaces. The surfaces, and down into the depths. How light illuminated the twists of water in the river below Pelorus Bridge! And in the deep, still pools it was lost into the dark, while shining always from the surface sheen and meniscal tensions of the water.

Now I gaze into the world, seeing light playing on the surfaces and illumining the depths, aware of lost lucency, while marvelling still at what remains, and learning again to perceive freshly that imaginative vision.

In my eighteenth year I first read Wordsworth's 'Ode: on Intimations of Immortality' and there discovered words for these experiences of childhood's light:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream...

These lines, and his poem 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' interfuse my memories of that childhood consciousness. But between childhood and now, there were the shadows: the fifth section of Wordsworth's 'Ode', and the passage about the boat in the Lake District recounted in 'The Prelude', articulate my own sense of the losses sustained. Some of those losses were itemised, as it were, in deaths — my sister, my best friend, a cousin — which were also indicators of another death which I experienced throughout the whole of consciousness. At last, as Wordsworth put it, the light of common day remained.

But as a child I knew light, it seemed through a kind of body sense. It simply was, and I was in the light.

1.

So many pictures in the mind's eye... There was a moment when I was about three and stood alone among some trees at Picton in the Marlborough Sounds, the pewter sea shining beyond them, and I saw the light and the shadows, and knew myself as a self. I was lost. I was me — and therefore I was found. It was a terrifying and wonderful event and it always appears as my first memory.

There were people living next door. Sally was my age and we played together; her sister Debbie played with my sister Joan. Apparently we were very imaginative in our play — 'away in another world', our parents always said. I can remember little about that particular world, except there was an imaginary friend whom we called 'Metrid', and who became such a dominating presence in the lives of both families that she had to be sent away. One day we accompanied Metrid to the railway station to farewell her. I was lifted up onto the foot-plate of the locomotive and gazed into the furnace:

Down by the station early in the morning
See the little puffing-billies all in a row
See the station-master pull a little handle
Puff-puff toot-toot off they go...

Then one afternoon Sally and I vanished. We were found down by the station, welcoming Metrid back — 'only for a weekend visit', we announced, much to the relief of our parents. I recall this now, wondering whether this is how we manage fate, incorporating its exigencies into our lives on our own terms...

There were monsters under the bed. If I had to get up in the night, I first had to fix in my mind the direction of the crack of light beneath the door, because when I stood up on my bed in order to leap far beyond their clutches that reassuring light was no longer visible, and I knew that if I didn't get to the door-handle or the light-switch in one attempt, they would get me. In my dreams they often did, pursuing me along a beach where I struggled to run in dry soft sand until I was trapped between a cliff-face and the rising tide. As these beings began to smother me I would wake up in terror.

One particular nightmare, so intense it was a kind of 'waking vision', first occurred about the age of four and developed in detail and intensity over the next fifteen years into a living vision of a concentration camp. In its earliest appearance it was just behind the woodshed of our Edith Street home, a small wire-fenced compound. The ground was thick with mud and excrement. It was always raining. The people there were naked, emaciated, and distressed. Among them were some of my childhood friends. There were dogs, gnawing at the flesh of still-living victims. Other things I saw but did not comprehend. Not then. I was somehow apart from it all, watching the scenes being played out; yet I was involved also. An incident would develop, until it seemed two lines would be crossed; one direction led further into the depravity, while the other was an awakening into compassion and conscience. It was as if I saw the events simultaneously from the perspective of two selves. In late adolescence I discovered that both were a choice. If chosen, the first could be all there was; but it always was a prerequisite for the second.

Many years later I returned to my childhood home. I walked up the driveway, around the back of the old woodshed, to the site of the 'concentration camp'. There was a bare patch of earth, about two yards square, strewn with woodchips and sawdust. It had never been more than that. I picked up a handful of dirt, and trickled it through my fingers. Ashes, a piece of burnt bleached bone. Yes, it was the place all right.

There was also a daylight-life in that place. I 'borrowed' my father's tools, always making 'things' behind the shed. 'What are you making?' asked Dad, discovering me there. 'Things,' I would reply. My frequent misplacing of his tools was inevitably the fault of the 'monkeys down at the bottom of the garden'. I liked helping Dad in the garden, weeding around his ripening corn and tomato plants. Once I cracked Joan on the head with a hoe when she ran in front of me, bringing it down from a height and watching from another part of me which actually wanted to hit her because she was being such a nuisance. She had to go to hospital for stitches in her scalp, and I was both angry and anxious until she returned.

I also had to go to hospital sometime in those early years, to have my tonsils out. I struggled against the engulfing darkness of the gas anaesthetic, but inevitably drowned... Afterwards I had to endure the long lonely vigil, sitting in my cot and watching along the ward towards the door, not knowing time and thus when my parents would come. I can name emotions now, but I did not know then what they were. I would now call them abandonment, fear, loneliness, and maybe even humiliation because I was caged in a cot, actually far too old for that but there were no spare beds. Then my parents would be there, with stories of the day, of home and office, of the life from which I was exiled.

Both Mum and Dad seemed to have stories for experiences I encountered in my childhood. This was often a light-hearted commentary on the way things were. One day I talked to the sulphur-crested cockatoo at the Riverside Park and 'Hello!' the cockatoo replied. 'There, you can hear where Aussies get that funny sound in their voices from,' Dad declared, which I did not understand till later. There was a huge monkey-puzzle tree by the river, though no monkeys... 'Which just goes to show,' said Dad, 'no wonder they're always nipping into my tool-shed — with trees like this, they'd have to find somewhere else to live.'

I became a story-teller from an early age, with several neighbourhood children lined up on a bench in the trellised courtyard; I narrated tales, 'reading' from the books I knew off by heart, inventing if necessary (and it often seemed necessary to give some particular help to the stories, to make them more 'true'). My father made me a little blackboard and I used it in my lessons, instructing Joan and Sally and any others in the letters of the alphabet and in numbers. And in everything else I knew. Can a vocation appear so early in life?

2.

One day I stood in a farmyard on the Kaikoura Coast and knew there was Mystery in the world. It must have been soon after — and it appears as a corollary to — that moment in Picton. Both were experiences of anticipation and apprehension: of the self and of the world. Each was thrilling and strange. In his books, the New Zealand novelist Maurice Gee makes use of an evocative juxtaposition of two common images — the creek and the kitchen: 'I'd

run home from the creek to the safety and security of the kitchen; one the place of safety and affection, the other the place of adventure, danger, excitement. And death'. This is how I too see my childhood. The light and the dark of the world were embodied in such polarities, but it felt like a natural circumstance. It was just how it was, and everything would be all right provided I came home immediately when my mother *coo-eed* in the evening. This was the experience of so many of us in small-town 1950's New Zealand, of living in an innocent — though slightly sinister around those borderlands of adventure — paradise.

I began school in my last year in Blenheim but remember little of it, except the compulsory quarter-pint of milk every playtime which I often tipped into the garden, and the ride there and back on my chain-drive tricycle with a little trailer behind it which my father had made for my fifth birthday. I loved that trike! It was painted red and went fast, the trailer skidding sideways when I cornered. One day there was a huge ferris-wheel at the showgrounds near our house. I was so fascinated, looking back at it, that I drove my trike into a deep ditch beside the road. I was embarrassed. The next day we went there, the first of many annual visits to the A&P Show, with all that massive machinery, the animals, the sideshows, the show-jumping, and the lolly scrambles (scattered from a low-flying Tiger Moth).

One day in 1955 I saw a Bristol Freighter crash on Omaka aerodrome when its motors failed, sheering wings and wheels as it plunged through trees and across the Taylor riverbed near our home. Amazingly it was restored, and years later we rather apprehensively flew in this particular phoenix across Cook Strait, en route to Gisborne to live.

On another day we went by bus over the hills to Motueka, to visit my other grandparents — my mother's parents. The hills around the Rai Saddle were covered with Christmas trees just a few feet high, the first pine forests in that region. My grandparents' house in Motueka was gloomy as all old houses were, but in the backyard there was a water-pump I could just manage, and I could pick fruit from their orchard. Grandad Sparrow's shed was filled with wondrous things. Fred Sparrow had been a mechanical engineer, and all kinds of gadgets and gizmos were stacked on benches and shelves or hung on the walls. I investigated them, carefully replacing each mechanical contrivance or tool afterwards. Then, in the evenings Grandad sat me on his knee and recited the ballads of Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson, his glass eye a haunting aide to storytelling. My Grandma Maria (née Stade) was German, from one of the many immigrant families in the Moutere area. I cannot remember her, only that there was a severe space where she existed, and that she died when I was quite young.

From this early time, I only recall my mother, Mona Alice (née Sparrow, widow of George Richards) in the sense that she was forever there. She was very tall and regal (when she died in late 1987 I was shocked to see her head slumped forward on her chest; not even when napping in a chair did this happen). She was the meticulous housewife, present everywhere yet visible nowhere. Not clearly, not in that early time. I have wondered about this. Perhaps fathers made more of an impression because they were there, and then they weren't there, and then they were there again. Absence — or is it intermittence? — does seem to awaken consciousness. It is a more notable event in a child's awareness, intersecting the dreaming flow of things. He was of course the authority in the family, and he was also my role-model whom I was always eager to please. But my mother... She was always just there.

My father, Henry Thomas Midlane Allison (known ubiquitously as Harry), was a surveyor in the Department of Lands & Survey. Sometimes we accompanied him on his field trips, along the Kaikoura coast and around Pelorus Sound. Among my earliest memories, seeing my father gazing across a landscape to sight the next trig-station. In time he taught me what his father, who had served in the Royal Navy, had previously taught him: to just let the eyes wander along the horizon, trusting one's sure peripheral vision to snag on the stand-out feature — for my grandfather on watch aboard HMS Philomel, a mast; for my father in the field at Kaikoura, a trig-station; and for me now at my desk, recalling childhood, an image, 'a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche' (as the phenomenalist Gaston Bachelard has so attractively expressed it).

So I see my father gazing, identifying the terrain; sighting with his compass; clearing a line with his machete through dense manuka and matagouri scrub; setting up the theodolite; and jotting down figures in his field-book. From an early age my father indulged me, letting me take part in his handyman activities about the home, and also in his surveying work. As soon as I could manage it, I became his chainman, handling chain and staff while he sighted and measured the world. Later I learned to do that as well. He even took me out of school to join him on some of his surveying trips. Here then were the first makings of my mind.

In those evenings, around a camp fire with billy tea and stew — my father loved words like *hoosh* and *goulash*, relishing them as sounds as much as the food they denoted — and then off to bed, in sleeping-bags and tents he'd made, which he deftly repaired and modified, his sewing kit so versatile with every kind of needle, including the fine semi-circular one with which he told me he had performed minor surgery in the mountains if someone gashed a knee or worse. There were many such stories. I saw the scars.

And there were the Mysteries... 'One day I'll take you up into Molesworth, chum,' Dad would murmur with a tone of almost mystical awe, gazing inland as though towards some place of pilgrimage. Molesworth Station was the vast interior, about half a million acres of somewhat nominal cattle country, mostly tussock and manuka and matagouri, river valleys and shingle scree fanned down between mountains. Ah, the Names: the Inland Kaikouras, Tapuaenuku, Acheron, the Clarence River... Years later I learned that I had been conceived in this region, by the Awatere River beneath Mt Tapuaenuku, on New Year's Eve 1949.

On these trips I was astonished by the stars, so many, so near and so far. I loved the deep night sky, and we often looked at the moon or the planets through the theodolite. My father knew the names of the stars, and could always locate them. He seemed to know *all* of the Names. Of mountains and rivers of course; but also the trees and birds (he could imitate the calls of warblers, fantails, bellbirds and tuis). I learned about geography and geology from him, and of course trigonometry. He would gaze at the landscape and muse, 'Why do you think those mounds are there, at the bottom end of that valley, chum?' *Chum. Cobber.* They were terms of acceptance. I loved his intense interest in things, and I wanted to please him, to prove myself intelligent enough for him. So I stared at those mounds of glacial moraine in the valley and declared a range of improbable suggestions until he led me to a reasonable answer. He was a natural teacher. Thus, though these years of childhood I learned to read stories in the world.

3.

When I was five we moved to Invercargill. By this time I was more aware of the fact of my brothers. Peter and Michael were Mum's children from her earlier marriage, ten and eight years older respectively than me. Because they were so much older they inhabited a quite different world, and although I know they played with Joan and me I can hardly recall it, apart from sparring with them, wearing their huge boxing gloves, and being impressed by the magic of the crystal set radio that Dad made for them. And there were the marvels of construction we all created from Meccano.

We lived in Fulton Street, and at the end of the street was the railway line. I lay by the tracks close to the passing trains, awed by the locomotives' massive presence and sound. I soon learned to identify the AB's and KA's which hauled goods trains or the daily passenger express past the bunch of crouching boys I had joined, huddled against the embankment, retrieving flattened ha'pennies and pennies from the track after the trains had passed.

There were the shingle-pits en route to Oreti Beach, where we would sail our 'claddy-stick' catamarans or the model yacht 'Awarua' I had won in a school raffle; or later set out in the 'Comet III', a small punt I made together with the boy across the road, which floated quite satisfactorily, thanks to the copious quantities of putty, and in which one of us could sit and paddle across the shingle-pit ponds to retrieve the yacht whenever it ran aground.

Not far from these gravel-pits, near the estuary, were the flax-works. I wandered through the yards and sheds, sometimes talking to the men who harvested the flax with long hooked knives, and hung it out to dry on wire fences before processing it into binder-twine. They answered my questions with grunted monosyllables, chewing on the stems of their pipes. They were a glum crew, except for one excitable character who said things I could not quite understand and waved his knife menacingly. Later I saw him swigging a purple liquid from a bottle. I knew of course what methylated spirits was, but had simply accepted my father's injunction against even sniffing it. I didn't understand my parent's explanations when I asked them about this incident, nor did I understand why they forbade me ever to go there again.

Watching manual work — everyone seemed to do it. I remember the women-folk scrubbing doorsteps, boiling clothes in wood-fired coppers, putting them through the hand-wringer, and in the evenings sewing and darning. I watched and helped my mother preserving fruit, my father salting down beans in an earthenware crock, making his home-brewed beer, and both of them bottling beetroot or making pickles, chutney and relish.

Workshops were an especial joy. I loved the working of wood with a plane, spokeshave and chisels, admiring the maker, and the thing made... The alchemy of glue — in those days the pungent hide-glues used for joinery, simmering in the double-boiler pot. This is my father, shaping a tiller for Peter's 'idlealong' yacht, so expert it seemed with the spokeshave, and capable of doing anything. At some time or other, in some workshop, I saw a master-joiner working on a chair... I watched, and whittled at bits of wood, learning to use my hands. Later, I would carve model cars and ships and planes from soft kahikatea, and later still, I constructed several musical instruments, including three lutes.

Dad was a great do-it-yourself-er, and I was his apprentice. He mused over every task, often including me in the decision-making as he rummaged about in his shed for whatever might just do the job. 'See anything that might do for a whatsit to fit just here, chum?' he'd ask, and we would fossick together through boxes and bags and bins. 'Guess I'm a bit of a weka,' he would say, explaining how those native wood-hens hoarded any items they came across, especially shiny things. Everything seemed to have potential uses; our periodic visits to the town rubbish tip often yielded more than was dispensed with.

Dad also had recipes for making gunpowder, for rockets and crackers at Guy Fawkes. He seemed so practical, but he also had his dreams. Sometimes I saw him staring into space, towards some outer or inner horizon, twirling a lock of his hair. One morning before dawn he woke me with his 'Ready, chum?', and, wrapped in a blanket and the skeins of dream, I was bundled into the Austin 12 and off we went, in that special world of relativity bounded by the headlights, to the perimeter of the airport. Others were there already, chatting: 'Great morning for it'... 'Should be off about the back of five'... 'Do you reckon it'll be *him*?' Him, I understood to be the last cowboy on earth, leaving town with all guns blazing. His steed, an Operation Deep-Freeze DC-4 looming dark at the end of the runway, revving its motors.

Antarctica was beyond the range of the heavily-laden American DC-4s from Christchurch, but from Invercargill they could just make it, with some extra help to get them off the short runway. Small rockets called JATO bottles (Jet-Assisted Take-Off) were fastened beneath the wings of the aircraft. Most of the pilots ignited them two at a time. But *he* fired all eight at once, and the DC-4 staggered almost incandescent into the dark air.

Afterwards, we gazed into the huge space opening towards the south. Somewhere out there was Antarctica. If Molesworth was the vast interior, then Antarctica was the vast *beyond*. My father told me it was one of the last adventures left on earth. He hoped to spend a summer down on the ice, and eventually was chosen for the 1959-60 season. But fate intervened:

I have looked in that direction
too; have seen the white
light of dream reflecting on
the undersides of clouds:
those cumulations of the south.

My father would have gone there;
but his daughter kept
him home, stumbling on
an Invercargill street
just wide enough to let her die.

A ventifact lies beside my hand:
black, sculpted by
the constant katabatic winds
which plummet from
the cracked rim of Vanda Basin.

Some member of the survey team
returning, gave this
polished stone as a memento;
as I write these words
light freezes along their edges.

4.

The 'one good thing' about my sister's death was the air-rifle someone gave me. A boy with a BSA Diana .177 can do many powerful things. Sparrows tumbled from hedges and fences twitching on the ground, and blackbirds and starlings and thrushes as well, although they were harder to bring down. When we moved in the New Year to Te Anau to live because Invercargill had become such a dreadful place, the rubbish tip two hundred yards down the road proved to be infested with rats which I liked killing most of all.

Te Anau was a new start, my parents said. 'You have to put the past behind you and make a clean fist of it.' So other things might have gone but shooting was good, it was a new thing and with it the memories did not sneak up unawares. Like of the times when Joan had been with us still and we'd been driving through the rain in our old beige Austin 12, Joan and I chanting, 'Stop windscreen wipers!' until Dad had to get out and prod the wipers into their miserly arcs again, and then we children had curled up upon the back seat and giggled and sometimes even dared to do the magic again...

Now the windscreen wipers would not stop any more because we had a new car, a 1952 Austin A40 Devon, battleship grey and much more reliable. My father growled, 'So don't even bother to try,' and I then knew that was an old thing also to be put behind me.

On Saturdays we often drove up the lake towards the Eglinton Valley or across to the Waiau mouth and fished for trout. My mother was soon quite good at catching them although my father had all the right gear and the casting technique and knew where the fish were. I fished too, with a thread-line and casting a spoon or more often a bubble-and-wet-fly. I learned with my father how to make my own spoons, beating them out of copper or brass and fitting them with split-rings, swivels and hooks; also how to make bubbles from plastic tubing left over from Dad's home-brew apparatus, heating the ends with a blow-torch, and clamping them shut with pliers before drilling them and fitting the split-rings and leaders. We learned to tie trout flies, using feathers plucked from birds lying dead on the roadside, or solicited from numerous duck-shooting acquaintances. Tying flies by a winter's fire was companionable, and the fishing itself was simultaneously companionable and solitary.

At Te Anau School I was unpopular, being a city-slicker smart-aleck, but mostly I suppose I was grieving and confused. No one talked about death in those days. After school and most Sundays I roamed across the Lands & Survey Development Block shooting at anything with my air-rifle. The skylarks were the hardest to hit, a real challenge, so quick to fly up and hover beyond reach, and so cunning in the way they trailed a wing as though hurt, and hopping and twittering led me away if surprised near their nest. Once I hit a harrier hawk hovering above the hillside, and often enough the seagulls wheeling over the tip. A feather

or two drifted down but always these bigger birds remained outstretched upon the bright rim of the air, despite my accuracy.

I shot a duckling once in the hatchery creek and as I looked down at its broken loveliness still flapping weakly I felt something hot creep up inside me and stood silent shifting from one foot to the other and looking around not wanting to be seen. It was like that again the Sunday I found a couple of rusty gin-traps at the tip and set them to catch rats, and later in the afternoon found a little wild kitten wailing by the sprung trap without its front paws and rats scurrying away with them into the garbage. It was hard to kill the kitten, trying to club it with abandoned sash-weights. Somehow I kept missing but at last it was dead. It looked awful, and I threw up on the bushes after kicking rubbish and clay over the bloody pulp. After that I didn't muck around at the dump so much, at least not for quite a while.

Sundays had been so different in Invercargill, just a year or so earlier. In the evening we had gathered around the old Collard piano with Mum playing and everyone (except Dad who said he was tone-deaf) singing 'All day all night Marianne', and 'Robin Hood Robin Hood riding through the glen', and ending with the 'Jamaica Farewell' — 'Down the way where the nights are gay...'

Then there were stories before bed, Dad reading me *The Knights of King Arthur* or else *King Solomon's Mines* while Mum read *Heidi* to Joan although she was still too young, and our older brothers inhabited another world called rock'n'roll in their bedroom. I remember such a fuss when Mike brought home a tape recorder with all the latest hits. Elvis was anathema. It was probably my first experience of a generation-gap.

Sundays had always begun and ended with stories and songs. In the mornings while Mum and Dad slept in, we'd listen to the Radio Request Session: 'Flick the Little Fire Engine' and 'Toot the Tugboat', but Joan liked 'Sparky' best and of course there was 'The Lone Ranger and Tonto'. A good day was when all those familiar stories were played.

And in between there had sometimes been Sunday School (another thing which ended after Joan's death) with Jesus and Guilt, and Unreal Pictures except for a faded print of the Magi by Dürer which I would remember forever. When it was over there was the Sunday Roast and then the Sunday Chores while Dad snoozed on the sofa. Peter and Michael did the coal and firewood, and Joan was to pick flowers for Mum to arrange, while I split kindling. I loved chopping the kindling and was adept with the hatchet, swift easy arcs scattering slices of yellow-white boxwood across the shed floor. And later the Sunday Afternoon Drive, as often as not to Oreti Beach where we collected driftwood for the fire and pungent-smelling kelp for the garden, loading the trailer till the tyres rubbed on the wheel guards. And we would hunt in the dunes for the JATO bottles jettisoned by the DC-4s bound for McMurdo. Then, driving home in the drizzling rain, chanting to the windscreen wipers...

There had been so much living to do: those ha'pennies and pennies on the railway line, and underground huts and cops'n'robbers, and there was balsa-and-tissue glider I made with my father which folded up on its maiden flight and fluttered broken to the ground, and then Dad telling me about Icarus and also Richard Pearse (who might have been the first person

to fly) to make me feel better. And there had been our first time at the flicks. It was *Tammy*, and I had nightmares about the storm but we sang the song on Sunday evenings, 'If I knew that he knew what I'm dreaming of, Ta-ammy, Ta-ammy, Tammy's in love'.

There were the holidays spent at Tuatapere, and there was sunburn down at Riverton, and there were the oyster-boats at Bluff. You could buy oysters direct from the fishermen then. And I could stand very close to the wheezing locomotives pulling out of the sidings on the wharf, their huge wheels spinning and shrieking on the rails as they began the haul north.

Sunlight casts shadows and so does living. Like the time I was ridiculed both by the teacher and the rest of the class when I stood up for the first and last time in Morning Talks and announced, 'The sun is just a medium-sized star, and what's more, bumble-bees can't fly, they're far too big for their wings'... Or like the time when Joan passed out cold during a quarrel with me over first turn on the new swing, and really I had only leaned a little bit across her throat with my forearm as she lay on the grass, not pressing very hard at all.

Joan was just two days off six when I hurried back to school after lunch one day to play footie with the other boys, and that same day Mum decided Joan was now old enough to cross Dee Street alone, even though the pedestrian crossing the mothers had campaigned so hard for had been turned down by the council. But perhaps Joan was not old enough or maybe anyone could have tripped on those wide streets of Invercargill, and anyway I believe she died instantly when the truck hit her. It was the 19th of August, 1959.

My mate Smithy arrived back at school in tears because he'd seen it. The Headmaster spoke to me, telling me I was to remain at school. No one took care of me. For the next two hours I wandered the corridors alone. I seemed to see moving shadows and sometimes glimpses of light, maybe angels I thought later. 'You must have been seeing things,' I was told. That was true. People said I acted strangely and said unusual things for weeks afterwards.

At home I hoarded Joan's toys: 'Good, these are mine now.' This further broke my mother's heart. After three days I pushed them away: 'I don't want these anymore, I just want Joan.' So I was told much later. In my imagination, which from that time seemed even more to be the real world, I still had her as a companion in my life.

At the funeral the minister said, 'She was too good for this world and so God decided to take her back,' and then our father was angrily blurting out, 'Not with a bloody seven-ton truck He wouldn't!' Or maybe he didn't say it, because I was not present at the funeral service anyway and so could not have heard it there. But years later it seemed I knew that story well and I felt proud of my father for his defiance.

Everything was different after that, and it also was about then that my brothers left home and took Bill Haley and the Comets with them and Elvis too. And about then the piano went as well. 'All day all night Marianne' had been Joan's song and the 'Jamaica Farewell' was too poignant and there was really nothing much in the days and nights to be gay about. Apparently I was troublesome. One evening when I had goaded Mum to a fury I was sent to my room to await my father's displeasure. Home at last from work he came into the room

where I was whimpering with a sense of injustice, and my anticipation of the hiding. 'Been upsetting Mum, hmm-m?' he asked, sitting by me on the bed. Tearfully I tried to explain my side of things, that although I had been 'a wee bit rude', Mum had really made too much of it. My father looked dissatisfied. 'Well, chum, your mother's been rather unhappy lately, so we'd better put it to rights. Over the bed!' I bent across the bed as he pulled off his belt. One! Two! He thrashed the bedding beside me, then pulled me up close to his face. 'Now you go and say you're sorry, and let's not hear about such things again, hmm-m?'

He was not always so compassionate. Once I ran away from his wrath, and discovered that I could take a short cut across his vegetable garden to get away from him. However, his humour was not improved by this initiative, as I found out when eventually he caught up with me. I think I was mostly bewildered by the family dynamics from this time of Joan's death, being so young but so aware of charged atmospheres. My mother must have grieved, although I cannot recall her crying. She did count fifty days on end of drizzle, a relatively unremarkable phenomenon in Invercargill, except for that fact of her counting. My father went for long walks alone at night and stared at the stars to the south; he'd been chosen for the summer expedition to Scott Base but now that had all changed, and he reacted angrily to my suggestion one evening that we might go and see the DC-4 taking off in the morning. Through such incidents I discovered there was not so much of our former pleasures to be talked about. I suppose that for each of us the family of five had become a family of one.

Moving to Te Anau meant we were supposed to leave everything behind; but sometimes when I was alone I felt blood beating in my temples, and shadows in the periphery of my gaze. Then I would go across to the implement shed and smash the large lumps of Ohai coal they brought by the truckload and dumped in a bin just inside the door. The weight of the sledgehammer made me stagger but the shattering coal and the shrapnel flying into my face and the thick clouds of coal-dust exhilarated me, while beginning to develop muscles which would allow me in my teenage years to excel in athletic field events such as the shot-put, discus and javelin. Once I found the imprint of a fern-leaf, perfect and fossilised inside a lump of coal. I examined it carefully, then smashed it.

One day I announced that, since my parents obviously did not love me, I was going to run away from home. 'Very well, dear,' my mother said, 'but you'd better take some lunch with you.' How could I react against such reasonableness? So I had to hang about the open door, anxious to leave, my air-rifle slung on binder-twine across my shoulder, my sheath-knife on my belt, while she cut some sandwiches and put them together with my parka in a rucksack.

'Now, is there anything else..?' she muttered, but I fled, keen to be free. I walked out to the road and down around the first corner without a backward glance. I lingered by the lake for a while where I used to play when I'd been more carefree. I smashed up the hut I'd built among the willows... My parents would be sorry for this. I walked back to the road, and continued for a while before stopping at a clearing where I sat on a log and ate some of my lunch. I knew I must keep some for later, to make it last. Life would be hard. As I put the lunch-box back into the rucksack I noticed that Mum had thoughtfully put my Post Office Bank book in there too. I looked down the empty road. Suddenly it seemed kind of lonely out in the world.

It was evening when I got home, but I didn't go inside. I'd show them yet. I went around to the back of the house where I could spy on them eating dinner in the kitchen. I ate the last bit of my lunch. Mum and Dad chatted amiably, bother them, as they washed up and went through to the lounge where I imagined them reading as usual, although no doubt they would be beginning to feel anxiety gnawing at them. I waited. As the long southern twilight faded, I decided to secretly climb in through my bedroom window and go to bed without telling them. Let them worry, they deserved it. It was easily done. On the bedside table was a supper, neatly arranged on a plate. My bed cover was turned back, inviting. But I was too weary to consider the implications of all this, as I avidly wolfed down the food.

At school I got involved in fights, mostly against my will, and once was disconcerted when my antagonist passed out, choked in my headlock. But I was indignant and hurt when the teacher shouted at me, 'I'll be pleased when you're gone, Allison!' For we would be leaving soon; my father's work was itinerant, and promotion was always elsewhere. Thus, in these circumstances, just to keep to myself seemed a valid choice.

At the foot of the hill where the road left the lake and headed south past our house towards Lake Manapouri, the trout hatchery buildings squatted beneath tall blue-gums against an impenetrable thicket of manuka and tutu and blackberries. Through Dad, I had befriended one of the Acclimatisation Board rangers who managed the hatchery and who showed me every aspect of his work, from stripping roe and milt from spawning trout through to the release of the tiny fingerlings in the lakes and rivers of the district.

The hatchery creek rose from a spring across the road and ran just one hundred yards through dense scrub and blackberry to the lake. I dammed it and built water-wheels with cotton-reels and tinsplate and wire, and I made harbours and floated sticks for boats and bombed them, or simply played Pooh-sticks, fascinated by the whims and purpose of the current. Down at the lakefront the stream plunged through yellow lupins and broom into a bay where I sailed my model yacht and built more harbours; the water in this bay was broad and shallow and safe, very untypical of Lake Te Anau which mostly dropped into black depths just a few yards off-shore.

Sometimes I just sat alone on the beach and watched the light constantly shifting its patterns across the Murchison Mountains and the foothills around the Dome Lakes and Dome Island at the entrance to South Fiord. And the mist, and the rain. The rain, falling so frequently on that side of the lake, up to 200 inches annually.

5.

Time is different for a child. It did not seem to exist until I was at least ten years old. My life was instead ordered according to place; there were the Blenheim times, Invercargill times, Te Anau times... Within those periods, I know some things which came earlier, and some things which came later; but there was not a steady stream of events, rather a series of eddies and rippling backwaters where time looped and seemed to come back upon itself, intensifying certain moments. Mostly, before and after did not matter. However, the date of Joan's death is a stone in that stream, a monument fixed in time: the 19th of August 1959.

Edith Mercier was a close friend of my parents who, when my sister died, was wonderfully supportive, especially of Mum. Later we visited the Mercier home in Dunedin. I can hardly remember her husband or either of their children, but Edith was for me a kind of epiphany. I was suddenly aware that she was a woman, that she was lovely, that she was radiance itself. This was not in any way a sexual awakening; in that regard I remained notably naïve until well into adolescence. Rather, I was inspired by this vision of feminine loveliness to look for its presence in the women I have loved since.

I have often thought about this, and I am now convinced that we carry into life a kind of predisposition for certain possibilities of development. An image inhabits the imagination, and anyone loved must conform in some aspects at least to its archetypal features. This is what Jung means by the figure of the *anima*. In the event Edith was the first awakener. I was only in my twelfth year, yet in my memory that is how I find her:

The Persian Tile

1.

Riding. He is always
out riding, this
dark horseman with a falcon
on his wrist.

Horizons drain his eyes.
He glances
inward to the woman
waiting for him.

2.

Waiting. Always waiting,
she is someone
he knows but has not
ever seen.

Still he is riding out
towards her image
in the faces of the women
he has known.

6.

At the end of 1961 we were on the move again, this time to Gisborne, flying across Cook Strait to the North Island in the *Captain Cook*, our laden Austin A40 tethered just beyond the canvas flap in front of the half-dozen webbing-on-tubular-frame seats in the rear of the old Bristol Freighter. Staggering out of clouds towards the notorious Wellington airport, I was acutely aware that I had seen this particular aircraft crash at Omaka years before.

My paternal grandparents, Harold Charles Allison and Rosa (née Midlane), still lived in the Wellington suburb of Khandallah. I can hardly remember Pop but was impressed by the fact that he had served in the Royal Navy, and had been in fact an engineer on the first steam turbine-powered destroyer. My Gran was a formidable woman, reminding me of the Giles cartoon granny. On a later occasion I would try to humour her with a Bob Hope wisecrack, 'The Beatles are the one reason there won't always be an England,' to which she would grimly reply, 'Oh, there always will be an England, my dear.'

Gisborne was an isolated backwater, but after Te Anau it seemed a big town. It was a relief, having been the only pupil at my age level at Te Anau, to be part of a large class of Form One pupils at Gisborne Intermediate School. Soccer was a significant sport in Gisborne, and I played on the right wing in the First XI. In the first year I won the metalwork prize, and in the second, the senior athletics championship. My anger made me competitive, and it also made me argumentative. Sometimes the quarrels led to fights, but I had become aware of my strength when angry; after yet another boy (a hot-headed friend this time) passed out in one of my headlocks I resolutely put my hands in my pockets and refused to react. This was the beginning, unrecognised as yet, of a new way.

I won a guinea-pig, a black and white and ginger bundle of fur, in a raffle at the school fair. Dad and I built a hutch for it and I cared for it with some increasing reluctance — after all, what can a guinea-pig actually accomplish to justify its existence in the mind of a twelve-year-old boy? — until it died of a wasting disease the following winter and I was surprised to feel sad. Mum said I didn't need to go to school that day. I went up to the local dairy and stole a packet of LifeSavers. I walked around the block with them heavy in my pocket. I felt considerably less saved, somehow. Half an hour later I returned to the dairy and, terrified of being caught, successfully sneaked them back on to the display stand.

Every Sunday night Mum, Dad and I tied trout flies. We each had a little work-box Dad had made, with a simple hinge-and-butterfly-nut vice which extended from the front of the box when open. Each box contained a range of makings: hooks of all sizes (4 to tiny 16), threads, lurex, feathers and fur of creatures collected from road-kill, nail-polish and lacquers. On that particular Sunday after the guinea-pig's death, I noticed in Dad's box a small plastic packet of black and white and ginger fur. He saw me looking at it, and enacted a variety of gestures to appease me — awkward, bashful, rueful, conciliatory, and at last giving me a sly wink. 'Care to use some, chum?' he asked. Mum stared into the fireplace. The prickling sensation across my scalp eased and we resumed our fly-tying in companionable silence.

How do we know loss and grief when we are young? I only remember events that indicate disturbance, times when I seemed to exist in a whirlwind — I did not know what emotion it was, I did not even know it was emotion, only that it bewildered me. I struggled to make meaning out of incoherence... So there was a day around this time when I was alone in my room, and something was very wrong. My temples throbbed, and the room spun around me. Eventually I climbed out of my window and fetched the tomahawk from the shed. Back in my room, with calculating, restrained fury I smashed several of the fine little model cars I had made, and then left a trail of prints to prove that someone quite mad had got into my room and done this. It was true enough, and perhaps my parents knew it too but were

helpless and unable to do anything with my story. Mum asked me if I was all right, was I sure I saw him running from the property? *Did I need any help?* Stubbornly I maintained my version, failing to see how ludicrous it was.

There were other occasions when my fantasy created dangerous worlds in which I lost my reason. I also felt ashamed sometimes to reflect that I really believed that the more extreme confabulations were intended to succeed. I suppose they were desperate attempts at control, through which I tried to overwhelm some reality I could not cope with. In these moments there was no help I could recognise. And what help could my parents offer?

I thought my greatest failure was in love, and these at least are true stories. Our class was seated according to maths ability, and Helen was in the top maths group. I was convinced I was in love with her. I worked hard at maths and after doing well in a test was promoted to the top group. I was so overwhelmed in Helen's presence that I could not concentrate at all on the lessons, and was promptly demoted to the bottom group after the next test. At the time I felt certain that our exasperated teacher Mr Ensor rigged the results, to deal with me. I continued to love Helen from afar.

Towards the end of 1963 I became aware of a gloriously lovely girl in one of the other classes. And Zoe liked me also, I was told. We seemed to smile foolishly at each other as we passed in the playground. The annual school social was drawing near, yet I was completely unable to say anything of consequence to her.

It was a portentous time. On the 22nd of November 1963 I was cycling along a suburban street in Gisborne when a woman came out into the road, wailing. 'They've shot President Kennedy,' she sobbed. That was my first awareness of a world event. I was thirteen years old. Then, on the night of the dance, a remarkable thing happened: there she was — Zoe. And when the boys were asked to choose their partners for the first dance, the surging sea of bodies parted and she was as yet strangely unchosen. We danced, and I think we danced again and again. Apparently everyone thought she was 'mine', and I, 'hers'. We were shyly, blissfully happy that evening.

There was one small matter to be attended to; couples endeavoured to leave the school hall discreetly, to meet around the back of the building for a 'pash'. I was aware that it was the custom, and that I was supposed to suggest it to Zoe. We watched a mutual friend trying to accomplish this with his date, and then Zoe rescued us both by suddenly whispering in my ear, 'I don't want to do that, not here, do you?' So I spluttered out, 'Of course I don't.' And quite truthfully added, 'Not here, that is.'

Then her father was there, to collect her, and I said, casually of course, 'See you at school on Monday.' Her eyes shone as she said goodbye. But at school it proved awkward. We were both evidently acutely shy. The final week of the term passed and Zoe seemed distant, distracted. 'Well? Aren't you going to see her before she goes away?' someone said, and thinking of my own impending holiday at Waikaremoana, I realised something had to be done. On the last day of school I asked her if I could see her the next day after lunch. 'Yes,' she whispered.

I could not sleep. The morning was appalling. I could not eat lunch. At the appointed time I walked nonchalantly twice past her house, as I had done for weeks before, rehearsing such silly excuses as 'I was just passing by...' I turned, walked up the path and then knocked on the door. Her father opened it. 'Oh, you must be Zoe's friend,' he said. 'Come on in, excuse the mess, we're still packing.'

The house was a bomb site. Still, I did not get it. Zoe was in the garden, sitting on a bench, sorting odds and ends. I sat beside her. We tentatively held hands and traded pleasantries. She seemed distraught. Then all at once I muttered something about thinking I was in love with her, and she began to sniffle quietly. And so, in just a few words I was brought to the awful realisation: the next day they were leaving — permanently — for England.

7.

I moped around the lakeshore, half-aware of that quicksilver sheen of Waikaremoana. The song of bellbirds dropped like liquid honey through another sound, inaudible yet somehow sensed: crispness of the air. And the scraping of cicadas on the glassy light. It was now mid-summer, late afternoon. The original land-dwellers, the Tuhoe — children of the mist — still seemed to call across these waters. Restless, fierce, dead. Waiting.

West from Mokau Inlet, I carefully picked my way along the rock-strewn lakeshore, towards the peninsula. It had once been an island, perhaps a hundred yards long, fifty wide, rising thirty or forty rugged feet above the water. It was bush-clad, rimu and tawa standing over fuchsia, mahoe, five-finger, ferns and tree-ferns. With the lowering of the lake-level through hydro power generation, the island was now connected by a rocky causeway to the shore.

I had never seen anyone else there. It was my place. But Bernie, the old possum-trapper who lived in the decrepit Bedford bus among the toi-tois back at the Mokau Inlet, had muttered something about the peninsula being an old Tuhoe burial place and therefore *tapu*, and I, unaware of any of the significance of that, had searched its nooks and crannies, naïvely hoping to find a greenstone *mere* or maybe even a *tiki*. I did find two or three square-ish hollows just below the main ridge, and recalled my father quoting Elsdon Best about the Tuhoe burying their *rangitira* in a squatting position. But when I began to scrape at the forest humus in one of the hollows, a weird feeling came over me. The light seemed to darken and spin about my head, and somehow the insistent noise of the cicadas got inside me. I rushed dizzily down into the open sunlight where the ice in my spine and at my temples gradually thawed and the chanting of ancient voices at last diminished. Three days later I returned there, called by those voices which recurred in my dreams. I knelt down by the hollow and murmured, 'Sorry,' and then recited the Lord's Prayer because it seemed the right thing to do, and at last the clamour in and around me quietened and the whirling light grew clear and still.

And so it became a special place. I went there nearly every day, sometimes to fish the reach of water just beyond the point where I could always guarantee to hook a trout; sometimes to clamber around its cliffs; sometimes however, after stripping off to swim in the freezing water, climbing to a rock ledge near the summit, to lie on the warm stone in the afternoon

sun to dry, and to dream the daydreams which always came to me there. Strange dreams, more like moods really, rather than pictures. New feelings stirred in me as I lay there, naked in the sunlight. My scalp would tingle, the skin of my limbs and torso would become especially sensitive, and I was acutely aware of how the earth was touching me. Sometimes, when I felt like this, I would leap up and run wildly through the forest, feeling the ferns and the epiphytes that trailed from the trees grasping at my body, and believing that the forest was watching me. At last, panting, I would lie again in the sun and rest, and sometimes sleep there once my heightened sensations had subsided...

I was there. The water-worn stone rose above me into the overhanging bushes and ferns. It was cool in the shade and I was hot. I removed my shirt and the air was thick velvet on my arms. I stuffed the shirt into the crook of a nearby tree and, grasping roots and branches for support, began to climb. The rock was soft and crumbling, slippery when wet, not always to be trusted. Mudstone, locally called *papa*, the sinuous roots of trees entangled in every nook and cranny. The earth in these dark places was musky to smell. I thought of the Maori myth of Tane, his hair across the flank of his mother Papatuanuku, his head thrust into her midriff, striving against his father Rangī...

The breeze had died away again, and the air was close and warm. I was nearly at the top. A few moments more, and I'd reached a level patch of ground near the summit. Panting, I gazed around, at the ferns, at the trees, at the sky, at the lake below. I felt the light and the shadows of the forest gather to greet me, and stretched my aching arms upward, into the sunlight. A black fantail flickered by, and I watched it flit between the branches, delineating the light above my head. Then it was gone, twittering down into the depths of a gully, and I shivered with the nearness of unseen companions. Slowly, I turned around, holding my breath almost, watching, listening. They were waiting.

I unbuckled the belt of my shorts, pulled them off, pulled off my underpants, kicked off my Roman sandals, gathered them all into a pile and stood naked in the warm golden sunlight. I turned once more, completely around, looking at my world and listening, as the blood began its beating at my temples and the dance began. I whirled myself around, enjoying the quick giddiness, until I staggered against a half-fallen tree smothered with moss and lichen. Claspings the trunk in both arms, I pressed my body against the moss and the crumbling bark and the decaying wood, feeling that soft and hard and warm and cool and dry and moist texture of a partner, feeling the pressure against my chest and my belly and genitals.

Abruptly, I stood back from the tree. I looked down at my body, at the imprints upon my skin, the tiny scratches stinging all along my arms and legs. My boy's penis had stiffened a little. Then I laughed and ran.

At the other end of the ridge I stopped, out of breath. I threw myself down on a bank of moss and rolled over on my back and lay still, listening. I felt the damp moss pressing against me, the earth moving and breathing beneath me. I turned over and gripped the earth, sensing how it responded, working my fingers down into the moss and squirming my body into its warmth and its moistness and down into its cool depths. Just for a moment everything was still, and then my body heaved, and a strange fire broke out in my loins and

was extinguished in the moist earth, there amidst the dark hypnotic chanting of the forest and my convulsive cry of pleasure and anguish. The fantail, black and quick, fluttered above me, its twittering the only sound beyond the incessant scratchings of the cicadas. It was the death of something, and of course therefore another birth, of some kind.

8.

In the apocalypse New Zealand is occupied by evil forces, an invading people who came in their ships from teeming nations to the north. Many of us are resistance fighters, based in small communities hidden up in the mountains. My experience as a hunter and fisherman makes me a leader in these circumstances.

I have a special mission. In my white Porsche I drive furiously through the hills surrounding Gisborne. It is night. As I slow down for a hairpin corner a girl suddenly appears naked at the roadside, dark-haired, pale, terrified. I brake hard into the shingle on the shoulder of the road and in an instant I am with her. She is huddled against me now as I fire my pistol at the dark shadows scrambling at the bottom of the roadside bank.

The deep silence which follows seems to pulse with another sensation. I wrap my coat about her, and help her into the car. She huddles in the encompassing bucket seat as I drive on. It is now raining, and the wipers slap across the shining dark. I do not know what the next stage entails. There seems to be nowhere to go now, just a possibility, for a little while, of being in this strange yet tender mood between us which is a cloak against the terror which remains behind us and in front of us. We drive through the dark with nowhere to go, except as far as still possible into this mood...

This is a dream. This is an old hero myth in contemporary images.

9.

In February 1964 I began at Gisborne Boys High School. I made a mark there immediately by easily winning the junior athletics championship, coming first in all events and setting a record in the 440. I remember little else of school except the bullying. I was very strong, and reluctant to fight, but it became unavoidable. Standing in lines in the quadrangle, waiting for school assembly, I had to grapple with the notorious 'Glassy' Pianga. After a couple of minutes I lifted him off the ground and whispered to him that he might give in. I then let him down to beat me, so he could save face. We were stopped eventually by the prefects, and subsequently caned by the Headmaster. But Glassy respected me from then on, and I had no more trouble. I have wondered sometimes what happened to him.

In the May holidays I went tramping with my father on Mt Tongariro. We camped in a gully east of the Ketetahi hot springs and from there spent three days on the mountain. It is an astonishing place: the vast Central and South Craters, the Blue Lake, the Emerald Lakes, and the Red Crater with its velvet texture of red and brown scoria. I gazed in silent awe at my surroundings; all fourteen-year-olds should encounter such experiences, to — momentarily at least — restore a sense of proportion at that self-obsessed stage of adolescence.

On the last day the weather closed in abruptly and we broke camp. Dad led the way down, and in the dense mist and gathering darkness we lost the track and stumbled through the middle of the Ketetahi field. I could barely make out his form in front of me. Carefully we picked our way among gurgling mud pools and boiling springs. I walked through hell that day. Only when we reached the road did my father admit it was a bit of a close call.

At the end of that year we went again for Waikaremoana, this time taking Raymond with us. Raymond Louie was a genius: the eldest son of Chinese market-gardeners, he had been in that top maths group at Intermediate, in fact always effortlessly came top in every subject, yet somehow achieved this while doing all kinds of other things. Typically he would cycle seven miles to the market-garden at dawn, work until it was time to go to school, get his homework done during breaks and after school return to the gardens until dark. By the time he had turned fifteen he was appointed as the secretary of the local Acclimatisation Society. Late into the night he practised taxidermy, to help support the family. In the August and Christmas holidays we usually went trout-fishing together, and in the May holidays, duck-shooting. He was my first 'best friend'.

The following year Helen became his girlfriend. But for now everything was easy between us. We camped at the Mokau Inlet, and fished the river up to the falls in the mornings, the lake shore beyond the peninsula in the afternoons, and the inlet each evening. We were naturally competitive; Raymond was usually the most successful up the river, while I was a great angler on the inlet, one evening taking six rainbow trout in just an hour and a half, the heaviest jack weighing in at seven-and-a-quarter pounds.

I had joined the Air Scouts early in 1964. Our scout master was a fine person, and I admired him, I suppose as a kind of mentor. I had my first flying lessons in a Piper Cub; for a while I thought I would become a pilot. At the end of that year I was due to go on a glider flying course, when abruptly I announced to my parents that I would no longer go to Scouts. My father, who in his day had been a Rover, was very disappointed, but I could not explain to him why I refused to attend any more until many years later. On a previous camp one of the boys, a hulking, coarsely obscene character, had tried to involve our group in masturbation rituals. I was shy, and thus embarrassed, fearful of humiliation, and maybe indignant. The mood of compulsion was suffocating. I was mocked for refusing to participate, but I could willingly accept that, preferring to leave Scouts in order not to associate with that particular boy. However, I struggled to relinquish the dream, and for many years later I lied, claiming to have actually flown a glider...

At Gisborne Boys High School, participation in the military Cadet Unit was compulsory. I quickly saw advantages in gaining promotion. Better to move up the chain of command... And my father encouraged it. So in the May holidays in 1965 I underwent a training course at Linton Military Camp, near Palmerston North. It was cold, and the training was brutal and abusive. I could face up to the physical ordeal, but resisted the authoritarian discipline and the shoe-horning into a mould. Answering back, I was regularly assigned to 'fatigues' — I swept the parade-ground and peeled a lot of potatoes. However, I graduated as an NCO and at school on cadet days I initially 'played the game', although I often undermined my new authority with self-deprecating irony.

This sense of irony was exacerbated by our young, rather subversive music teacher, Edwin Schnoor, an American who sat on the edge of the table with his guitar and taught us Bob Dylan's songs, 'Blowin' in the Wind' and 'The Times They are a-Changing', and also Pete Seeger's 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone?' School began to be an 'institution' that was to be challenged, either openly or silently. I argued with my art teacher, Mr Mudge, an abstract painter who of course was called 'Mr Smudge', and who wanted me to experiment beyond the detailed realism of the locomotives, cars and aeroplanes which I rendered in dramatic perspective. The quarrel was not with him; two years later, I might have appreciated him more. I questioned every subject, and decided for myself what I would learn — 'only for the love of it'. My school report stated that 'Allison has natural ability that sees him through, but does absolutely no work'. That is the only phrase I remember from any report.

I won the Hawkes Bay and Poverty Bay shot put championship, and did well in my other events. Meanwhile Raymond was being brilliant at everything else, and was now going out with Helen, and it was not so easy between us as it had been. Still, we went duck-shooting together in May. And with Mum and Dad, I regularly fished the Motu and the Ruakituri Rivers. At the end of 1965 our family shifted to Rotorua; in the Christmas holidays Raymond joined us again when we returned to Waikaremoana for two weeks.

10.

New Zealand is earthquake country, and sometimes I think this knowledge New Zealanders have, that not even the solid earth is reliable, can make them resilient in particular ways. In my case, circumstances — my father's vocation, events in my own life, awakening interest in the formative history and influences in a landscape — combined with a way of thinking that incorporated geology into the imaginative structure of the psyche...

In 1669 the Italian geologist Nicolaus Steno had published his three fundamental laws: 1) the law of original superposition; 2) the law of original horizontality; and 3) the law of original continuity. Any variation from these must be due to a disruptive process, for example an earthquake. This can be a metaphor. I think of experiences laid down like rock strata, one upon the other. Normally we locate ourselves in memory, aware that whatever came before is foundational, and that whatever comes after overlays this; that what surrounds us in life is simultaneity; and that our consciousness in time is continuous.

But trauma is an earthquake in the psyche; all the strata are dislocated, disjointed, disrupted. We then have to orientate ourselves in this shattered landscape of the soul by comparing its broken features with other formations that have not been subject to such catastrophic forces. Adolescence has its 'normal' features, and those aspects of my teenage life which resemble all other teenage lives are not especially significant. The real interest is in the characteristics of the disjointed terrain.

The earthquake was death, two deaths in fact. The first tremor was near enough; my cousin Trevor, whom I'd really just got to know a couple of years previously, died of the 'bends' (nitrogen narcosis) while scuba-diving in the Bay of Islands in the summer of 1965-6. I was already in quite a state regarding death because only a short time before I'd confessed my

loneliness and unhappiness to my mother, who said grimly, 'You're not going to make a swan-song about Joan's death, are you? It's no good, we just have to put it aside and get on.' Later, when I learned more about the tragedy of Mum's life, I think I came to understand why she was so harsh, but my instinct at the time was to recoil. Trevor's death was endured in solitude; my parents commiserated with his family while I spent most of the time in my room with the door shut.

But the epicentre of the second quake was right beneath the bedrock of my life. Four months after Trevor's death, I'd intended as always to spend the May holidays duck-shooting with Raymond on the Waipaoa River near Gisborne. On the 6th of May we received a phone call to tell us that Raymond had drowned while putting out the decoys just off the mai-mai. It seemed that his dinghy had capsized and he was dragged under by the weight of water in his thigh-waders. I felt guilty for not having been there.

The Chinese have a delicate custom at funerals. After the service each mourner is given a penny, and a sweet. The penny represents the sharing of worldly riches, while the lolly is to take away the bitterness. I remember very little else from that time, except that Helen came to Rotorua later that year, pregnant, and boarded with us for several months before giving birth and having the baby adopted out. There were some tender moments, but we were just traumatised children, fifteen years old, who could not reach across the sad, alienating space between us.

11.

We had shifted to Rotorua as a strategy — to put my father in line for promotion to Nelson where he wanted to retire. It was only ever going to be an interlude and I felt considerable resentment at the disruption. The deaths of Trevor and Raymond intensified my sullenness. I often sat for hours in my room, reading or listening to music. At school I dreamed my way through my lessons; sometimes I think I could later idealise teaching because I took so little notice of whatever I was taught! There were a couple of friendly acquaintances at school, however, with whom I played golf once or twice each week. We also went trout fishing, and I became further involved in athletics.

I began to specialise now in certain events: the 440, and the shot put, discus and javelin. I set regional records for my grade in the shot and javelin. I ran a good 54.5 second 440 early in training. I worked harder at it, fantasising heroic futures, my inspiration being Peter Snell, who coached me during a school visit. I enjoyed the training, punishing my body. Often I finished a race with the taste of blood in my mouth, and my temples aching. I imagined my heart bursting, and so dying — rather romantically I thought — but it would not happen.

My father and I tramped over Mt Tarawera. As previously on Tongariro, I felt awed by the scale of the volcanic massif, with its series of huge fissures gashed across the mountain, extending more than 16 kilometres, the result of a huge eruption in 1886 that had destroyed several villages and the famed Pink and White Terraces. We fished Lake Tarawera, trolling from a boat, but this bored me. I had become a fly-casting purist, enjoying fishing the brief evening rise on the Ngongotaha Stream, or else on the Kaituna River — deftly flicking a dry

fly or nymph into the shadows of banks and trees, responsive to the plop of mouthed O's on the quicksilver surfaces of the water, sensing out — 'reading' — the contours of the riverbed and its sunken snags, the motion of currents, and the likely position of the trout.

As I watched all this, I began to be aware of something new happening. I found myself just gazing across the water, imagining Raymond and feeling some kind of communion in those still moments before the fading of the light. This feeling intensified until I altogether lost the desire to fish, preferring just to be there by the water and watch its movement, listening to its music. This profound awareness of presence slowly became the only certainty. I was aware of a division occurring in my life: while I went to school, played sport, fished for trout, hunted goats and deer, tramped in the mountains, increasingly I watched myself doing these things from another vantage point. There seemed to be two kinds of alienation: either I felt distant from the world, or I felt distant from myself. Inwardly, I felt the massed substance, the strata of my life under immense tectonic pressure; yet when active, I lost all sense of myself, and then in the midst of achievement felt myself void.

On our fishing trips, sitting by the camp fire, my father would occasionally recite poetry; it was the language through which he communicated what he could not otherwise say. I think the poems revealed the man who had become submerged by circumstance — the one who knew (as Oscar Wilde wrote) that 'one's real life is often the life that one does not lead'. My father especially admired the poetry of Robert Service; the final stanza of 'The Call of the Wild' illustrates why:

They have cradled you in custom, they have primed you with their preaching,
They have soaked you in convention through and through;
They have put you in a showcase; you're a credit to their teaching —
But can't you hear the Wild? — it's calling you.
Let us probe the silent places, let us seek what luck betide us;
Let us journey to a lonely land I know.
There's a whisper on the night-wind, there's a star a gleam to guide us,
And the Wild is calling, calling . . . let us go.

It is through these poems that I know the man who fathered *longing* in me. It is the voice of the solitary and slightly melancholy contemplative whom I often saw gazing in the evenings across a lake at distant mountains:

I am one of you no longer; by the trails my feet have broken,
The dizzy peaks I've scaled, the camp-fire's glow;
By the lonely seas I've sailed in — yea, the final word is spoken,
I am signed and sealed to nature. Be it so.

12.

Arriving in Nelson in January 1967, I was enrolled in Nelson College and was unimpressed by its traditions. I was more withdrawn than ever, brooding (while my guitar gently wept) in my bedroom, generally doing poorly at school. I excelled in athletics, training hard and

growing interested in the altered states of consciousness achieved while running myself to exhaustion. I won the Senior 440 and shot put in the school championships. On Wednesday evenings I competed at the Nelson Athletic Club, winning the discus, javelin and shot put competitions (and setting a record in the latter). I won the shot put championship for the Marlborough, Nelson and Westland Provinces, and subsequently gained second place in both the shot put and javelin at the Wellington Provincial Championships.

I joined the Rival Rugby Football Club and enjoyed playing at outside centre in a great side with a marvellous coach, Jim Webby. In the second year our team trounced all opposition including the Nelson College First XV — a most satisfying act of defiance, for many of us had been expected to trial for the school team but had rebelled against its bullying coach. In that second year I was chosen for the Nelson / Bays Junior Representative team.

But in the spring of 1967 I suddenly became less motivated towards athletics, and eventually rugby as well. My cousin Jane had introduced herself to me earlier that year in the street at the bottom of the hill where our respective families lived, and we walked to and from school together. We played guitars and sang folk songs together, did our homework together, went out together and laughed a lot. Jane was vivacious and sensuous. Trusted by our parents, it was easy for us to be intimate together, and we enjoyed each other's company in the mood of extroverted happiness and pleasure which characterised every aspect of our friendship in the course of the following year.

Important directions for my life-journey arose through this relationship: we read poems to each other, and shared the books that touched our feelings. We found Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* together. And Jane introduced me to Dag Hammarskjöld's posthumously-published journal, *Markings* — a book that has remained significant for me ever since:

At every moment you choose yourself. But do you choose your Self? Body and soul contain a thousand possibilities out of which you can build many I's. But in only one of them is there a congruence of the elector and the elected.

I noted this passage after we — no, I cannot say we ever 'parted', for we were never exactly 'together' — it was just something that was so. And that is the way it 'ended'.

Around this time I found myself searching intently for answers to life-and-death issues. Joan had died when I was almost nine, Trevor and Raymond both when I was fifteen. I found myself driven inward by cumulative grief, and discovered the really big questions. I was not impressed by the conventional religious answers ('She was too good for this world so God took her back'), nor by the 'dead-end' of materialism. I began to keep a journal, in which I recorded fragments of poetry by myself and others, and occasional thoughts about life. I was reading Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* and *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* by Paul Reps. I was practising a kind of nature-mysticism, seeking an identification with the world; I sat upon a rock in a river and like Carl Jung wondered about the consciousness of the rock being sat upon. I wanted to be Chuang-Tzu's butterfly, Ezra Pound's 'I stood still and was a tree in a wood.' I wanted to feel what Wordsworth, in those famous lines from 'Tintern Abbey', expressed as:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Sensing *presence*, I wondered what *was* present — myself or other? — or both at once? Was my Self an Other? These questions led me to poetry. I was sixteen when I wrote my first poem, a quatrain about dawn over Mairehau. Somehow my father came to read it: ‘Hm-m, not too bad, chum. But Omar Khayyam did it better — this doesn’t scan.’ Consequently I preferred not to show him any more of my poetry, and in the meantime I read the *Rubaiyat*, in the Fitzgerald version. I didn’t like it much, but perhaps it was better than my quatrain. I continued to write simply because I had to; I found myself wondering about things and, in my mind, images would appear spontaneously as some sort of explanation, or maybe in lieu of any explanation.

I wrote many lyric poems, pervaded with a deep melancholy inwardness. I also wrote some apocalyptic ‘epics’, inspired in part by my reading of religion and mythology, but also by that mood of the late 1960’s articulated by singer/poets such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and Paul Simon (‘The Sounds of Silence’). These first efforts were a consequence of those deaths I had experienced. I would find myself by lakes and rivers, contemplative, in a deep reverie in which Raymond in particular seemed to be there with me:

Afterwards, I sought you there
in places where, together
lost into the thrust of adolescent violence
we had plundered life.
Lost into our world-revelling...

Nature claimed her sacrifice.
Afterwards, those places were for me
inviolable, a sacred altar where
one evening I would hear, intoning:

*Make your mind
a mirror like this lake
in which there shines,
world-revealing, light.*

I felt I understood what Keats meant when he wrote of ‘the wakeful anguish of the soul’. In English lessons at school I naturally loved the Romantics; Jane and I had read their poems to each other, curled up together on a sofa. But I had also encountered some of the ‘moderns’: Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Owen, and Thomas. And Emily Dickinson. And I also had my first

experience of New Zealand poetry: Mason's 'Footnote to John ii, 4', Glover's 'The Magpies', Curnow's 'Wild Iron', and Baxter's 'High Country Weather' and 'Poem in the Matukituki Valley'. There also was Alistair Campbell's 'The Return', in Lilburn's electronic soundscape, which I listened to repeatedly. However, apart from these few, I knew nothing about New Zealand poetry.

13.

During the summer holidays a school friend invited me to go pig-shooting with him at Tarakohe in Golden Bay. Mike was an extraordinary character — hard drinking, full of jokes and songs, but wonderfully generous. We rode horses along the beach on the first morning, and then tramped up into the dense bush, Lee Enfield .303's cocked at the ready. A wild pig bursting from the undergrowth would give little time for reaction. We saw a couple of Captain Cookers — as wild pigs are called — but failed to bring either of them down. Dusk fell, and we were struggling down a limestone ravine in gathering darkness, unsure of our direction except that 'heading on down' must bring us eventually to open farmland. At last we could go no further — we were 'bushed'. We lit a fire and sat out the night, wakeful, unnerved by the elemental presences that seem to creep up on us, fingering the nape of our necks. In the early dawn, shivering and shaken, I resolved not to kill.

A few months later I borrowed my parents' Vauxhall Velox PAX and drove Mike out of town before dawn. His girlfriend was 'up the duff' and his violent father had thrown him out of home. Mike hitch-hiked to Dunedin, and his girlfriend eventually joined him there. Some time later I visited them to attend their marriage as his best man, and they asked me to be their son's godfather. The marriage did not last long, however, and Mike pushed off to Australia, changing his name to Pat and living on stories, Irish folk songs, and ebullience. Within a few years we lost contact with one another, mainly due I believe to my increasing inwardness and Mike's apparently increasing outwardness.

My relationship with my parents deteriorated. Perhaps it had been difficult for some time, but I noticed it now as I quarrelled and disputed with them both over issues ranging from household chores to the war in Vietnam. I had become a pacifist, I declared, and wanted to make a stand as a conscientious objector by refusing to participate in the School Cadet Corps. My father forbade me, and I conceded. But we frequently shouted at one another, and one day when I was rude to Mum, he furiously lunged towards me. I braced myself, ready to fight, though terrified by the force of his anger. Abruptly he stopped, muttered that I had 'better watch myself', and went out to the kitchen. I brooded in my room for the rest of that evening, agreeing I had better watch myself. I thought he could kill me. Many years later he confided that he'd stopped himself because he thought I could kill him.

I watched myself. My protest deepened. One day my mother asked in a moment of anguish, 'Where did we go wrong?' And I replied, 'Do you want a list?' I then tersely told her I felt sad and angry about our family, but there was nothing I wanted her to do about it, nothing she could do. In this way I punished her, and I felt both pleased and guilty that she was so devastated. In my room, I breathed hard, my breast bursting, fighting back tears. It seemed I had decided on alienation.

Yet my parents never ceased supporting me in many ways. My father — fiercely aggressive over minor incidents — showed a remarkable demeanour at critical moments, such as the Friday night when I rolled the Vauxhall on a gravel road, losing control of it and fishtailing into a deep ditch. My five friends and I climbed out unhurt. The wrecked car had stopped just six feet short of a concrete culvert. When my father arrived together with the tow-truck, he pulled me close to him. ‘Been drinking?’ he demanded, smelling my breath. I hadn’t, and he said, hugging me fiercely, ‘It’s all right then. Don’t worry about anything — it’s just a relief you’re alive.’ My friends had hidden the crate of beer and two flagons of cheap apple wine — untouched — over the fence in long grass. If we had reached our destination, a shingle beach 15 km north of Nelson, we would have lit a bonfire, sung songs and drunk beer and wine and shouted for a few hours, maybe even leapt through the flames of the fire — as we did most Friday and Saturday nights, at a beach or more often a favourite spot on the Waimea riverbed.

14.

I’d turned seventeen. I had two distinct circles of friends. One included my drinking friends — Mike had been the centre of this group, but there also were my rugby-playing mates — and the other consisted of several school companions. This latter group was, as a matter of course, more intellectual, philosophical, more ‘cultural’. Poetry, art and music were central to our conversations. We were aware of changes in the wider world, social and political. Sometimes we were troubled and troublesome regarding injustices. We were in the ‘top’ class at school — we were very clever and we knew it. We talked of revolution, and like Wordsworth we knew that ‘bliss was it in that dawn to be alive / but to be young was very heaven!’ We antagonised our teachers. We each reported how unbearable family life was...

Ray was a particular friend during my two years at Nelson College. We sat on the terrace in front of the main school block, contemplating a delicious juxtaposition in our minds, of the College for Girls, erotically mysterious below us in the valley mist, and the student riots in Paris. Ray talked of Jean-Paul Sartre and sometimes of Albert Camus, names I began to refer to also, knowing they belonged in our conversations although I was not yet so certain who they were but would never say so. I was reading about religions, and he was reading about politics. His finely-developed sense of irony — more intelligent than adolescent sarcasm — tended to keep my more delicate interests subdued. In philosophy and mythology however we had things in common. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Ray declared, gesturing at Camus’ book, ‘is the most significant contribution in our time towards understanding the suicide-problem.’

For that debate, continued on into our English class, I was suspended from school. Not for being inattentive to the teacher; he’d only invited me to leave the room for the rest of that period but then I’d suggested to him that he was exiling me and not Ray because I was only the second-to-top student. Ray always outscored me, even though I’d discovered the words ‘ostensibly’ and ‘juxtaposed’ and ‘idiosyncratic colloquialism’ and used them well in every essay that year. But somehow he knew other words, and those ones seemed to make all the difference. In chess too he always beat me. And in maths. I suspect this latter circumstance was quite embarrassing for my father because, after all, Ray’s father worked under him. And Dad was great at maths. So much so, that when Ray’s pocket-money was increased, my

father always topped it by ten cents. I soon learned to lie when I realised our fathers never discussed it, that not being the 'done thing' in the office hierarchy.

We played music: 'I Am a Rock' ('The words! The beautiful fucking words!' he shouted, and talked of existentialism), and anything by Bob Dylan, worked out on guitars with aching voices. We found out independently that 'Highway 61 Revisited' played at 5.30 pm was not appreciated by our fathers coming home. But then there was also the 'Girl from Ipanema' — Ray fell in love with Astrid Gilberto for the sound of her voice, and I for the sound of her name. That was another difference. Ray discovered Jacques Loussier and Dave Brubeck and gently mocked me when I found I couldn't 'take five'; I just didn't seem to be able to think in that rhythm and he speculated that maybe it was the same awkwardness I demonstrated in handling bases in maths, laughing of course but still it hurt.

We read our poems to each other, mine mostly romantic and lyrical and his mostly ironic and bitter, but we listened to each one carefully, staring at the words scratched on the paper and the words scratched out, interested in the ways each of us arrived at a poem.

A month later the College for Girls became less abstract for me. I'd discovered one of them — was discovered, that is ('I once had a girl / or should I say / she once had me') — and the rioting in my gonads supplanted our intellectual French connection with quite another one. We drifted apart, Ray and I, with some strangely bitter words one night from him, and I realised only much later that his sardonic, ironic wit regarding girls was the harbinger of a gay orientation. Still, we talked and laughed together periodically. We talked about insanity as a solution to life's conundrums (and again I was required to leave the English room); and we laughed after our biology master came by while I was fondling a girl in the nearby park at lunchtime (he later called me to his study and mildly advised me that he often passed through that park, observing local flora and fauna; however, there was some 'fauna-cation' he preferred not to witness). But that same day he caught Ray smoking by the park gates; he got the detention, and for once I felt I had the superior vocation.

This new absorption, however, together with that of poetry and music, meant that I failed the end-of-year exams and had to repeat my sixth form year. I saw even less of Ray, though there was a weekend during our second winter, lying on the lounge floor at his place while his parents were away in Wellington, talking and staring at the ceiling side-by-side, when I read Arthur Rimbaud's 'The Drunken Boat' and 'A Season in Hell':

Why talk of a friendly hand! My great advantage is that I can laugh at old lying loves and put to shame those deceitful couples,— I saw the hell of women back there;— and I shall be free to possess truth in one soul and one body.

And Ray talked about Rimbaud and Verlaine and still I did not understand.

Then came Prague and, as the Russian tanks rolled in, Ray read Kafka's *The Castle*, darkly muttering by the oak trees outside the Scriptorium in his duffel-coat; but I was now reading Rilke with Roselia ('A relationship is two solitudes, meeting, greeting, touching one another — and always protecting each other's solitude') and believing that was how it was for us.

And she said so too. On Friday nights we curled up in the back seat of my parents' car up the Maitai River, cramped and moist but warm beneath the rug, and repeated those words, like a mantra. There always would be a free space between us, we promised one another. Tempestuous by nature, she carried a stiletto in defence of her freedom — it was dramatic, the theatrics of Spanish heritage, and I was embarrassed by it. But remained silent about it...

Suddenly Dubcek was gone. So too was Roselia, and the space between us was too big for me. For weeks I walked the streets at night, my greatcoat collar up, my mind tormented by the stories I was imagining taking place behind the curtains of her new boyfriend's flat. The final term's preoccupation with exams, and then several weeks working in the Nelson Lakes National Park with a team cutting tracks through the bush and constructing a swing-bridge across the Sabine River, gave my afflicted fantasy some respite.

So did my reading. Roselia had lent me her mother's copy of *God Is My Adventure* by Rom Landau, a survey of twentieth century spiritual movements. I was interested in Landau's impressions of George Gurdjieff and Rudolf Steiner, but most affected by the chapters on Krishnamurti. I bought the Penguin *Krishnamurti Reader*, noting one aphorism in particular: 'You are what the world is. If you want to change the world, change yourself.' At New Year I met some members of the Baha'i faith. I was impressed by the peacefulness of this new religion, and by its concepts for world government. But I found myself unable to join their group; I felt oddly reluctant to give myself to a belief. In a derelict cob-house inhabited for a time by the first self-proclaimed hippy of the region, I smoked a joint, but could not identify with all that psychedelic peace and love. I felt too acutely the existentialist position. Maybe Ray was right; we were isolated beings in a hostile universe.

It was a difficult time. I walked, all the time conducting dialogues in my mind, as a constant stream of consciousness, while longing for actual company. Then one summer night, just before I was to leave for Christchurch and Teachers College, there was Ray, leaning against a power-pole at the corner of our street, smoking a Gauloise and reciting Eliot: 'Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table.' I responded, misquoting, 'We linger in the chambers of the sea / By mermaids wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown,' and then we embraced, very awkwardly, stood back and punched each other on the arms.

15.

Harwood's Hole plunges 176 metres out of an extraordinary marble landscape near the top of the Takaka Hill, westward of Nelson. The surrounding area, Canaan, is an extensive karst basin where granites and quartz diorites have been juxtaposed against Ordovician marble, forming a unique landscape that drains into a vast cave system. The weird weather-sculpted rocks in this basin are hauntingly evocative in the mists that frequently shroud the hills. I loved this place in the first moments of being there.

If a lake is the earth's eye, as Thoreau has suggested, then Harwood's Hole is its ear. It is a wholly attentive organ, listening to the cosmos. But I do not mean the outer world. Standing near its rim — a daunting experience, as the marble walls curve away into vast resonant

depths, inexorably drawing visitors closer — I become aware that it is my inner world that is being audited. What have I to say? What is of relevance? Each time I have visited this place, I have felt some kind of sacred intent. Spirit of place — there, sensing presence, and mourning losses, I wondered about such things, and I wanted answers for the questions that formed themselves in me...

Awe is the foundation of religious mood. Nature repeatedly brought me to this experience, and I sought it more frequently just for this. In this mood I found consolation, but also the insistent promptings of conscience. Or of cosmos... What have I to say? What actually is of relevance? And, resounding in me as I contemplated those depths of Harwood's Hole, the question arousing greatest awe — who am I? I had all the big questions, but no answers. However, slowly my loneliness was changing, deepening through acceptance into aloneness — occasional moments of blessed solitude.

16.

Christchurch Teachers College was a bastion of arch-conservatism in 1969 when a number of relatively radical and/or brilliant students arrived there, aware of being part of a cultural and political wave which was sweeping the western world towards the end of the 1960's. So College was a sitting duck; or maybe we were, because many of us left within two years. Yet there were also those of us, bedding down comfortably into an overwhelming complacency, auguring something unexceptional for children's educational potential.

Mervyn Thompson's poetry lectures in the Great Hall of the University of Canterbury woke me up. Mervyn was a fine playwright — and had a marvellous voice for poetry. Some of the memorable moments in the lectures included his readings of Hopkins' 'The Windhover', Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan', Pound's 'The Garden', Eliot's 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', MacNeice's 'Snow', Thomas's 'Poem in October' and his elegy 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. This was the Canon, of course — I bought the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, and started to catch up.

I wrote a few poems at that time, imitative pieces mostly. When I was twenty-one I would destroy them, together with other aspects of my past, in a bonfire in the backyard behind my flat. I kept just one, 'The Fishermen', evoking a childhood scene from the Kaikoura coast, watching a group of fishermen mending their nets around a fire at night, seeing within that circle of warm light and conversation a community of feeling and belonging from which I was excluded. In this poem I experience myself outside the light, engulfed in the roar of the waves, drowning in the elemental darkness, ending up lost and yet found:

and now I am forsaken the men become
the fisherman's hands only and I am cast out
of their backbent contained circle of light
naked suddenly against the rising wind
seawall spray despair a seagull's cry

O child of God alone inside these deeps
of the ocean I stand baptised before thee

The theme of this poem, written when I was about eighteen and a half years old, is one of the 'signatures' for my life. This sense of exile, and of experiencing a chaos of elemental forces as a prelude to some kind of spiritual awakening, would recur at significant times, indicating a development in my consciousness which at that time I tried to understand primarily through my reading of Carl Jung's autobiography. On my long walks by the Avon River and in Hagley Park, I contemplated this welling-up of images and thoughts; I did not have them fitted into an established 'system', but there was a kind of coherence emerging. It seemed intelligible, essentially intelligent though not yet ready to be articulated. I walked, and I thought. Walked and thought.

Thinking, I required solitude, while not always enjoying it. One evening, while wandering lonely as a cloud along Bealey Avenue, I noticed a man working beneath his car by the kerb. The car was a beige Mk2 Zephyr, parked facing the wrong way, and the man was lying with his head under the front of it. I felt compelled to stop, and as I looked at the car and the legs of the man protruding from beneath it, the thought occurred to me that I could jump upon the bumper, and the engine-sump would probably crush his face. I considered this without any emotional response at all. It was not an immoral thought; it was an amoral thought. I did not do it... And as I walked away I reflected whether this was freedom, or whether such impartiality was even worse than immorality.

In January 1970 I moved into a Clifford bed-sitter in a former mansion at 140 Rugby Street. I joined the anti-Vietnam war marches on Friday nights after swilling at the Gresham. I sang regularly at the Folk Centre in Bedford Row. I knew all of Leonard Cohen's songs by heart, numerous Dylan songs, and many traditional folksongs. I played chess at No.17 Chancery Arcade and the Victorian Coffee Lounge. I played pool and billiards at the Clarendon Hotel and at the Star & Garter on Barbadoes Street instead of going to lectures. I also participated in a relatively good-humoured but highly subversive campaign at Teachers College, defying the conservative dress regulations, mocking the pervasive conventionality of the studies. I challenged the narrow behaviourist-dominated scope of educational philosophy. In this and in a number of other things I was part of the sub-strata of the times, and perhaps in some ways, in that milieu, a leader.

I 'failed'. Hauled up before the principal Dr Mann in mid-1970, I was accused of 'wayward bohemianism', questioned as to my mental balance, and was finally advised (amidst angry consultation of my files which apparently attested that I was 'in the top five per cent of the academic intake') that my studentship would be terminated. I patiently explained to him my attitude to such assessments. For I had been told by a second year student that if I did not do well in the tests, then nothing excessive would be expected of me academically; but as it was, now Dr Mann would have to wonder whether I had 'done well' because I was relaxed in regard to testing — or had I perhaps 'done badly' because I simply didn't care? What was my potential in that case? This only further infuriated him; how could such an attitude be acceptable in a person who was to stand in front of young minds! I replied that I imagined it might be challenging, but perhaps also inspiring. I saw Dr Mann was not at all impressed — 'mental imbalance', he concluded. However, because I'd had severe glandular fever at the end of the previous year, I was encouraged by the Dean of Studies to apply for a year's sick-leave. It was readily granted. So began my twenty-first year.

But there were other things I had experienced at Teachers College which made impressions. There was a gardener, gnome-like and dark, with a Solzhenitsyn beard and bright eyes, who worked in the gardens around the quadrangle. Something intangible about his demeanour haunted my mind, and when I talked with him I realised he saw things differently, sensing an elemental life and consciousness around the plants. Here then was someone with a direct living experience of that nature-mysticism which appealed so much to me.

Isa Moynihan lectured in the English Department and, although I never studied with her, seeing her walking elegantly through the College quadrangle reminded me of that vision of feminine loveliness I had first known through Edith Mercier. I now saw it more clearly: an urbane and cultured intelligence, in the world but not at all of it, it seemed. At some point I visited Isa in her study, feeling that she might be a sympathetic witness to the turmoil I was experiencing. Apparently (as she reminded me many years later when we met again as writers) I broke down and wept. She could not change anything, of course, but it was a relief to speak with an older person who also knew the stifling nature of the establishment.

The gardener and the intellectual: polarities in being. I admired the gardener for the unity of his being with his environment, but I felt as though I existed inside glass walls, a part of me remaining separated from my surroundings — an onlooker even of myself. My cultural world was increasingly remote from the natural world.

The Teachers College Folk Music Club was very active for several years, in association with the University Club. At the end of 1969 I was elected its president. For a while this became all-absorbing, as we organised a number of great concerts, including a tour together with the University Folk Club along the West Coast, and visits to IHC centres and prisons. We involved ourselves in the whole mood of protest of that time, taking on the big issues of Vietnam, the Bomb, racism, as well as the rigid authority of College.

Looking back, I see a relationship between music and poetry in my life; whenever I focussed on music I did not write poetry, or rather, when I was unable to write, then music became an alternative, a surrogate maybe. On occasion I experienced moments when I inhabited the being of music. These moments occurred only when I improvised — then, through a kind of inversion, it seemed the music was in me and I was in the music. Afterwards, I was an onlooker again — ambivalent, unconvinced, and therefore perhaps a bit unconvincing.

Still, I played the guitar well and sang, performing solo initially but eventually preferring to play acoustic and lead guitar in a constantly metamorphosing series of folk and folk-rock groups such as the one I named Genesis Hall. I absorbed my influences from many diverse sources, gradually developing a melodically lyrical style derived from Bert Jansch and John Renbourne of Pentangle, and later from Richard Thompson, lead guitarist of the folk-rock group Fairport Convention. I accompanied a number of singers who performed regularly at the Folk Centre in Bedford Row; most notably in the first week of Teachers College in February 1970 I met Paula Feather, a first-year student who spontaneously harmonised a song (Dylan's 'Tomorrow is a Long Time') I was singing in the common room. I loved the rich power of her voice and very soon became content to let her sing out in front while I accompanied her, occasionally adding supporting harmonies. Much of our repertoire came

from the rich hoard of British traditional folk-song. We also performed contemporary music, especially those moody songs written by Sandy Denny. Paula eventually began writing her own, some of which we worked on together. I also wrote a couple of songs, one of which I still remember:

visit these eyes and then
know why she smiles but is not laughing
speak then of silences
lands of dark shadows and sorrow

just listen to these words
and know the sound of fear
the torments of your mind
cannot be hers

and men who have used her
found warmth in just touching her hand
while sharing these hours
you try for her soul but cannot reach it

you'd like a hand to hold
but her eyes are like the clouds
they hide from you
the rainbows of her life

[There was a lead break for guitar and flute here]

and when at last you leave
you look back from the door
her eyes speak of the pain
you thought was yours

The words of this song were written for every woman I loved, especially for the archetype; but in particular it was for Angela — a first-year student, a beautiful, wild, photographic model whose eyes were a trap for any love-at-first-sight minstrel-poet. Yet also underneath those radiant surfaces I felt I sensed something else, a concealed inwardness. We fell in love, not for long but for me quite devastatingly.

I learned an incidental but important lesson early in this relationship. Years earlier, on three separate occasions, I had been roused to anger in a fight, and each time my antagonist had lost consciousness in the head-lock I'd applied. So I had vowed never to fight again, aware that my physical power was more than I could handle in such situations. One night, while walking back with Angela to her flat, we were accosted by her drunken former boyfriend, who began abusing her verbally and angrily pushing her. I stood between them with my hands firmly in my pockets, and said, 'If you want to hit someone, go on and hit me, but leave her alone.' He hit me, hard. And kept hitting me. I collapsed on the pavement, where he kicked at me a couple of times before staggering off. I was not so impressed now by my

decision not to fight. I was sore for a few days, and surprised in fact that he had attacked me; but when I came face-to-face with him in a pub a few days later, he could not meet me in the eye. Subsequently, whenever I saw him he avoided me. I had experienced the moral power of non-violence.

At some point during this relationship, for several days Angela stayed with me in my bed-sitter. As part of a Teachers College English assignment, she was writing and illustrating a children's book, while I was creating one of my occasional art-works, a large collage-cum-painting featuring a crowd of political, media and culture personalities gathered beneath a cross made of TT2 sticks, on which was impaled a monarch butterfly. We worked, talked, laughed, went for walks in the park, leapt upon each other's shadows, made love, ate and slept when we were tired. It was idyllic, and mutually creative, and it lasted as an idyll for just a few days:

I stepped into the pools
of your eyes, but
suddenly my senses lost

their footing, and I fell
in love into the pale
abyss of your open body

We drifted apart, strongly impelled by different temperaments into different experiences. I could not find her in the drug-induced states she increasingly entered, and was bewildered by her lack of presence in our encounters. A vacated body, and a vacated mind, are not such appealing love objects. Apparently I wrote angry 'unlove' poems for her, which one night I screwed up and threw at her. How ineffectual words can be!

I remember hardly anything of this, only my intense confusion in the situation. Yet we kept sight of one another, meeting again every seven years or so. Twenty-eight years later, when we become lovers again, Angela reminded me of these events, and then showed me another poem I had written at that time, an elegy for an elderly lady whom I saw almost daily:

this evening's shadows
are congealing blood
flowing from
the womb-wound of the sun

and the trees are trolls
groping in the churchyard
clutching at the figure
of the solitary old woman

who has no children
feeding sparrows by the path
weeping as she fumbles
bits of her heart into bread

the fingers of the trees
caress her parchment throat
and the birds startle
as she coughs up shadows

abruptly she looks up
her eyes reaching out to me
two pale blue wells
overflowing with loneliness

then she is gone
the space between us broken
like the shattered
petals of a frosted flower

17.

These years between the age of eighteen and twenty-one were extraordinary. In some ways it seemed like being in a dream, yet with a lucid consciousness. There was a sense of a larger drama — the big picture formed a backdrop against which my story was lived out. It was a notable time of the world. I walked the Christchurch streets at night with a multitude of scenarios playing in my mind, the scripts repeating and varying. When I walked along the river in fog, seeing the streetlights haloed huge and every surface gleaming, it seemed like the projection of an inner state. Often I was extremely lonely, yet I also craved solitude. I favoured the company of just one other at a time. I characterised this in terms of the saying of Jesus Christ that 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in your midst' — but ironically considered it the maximum number rather than the minimum.

Strange characters would turn up at my door and I let them in. We played chess, and drank dry apple wine or whiskey, and talked. Years later I wondered about mental illness and its border-lands; I did not know what was happening at these times, but I learned to find my way through the darkness, talking with these new friends, patiently threading a needle of consciousness with words and stitching reality together, slowly understanding that *to be present* for someone was special. Sometimes these deep experiences were with women, yet were not necessarily always sexual — or sometimes they were so simply because we were male and female, and therefore traversed that territory — while at other times we became lovers because that was the default mode of the relationship.

Life had some curious moments. I went to the Anglican Debutante Ball, and then to the St Margaret's Debutante Ball, with the daughter of one of the Anglican Church's dignitaries. Clemency was also a student at College, a sweet person with a sweet voice whom I enjoyed accompanying on guitar. The tenderness of this friendship was always an open blessing.

Essentially however it was an iconoclastic time, often infused with the spirit of Dada. Thus, one night I watched Peter Overton, a mate from Nelson College days, constructing an artwork by chaining a bicycle into a wooden fireplace surround, sitting to look at it — then in a blaze of inspiration clamping a cabbage on the carrier and labelling the whole assemblage

'Tomato'. It ended up exhibited in the McDougall Art Gallery. In response I glued twenty Huntley & Palmers cream crackers in a 4-by-5 grid on a polished oak rectangle, constructing a cube of biscuits towards the bottom left-hand corner, and called it 'Three Torrid Germans Out Walking'. It was also exhibited, and people actually discussed the significance of it. An art lecturer at the College asked me why I had not chosen to major in art. I told him that my piece was a joke, and he seemed to think that such an attitude was a valid artistic position to be explored. I never seriously considered this an option. Poetry was my vocation; music, my emotional expression. Art however remained just an occasional and spontaneous activity, an undeveloped talent.

I built a large construction of concrete blocks along the glass dividing-wall in my flat, with various 'found' objects which clustered on or around it. I liked it, but Mr Clifford was not so impressed. For the meantime, however, he thought I was a reasonable tenant compared with some. Only a few people lived at 140 Rugby Street in 1970: an old man; a dear old lady with whom I took tea; a scientologist called John who played Lovin' Spoonful songs in the back flat; Neil, an eccentric art student next door with whom I played chess until dawn, drinking coffee laced with rum; and Bob, an ebullient character who initiated the periodic water-fights, continuing a tradition established by previous tenants. Bob passed on the lore. He also had read widely and deeply; through him I now discovered the Beat poets. He was always laughing, even when muttering about some issue, 'Fuck, that really pisses me off!' And he was also exceptionally resourceful; we used his skeleton keys to gain access to the numerous empty flats and bed-sitters to exchange furniture. The old mansion had some fine original pieces, unstealable through the now closed-in verandahs.

At Bob's prompting, I read Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*; it was a powerful antidote to what I had found expressed (for instance, in Kenneth Rexroth's poem, evoking Jacob Boehme) as the 'signature of all things' — what I had begun referring to as the 'hopeless significance of everything'. On the first page, Wilson quoted Henri Barbusse: 'I see too deep and too much', and I said to myself, 'Yes!' The authors he referred to constituted my reading list during the following months. It was a bleak outlook; I walked through the winter nights, pacing out my thoughts amidst the turmoil of feelings. I necessarily had to call this intent awareness of existential despair — *angst* — a spiritual experience, yet simultaneously I struggled with some of the stranger connotations associated with the word 'spiritual'. But I found no one with whom I could share these questions — in most of my acquaintances I saw there was confusion between what was labelled as 'religion' and what I wanted to name 'spiritual'. I experienced a thread through these days and nights which I could name 'I'...

I came only gradually to appreciate the real value of the tension between my existentialism and this spiritualised consciousness. These directions, like map coordinates, were generated by differing elements — but this was a creative tension. 'The greater the contrast, the greater the potential,' Carl Jung has written. 'Great energy only comes from a correspondingly great tension between opposites.' The work-experience of constructing a swing-bridge across the Sabine River had provided one marvellous metaphor for this. So too, the taut strings on my guitar with their potential either for musical delicacy or power; and the dynamic tensions in practising archery... This sense of my mind in action was in distinct contrast to the anarchic madness of the water-fights...

The Rugby Street house was being 'renovated', and subsequently other people came to live there. Richard was a fine, sensitive young man from Timaru who introduced me to Strauss's 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' and Wagner's prelude to 'Lohengrin'. In return I introduced him to baroque lute music — an imbalance, acoustically. A couple of women, who were involved somehow with the Court Theatre, brought stimulation and imbalance of another kind — the theatricality which masked alcoholism and depression. Several guys who acid-tripped every weekend moved into a flat along the hall. Two strange and reclusive young men moved in downstairs.

I worked part-time in the vegetable markets, absorbing myself in the arts and humanities in my spare time, attending lectures at Canterbury University from time to time when some interesting subject was being presented. I enjoyed talking with others about such matters. There was also another life further up Rugby Street, where Trevor Richards and a number of others lived who talked politics and who initiated the activist project HART against tours by rugby teams to and from South Africa. It was a good street for it. But although I joined some of the protests, I could not become that heated about politics or activism. My increasing feeling for non-violence was troubled by the collective anger of protesting crowds; I could not accept that such abuse was justified. I read about Mahatma Gandhi and wondered how to accomplish what he called 'active soul-force' (rather than 'passive resistance'). After all, I was a tempestuous person. Yet I did not enjoy myself whenever I was angry. The volcanic power it released was frightening, and I only became aware of this through the reactions of others. That might be too late, I thought.

One of the reclusive arrivals at 140, David, became a close friend. We played records and chess and smoked dope and talked. He seemed to have a lot of the stuff, and it took me a while to discover that he was a heroin user and dealer who often received marijuana as part-payment. Through him I met the painters Tony Fomison and Philip Clairmont, both of whom he was then supplying. I went with him to their flats and watched while they hit up. We talked about art. Later we talked about 'it'... David had been poisoned once by heroin adulterated with strychnine, and had decided with his friend Ronald to import the uncut product in order to avoid a recurrence. They sold it initially to support their own habits, but eventually became more entrepreneurial. They encountered the big players on the scene, however, and pulled their heads in after a visit to Wellington. Throughout, they asserted they were not pushers, dealing only with established addicts.

David was just eighteen, a cynical and depressive person who responded to my essentially positive attitude by saying, 'You don't know what shit is like, or why I do it, so you can't understand me.' One day, after a long walk thinking about this, I simply said to him, 'Hit me up.' He asked why, and I told him — essentially, I would not let it be a barrier to our friendship. So he injected me. After the initial flash of fire and ice, I felt abstracted from the world, detached from my body, just a pinpoint of consciousness watching as we played a game of chess, distantly listening to our words. I became absolutely an 'isolated being in a hostile universe'. I felt no desire ever to repeat the experience. It had the desired effect, however, establishing a life-long trust between the two of us. It illustrates a tendency I have had to directly enter other people's experience in order to achieve a fuller understanding of their world. I have never regretted this particular decision.

Only later did I realise he suffered from clinical depression. David was also a professional shoplifter, probably a kleptomaniac. I listened to his quirky justifications, a peculiar kind of morality and loyalty which meant he stole only from large firms whose insurance policies he claimed inevitably invited his action. I found it almost acceptable, until I figured out who really paid for it. Still, he was a friend. Perhaps I thought at some point that through our association he might somehow change. Eventually however he was busted, then jumped bail with my help and has been living since in Australia, more recently 'clean' but physically rather debilitated. We have met occasionally, and I admire him in his stoic struggle with his despair, which he narrates ironically and often very humorously.

With another close friend, Dave Duncan, I applied to Mr Clifford for a flat downstairs at 140 Rugby Street, but somehow matters came to such a head that I was evicted. A schoolgirl friend, Naomi, mocked Clifford's son for his mannerisms in my open doorway and I was inevitably blamed for her behaviour. I asserted that she was my sister and apologised on her behalf but was asked rather stonily to leave. We moved into a notorious complex of houses, soon to be demolished, in Papanui Road opposite St Margaret's College. When the eviction order came, the tenants declared a republic, erecting a road-block half-way across Papanui Road early one Saturday morning. I was the 'Minister of Internal Affairs' and issued permits for entry. For a few hours the police were remarkably tolerant. In the course of several days we anticipated the demolition for the contractors. At some point a drug-crazed neighbour wanted to visit me through the adjoining wall, and simply began hacking a gap with an axe. Seizing a jemmy, I tried to smash his fingers as he pulled at the plaster-and-lathe wall.

In those last days a strange and lovely woman called Dorothy came into my bed and slept with me for two nights. I had admired her passing by on numerous occasions. Dorothy was mysterious, dark and gypsy-like. Now she had come, and then she went.

I turned twenty-one and, having declined the opportunity to return to Teachers College after the year's leave, I moved with Dave into a flat in Holmwood Road, sharing it with a close-knit group of friends, including Kerry and Lawrence Aberhart. During those few months they spent much of their time at Anthony Thorpe's place out at Sumner, or else listening to The Who's rock opera 'Tommy', for to one degree or another they had become 'Baba-lovers'. Around then I came across Rom Landau's book again and read about Meher Baba with some interest, wanting to believe but needing to make it on my own terms. As a curious consequence I began to find my way. Dave, anxious to persuade me of the truth, quoted to me Meher Baba's words: 'I was Krishna, I was Rama, I was Jesus, and now I am Meher Baba.' I was indignant, and surprised by the vehemence of my reaction. Dave went on to tell me that when Meher Baba had been asked about St Francis's place in the scheme of things, he replied that 'St Francis was one of my greatest disciples.'

In those moments of indignation, I realised that my orientation must be a Christian one. This surprised me, because I'd not had a conventional Church upbringing; in fact I despised the Church at that time. My father was a strongly-declared agnostic who liked the architecture of churches but always left whenever a priest appeared, perhaps (my mother suggested) because the Anglican Church had refused to marry him, as a divorcee, the second time; and also perhaps because of that myth of the minister's well-meaning insensitivity at my sister's

funeral. Henceforth he'd had no time for the trappings of religion. I was proud of him. My parents had not insisted on me attending church after Joan's death. When I'd voiced my unwillingness to continue going to Sunday School, Mum taught me the Lord's Prayer, and told me that in time of need I should turn to the Sermon on the Mount. 'One needs nothing else,' she said.

The various unsatisfactory answers regarding death had convinced me that Christianity was irrelevant. Instead I felt increasingly convinced by the idea of reincarnation and karma, and in feeling had identified myself as predisposed towards Buddhism; yet juxtaposed against this longing for the cessation of desire was the polarity of being in love with the world, a genuine *eros*-feeling which meant not only being in love with light and life, but also with the *thanatos*-mood of darkness, and of death. I was a Romantic, perhaps a Transcendentalist, I thought. And in my relationship with nature, I felt attuned with the spirit of Taoism, which also suggested a reconciliation of the light and the dark.

My reaction to Dave's quotes from Meher Baba shook me. A Christianity that encompassed reincarnation was the only answer I could accept. At the time I did not register that again I had read about Rudolf Steiner in Landau's *God Is My Adventure*, and that again I had been subconsciously impressed by his anthroposophy. Meanwhile, my flat-mates said it was easy: 'Don't worry, be happy,' was Baba's message. Yet I was distressingly unable to be part of their lives, despite their kindness and every effort at inclusiveness. I read the first chapters of the *Gospel according to St John*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. I lay still on my bed, listening to a recording of Schubert's 'Unfinished Symphony', over and over again. I owe my life to that music; together with Schubert's other works (particularly the lovely slow movement of the cello quintet) it was a source of solace, keeping the thread of consciousness stretched across my darkest days and nights. And that thread looped through the literature and ideas I was absorbing, gradually accumulating beads of light...

18.

We all worked at a variety of labouring jobs. I cycled in to Radley's vegetable market by seven each morning and worked through until the demand slackened, whereupon I would clock out, not needing any more money and preferring to use my time more effectively. I always enjoyed physical labour, especially those afternoons when we worked in teams transferring fruit from the trucks into the cool-store, heaving the heavy boxes and cartons from one to the other as fast as possible. I also liked the varied personalities working in the market. Old Jack in lemons would greet me every day with 'Have a puff of the old mari-hoochi-ana last night, eh John?' And at the end of the day, 'Gonna have a bit of free love tonight, huh?' In between, he muttered whenever I went by, 'Bloody hippies!' In a strange way, we were mates. Sometimes he was quite friendly, and often he was abusive. Behind him lay the shattering gulf of the war and his alcoholism.

Another kind of person entirely was Tommy Chang, a greengrocer from Lyttelton whose truck I loaded every day after morning tea, a kindly character who nevertheless expected the job to be well done. My foreman Doug would lean down from his auction stand where I worked on the berry-fruit table and murmur, 'Go see to it, John, we've got to keep the

regulars happy.' Tommy would give me a bag of fruit and vegies to take home. Several days a week there was nothing much doing, and on such days I had arranged with Doug to clock out, and spent the afternoon drawing, or playing music, or writing. Then, in the evening, I would listen to Schubert again.

Occasionally, one or another friend joined me in my room, listening too. Often they were in pain and lonely. We seemed to have the most sensitive responses to each other's souls. They arrived spontaneously, and we would share our respective stories in that intimate mood. In the case of women, it was also a tenderly erotic mood. Then they would go again. I think I was depressed at this time; yet I was also crossing an inner threshold to myself. It often felt painful, yet it was something I had decided upon. The essential loneliness of individualism. I longed for it to be otherwise; however, after making an effort I preferred to shun group experiences, feeling much as John Keats did:

When I am in a room with people, if ever I am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press on me so that I am in a little while annihilated...

It was a relief, perhaps for all of us, when in January 1972 my flat-mates set out to establish a more communal existence in Barry's Bay, and I looked for a place for myself. Eventually, I rented a tiny cottage at 83A Ottawa Road in Aranui, situated on a large back-section with a dozen fruit trees. It was a primitive paradise, with only cold running water and no proper kitchen, but there I rediscovered childhood's light and its revelation of the surfaces of the world. Light, leaping to touch the ripening plums and the apricots, the shining leaves of the trees and the grapevine, dancing in the long dry summer grasses... The vast shadows of the macrocarpa hedge contrasted with the bright rustle of the poplar wind-rows:

the poplars
ripple in the wind

like mountain
streams

and splash into
the sky

During 1971 I had begun reading Chinese poets of the T'ang Dynasty, and then the Imagists in the Penguin anthology with its brilliant introduction and the appendices by F.S. Flint and Ezra Pound. I painted one of Li Po's poems on the outer wall of a shed in the garden:

If you asked me why I dwell among green mountains
I would smile and remain silent.
The peach blossom follows the moving water;
there is another earth and heaven beyond this world of men.

From that time and throughout 1972 I wrote many brief poems, making little hand-written booklets of *Songs for Several Seasons* for friends. Only a few of these lyrics now remain in my

possession. They were written spontaneously, without much concern for craft, yet there is a naïve, rather Taoist freshness about some of them:

welcome back home
beloved friend

you've travelled far
discovered much

the greatest journey's
no distance at all

I painted another utterance from this sequence on the shed wall, beside Li Po's poem:

seeing you again
is no longer just
again

Many of the poems from this time reflected my renewed feeling for nature — expressing a simple identification with the objects of contemplation:

today I went inside an iris

I was there with a moth

we were both very still

I cannot say more than this

only the iris can speak

'The signature of all things' seemed to be inscribing itself anew in my mind. In this mood of connectedness, I spontaneously renounced all drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, and became a vegetarian. This was a confluence of many streams of thought and feeling, which presented itself as a straightforward outcome of my contemplative life. I never felt fanatical or moralistic about it; it just happened, and it seemed good. About this time I also simplified other aspects of life, ridding myself of all the non-essential possessions. I kept some clothes, cooking and eating utensils, my guitar and my journals, a greatly reduced record collection, the few books I felt I would read again, and a small jade Buddha. Life might be complex, I thought, but it would not be complicated.

One thing continued to trouble me. I craved company and solitude, and in that contradiction often found neither, only loneliness. I invited people to visit, and found myself hesitating to go for a walk in the pine plantation across the road, hoping for a phone call. One afternoon I seized the phone and threw it out into the garden shrubbery. The next day a friend visited me, and we went for a long walk. We noticed another couple walking beneath the pines, which was a rare occurrence in those parts. On the following day I went again for a walk, and returned to find a note on the door: 'We came to see you'. With the note in my hand,

like a dowser I walked out into the street, around the corner into Pages Road, and up to the front door of a villa. The door opened before I could knock, and a delicately-featured young man murmured, 'We've been expecting you.' So began a new life.

Reviewing it, my development seems to be a tapestry — interwoven moments of being and becoming. This is indeed how I experienced them. Each thread in itself reveals little, but when woven together and viewed from a distance, some patterns begin to emerge. At a later time, when parts of this tapestry seemed frayed and torn, I said to my mother, 'When I was twenty-one, it was as though I saw my life. Whenever I return to that point, I know myself, just a little, as a true picture.'

My journal from that time suggests the reality was not always so clear. But it *was* present. An image. A resonance. A coalescence of possibilities. I had been collecting, since the age of eighteen, aphoristic fragments by poets that articulated what I myself would have wished to say. For instance, from this time there is a passage by Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

Grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or find itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representation to rise up before you.

I hardly yet understood this, but intuitively I knew it was true. I knew that those 'contrary forces' also lived in me. I discovered that, as I located myself in that field, I came closer to what I could call my Self, and simultaneously I seemed to come closer to the world. This renewed communion included people. At this time the strands of a new consciousness, and new associations, were being woven almost imperceptibly together. As I turned twenty-one, and in the following months of early 1972, I met several people through friends at Teachers College who were actively engaging with Anthroposophy; and then a community of others, living in that Pages Road villa, who were involved in Subud — a spiritual practice founded by the Indonesian master Muhammad Subuh. Intriguingly, as though in a Venn diagram, these two groups of people intersected. Something mysterious was resonating within these encounters, which would lead me into the following years, and away from all my previous associations, with such a purposeful sense of direction that at some point I would remark to one of my friends, 'It's as if one book of life closed and another one opened'.

Postlude ~ Reflected Light

We do not see the light. There is light, but we do not see it. We can see the source of light, and we otherwise see only what light touches. We see the illuminated object.

There is an experiment described by the physicist Arthur Zajonc in his book, *Catching the Light — the entwined history of light and mind*, in which light is shone through a black box that has been shaped in such a way that when the observer looks into it, none of the surfaces can be seen, for the light does not shine on them. Gazing into it, there is no visible light. But if an object is placed into the box in the field of vision, it is illuminated. Think for a moment about those space photographs released by NASA. The stars are there, as brilliant pin-pricks of

light, and in the foreground a spacecraft or a spaceman shines in the black immensity of space. But light is nowhere to be seen in the interstices.

There is something in this also for our consciousness. We do not ordinarily see the light of thinking, although we do see what it illumines. Learning to look back upon thinking itself, and to know this light, has been a revelation, the greatest joy. So what was a metaphor has become reality. In the first place it is a matter of placing something in the space, in the 'black box' of the stilled soul, so it can be illuminated. Then, the trick is to look towards the source. And there it is. Light, flooding the dark spaces of the soul...

To find the way into language for our experiences is to articulate something that can only be 'reflected light'. I realise that writing has been for me a path of reflection; through poetry, stories, journals, essays and now these sketches, I have sought to place my experience in the light, to see just how it is. In that light I then find myself illuminated, and in its source, the luminous Presence in whose mirror we are reflected...

~ John Allison, Easter 1999