

Client Numbers

Aotearoa Invisible Press 2011

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2.7

And when I am more than the sum
of a number of fools
and unfortunates, left off, left out and I am

and one among the dreams of us – the bright
river, with straw and hope and mud and love,
that sparkle more beautiful than broken glass.
If you remember one thing remember this:

alive.

Oh we are a river –

running and flooding and waiting

stagnating and drying and

bursting and rushing

we fall like people and rise

like people

and we are.

We are people, we are people, we are people

2.6: the last visit

Pale lazarus of the public ward,
my heart is heavy with yours.
Age has left soft fingerprints
on the back of your hand, stems
of daisies pulping in the vase,

and medication set in blisters
beneath shedding petals, like
the hours are bitter pills; or
you're swallowing chalky years.
Unmoved bubbles line your glass
and my eyes are filled with dryness
worse than tears. Your hard frail knee
beneath the worn sheet, my brown
lazarus, the pressure of your arid palm
on my own, a fear draped with waiting
and sour orange in cracked
plastic. Your hair from your forehead;
the curtain from around the bed; your light
from mine.

Children will not play in my words.
No-one will speak of the lottery
of my disappointments, the empty bottles
and cheap labels, the badly mended shoes.
Vagrants will not find shelter in my thoughts,
though the grass grows through their cracks already
and the sky laughs down at my broken-open face;

and I am winding, hurried like a creek through
steep places. Catch tight the branches of belief
and feel them come away in your hands. Hope
my last luxury: pebbles rolling through
loose clay and dry gorse. But alive.

If you remember one thing about me remember this.

that way we always got enough air
and everyone we met seemed alive.

The moon
heaves itself from the sea
just the way we
forget about accidents.

You know, it's hard to say what's so good
when all of those words stand for "bad"
I'd do it all again if I could
from chasing rats to learning to swim.

The birds
build some really good homes
but like us they
sometimes fall out of them.

Well, we still have fish n chips and beer;
when we talk we still hear what we say.
They say the cost of living went up?
Well, we never had money anyway!

we can visit you between 9 and 10 on Saturdays
if I watch my mouth, hands to myself. To us
you will shine,
you will shine and we will crawl.

We will crawl through the eye of a needle for this.

2.5: the money song

We never had money anyway;
what are you supposed
to do with it -
there's never enough to make more and how
do you spend sixty bucks at the dairy?

*The sun
and the earth spin around
the way we did
to get dizzy and fall down.*

We always liked to walk everywhere
just as well, ay, since we have no car

1: The Clients

1.1

Client of the state
prison, the remand, client of the social welfare,
of the state hospital. Client. The word suggests
that we all pay, one way or the other
way

What do you know of the dreams of my numbers
in nights that crouch behind couches, barren
lounges and beer crates
old potatoes, peeling ceilings, and insignificant windows;
what do you know of their long walks home?

Or what do I know of the lives of your numbers
the feel of tar against your skin
the landlord and the water bill
and crawling skies that lie in wait
for dawdling children after school;

or of others, sitting up with silence that watches them

This is the staring eye of mercy, which
lets us into the fishy fluorescent light
of the Mount, this is body searches and sly comments
and fake pine benches and time is up.

This
is the blunt
point of it all, of
judges and green carpets,
lawyers who all know each other by name
but don't remember yours;
of the bottled water, the forms, the
smoked salmon and cream-cheese quiche
at the café next to the courts,
the cold nights, the long days, the remedial
reading, the no right turns,
the Christmas cards with snow on them –
the snow you've never seen, the salmon
you've never tasted, but the police knew your name
since you were a kid,
yeah *they* knew where you lived –

2.3 do you collect recipes?

- one cup of normal rice
- half teaspoon of cheap oil
- salt or any herbs that grow where you can pick them

Place all ingredients in a saucepan.

Add one & a half cups of boiling water, and stir with a fork.

Put a lid on it, and put it on the stove on the lowest heat for about ten minutes.

When it looks cooked, turn it off, stir and leave to stand for a while with the lid off. Enjoy!

2.4

It's to see you shining, though dressed like the others
in ill-fitting jeans and issue blue shirts, off-
colour like the others, face badly stitched. It's
for this that I queue,
have brought you a photograph, and will never talk back.

closely, lives turned to brown paper bags
and clipped coupons, cracked soap
and cupboards and moths?

The numbers, the numbers
in line, put on hold, their dreams folded,
set
aside, lost

1.2: late morning

Already I'm turning into
something not unlike a dog;
can feel it in the tension in my forehead
trying to remember have I had a piss yet? taken
my pills?
My bony lower spine curls with shame.

I've heard you say it sideways when you knew I couldn't
hear you.

My name, that is. Got one of those.

I dunno – there are days when you're too tired, days
when there's something in your head that feels
like spiders have laid their eggs
in there, so you spend the whole afternoon
with that feeling like you're just about to
remember something important. Try
to shake it off, but life refuses to come into

focus. There are days for us of
picking up the kids socks, days
of dirty dishes, days where you're sure
that if you could only have a piece of steak or
something everything would be better and you'd stand up
straight, or days of three days work, of nailguns and
gib-board dust, days when
you want to take that brown
pay packet straight to the pub;

or too closely, aware of our cheap worn shoes
and shiny-kneed pants, of how threadbare
civility can be,
after the second hour
especially.

Felt my lonely lower spine, all curled away.
Thought, if we're really just... *nobody*, the end will be
like sinking....

But when my ship comes in, there
won't be case workers on it

we won't need case workers any more

And when I am queen
and when you are king
there'll be no client numbers
there'll be nothing

Was it
was it green?
The clock was somewhere I couldn't see
and never moved, it never,
through the hours I did. After
the first one I could sense
the resentment of wood beneath the fabric and foam
of my seat. After the second hour
I was dead wooden too, and starting to feel
ashamed of my skin – colours, blotches,
a cat scratch up my arm
suddenly vivid in the humming neon.
Mark of the beastly. I thought
of the kids at home
with their running noses and newly washed hair,
and was pleased not to have brought them.

The worst thing there apart
from the carpet was the eyes of the others,
sighing inside their clean clothes
and harshly sweating bodies. We tried
not to look at each other too much

days with
standing in the supermarket doing pathetic sums,
of trying to get
stains out of cheap clothes with cheaper soap,
of wanting what you can't have,
and having what you can't want,

but then there are good days too:

days with the warmth
of late morning sun,

and time for yourself, of instant coffee
at your best friend's house,
days of good scores, days of smart ideas,
days when the toaster works and cars stop
to let you cross,
days when you find ten bucks in the
street, days when the team wins, days when
you think to yourself hey glad I'm alive.

1.3: the advice

I'm sorry but your parents should support you because you're under 25. I'm sorry but no, your mother is not eligible for family assistance because you're over 18. If your family is too poor, why not drop out of University? You probably shouldn't be somewhere like that anyway. You probably shouldn't be.

Hmm. You seem to have fallen off our Register. The best thing to do is go back to your doctor and get re-diagnosed, have them fill in a form to prove that you still have this illness. I'm sorry about the extra expense but it can't be helped. Yes I'm aware they haven't found a cure for it yet. Yes I can see that you still have it, but that's not the point.

I'm sorry but we've been overpaying you by \$2.10 a week and now you and your partner owe us just over seventy dollars. Speak up. Oh, he's in prison? Fill out this form and go back to the back of the queue.

through the cloud of pethidine & lights.
Name please, name. *Please*
let me stay the night.

2.2

It was green the carpet
was it, green? They some
times are. Oh god, I sat there for so
long; I should remember. I know
the pox-marks on the motley
potted plants, I know the
missing screw and rusted hole in
the back of the chair in front of me,
the shape of the half empty bottle
of orange flavoured 'drink'
lying under it, smeared with grease.

*(You May Have To Provide
Proof of Your Identity)*

2.1: A&E

Name.

Where does it hurt. There will be a wait, & pain;
there will be light. Let the little children
come unto the wards, let the police stomp through
with some guy they pulled out of the drink,
and the nurses mutter *anyone would think
they were trying to drown him*. Let the doctors
speak in the babel of many accents, let
them put valves in your arms to push the salt
water in. When did it happen, & where
does it hurt? Name please. There will be
a wait. Let
the synthetic curtain be a veil for now.
Come and find where they have wheeled him
to, behind a propped-
-open door. Let the lepers lie outside radiology
& the all night television in the waiting area.
We can't afford the taxi, & let something
show up in their tests, cos the 4a.m discharge
of Undiagnosed walks cold up my spine

1.4: a small town

Left over time and icecream:
the things that are left
to us. And fish n chips,
grey sand scattered with pipi shells
escarpments, storm break rocks
Nights with you and a bottle of cheap
wine, the wind in the failing
trees.

Old footpaths marked with
the prints of long dead dogs.
Picnic tables with the seats torn off
and your high-school boyfriend's
initial engraved. The weather dulls
my face like seaglass; and all the
gulls want a piece of your name
to shout – these things of ours,
these things of ours
catch hooks in my throat.

1.5

I look at my hands they are big and rough they are all I have and I dare not touch you with them, not even this once. Just this once.

That night I was lying to her a bit to make her laugh, told her I wear my hat all the time. Even in the bath she said, yeeeees I said even there, I just let it dry again on my head, after! Though truth be told I've only ever had showers, but I wasn't going tell her that. She giggled a bit and bit me on the lip and we watched telly for a while and we had a root and went to sleep with the music channel on. I like her house. I stay somewhere else.

That night, I wanted to get her something so she'll see what's behind those times when I switch the telly off and look at her, you know - just look.

2: Waiting Rooms and Visiting Hours

There is that moment when you realise you've said something wrong, and some angular bird in your chest tries to abandon you.

1.8

And when I am king
and when I am king
and when
I AM

the bright arc of a waterfall cutting through the hills;
a series of waterfalls
that don't need language to be taken seriously
that gravity is enough to make real for you,
you'll stand under me: you'll swim in my miseries
and believe.

And when
I am
king, and stand through a series of falls
in all my bright gravity, and when you stand under me
my mouth a dark rivermouth
full of stones and sea-hungry, and I am

*

(The Ratbags)

“... and there's nothing glamorous about them and nothing interesting well nothing that wouldn't be interesting more or less in anybody, like say a collection of talking parrots or an aunt who was in a movie once ... anyway in movies they're eccentric if not downright cool but in real life they tend to have names like Kev or Trev and maybe a reputation for being a little bit dodgy.

Oh sure there's a few who think they *are* cool and they have great shoes and terrible haircuts and tell you that they were “mentioned” once on Crimewatch, but for the most part it's either bad luck or else it's a job, more or less and the ones who go far work hardest and are most boring no nothing glamorous about them.”

*

*

*Fish n chips
and cherios,
this is
where I'm from.*

*We can get you one of those
if you want one.*

*Shopping malls
and stereos,
where we
don't belong.*

*I can steal you one of those,
d' you want one?*

1.7: song

*With Our Lady of the Small Cold Feet
we will go where the real people go,
and watch as they eat,
and eat as they sleep.
I'll dance where moonlight
and the streetlights meet
with you – with you!*

*With Our Lady of the Fog and Scum
we will play where the dice cut your teeth,
gamble with your heart
and lose it in the rum,
and I'll stagger over tabletops and
win another one
for you – for you!*

Social welfare taught me how to spell ambivalence.

Social welfare gave me a sense of community, through participation in national newspapers. When you're on welfare, it is possible to read what the middle classes think of you just about every week.

Social welfare was an exact measure of how much my country values me.

Social welfare gave me a pair of workboots so that I could get a job. This job was not about counting cars, it was about demolishing houses. When you work in demolition you can think about whatever you like. At night when I closed my eyes, I was still seeing walls.

1.6: They Say In a Healthy Economy There Should Be 5% Unemployment Or, What Has Social Welfare Ever Given You.

Social welfare allowed my mother to keep us even though she could not keep a husband. Social welfare gave me a mother who could keep us fed and clothed.

Social welfare gave me my education.

Social welfare gave me two years of living primarily on rice. I can cook rice in such a way that not a single grain sticks to the pot.

Social welfare gave me the great opportunity to count cars for eight hours a day. When you're counting cars, you have to think about counting cars or you'll lose your count. They can count cars more efficiently with a machine, but at nine dollars an hour it was cheaper to just use people. Nine dollars before secondary tax.

Social welfare gave me the time it gave me nothing. There is a strange way the gaps in the system open up and you become wedged.

Social welfare gave me the amazing ability to fill out forms so that each letter of my name falls into a separate little box, without even trying. Social welfare gives people a lot of practice with forms. Forms and forms and forms and forms.

Social welfare gave me self control. Once during a long wait some guy up ahead in line picked up the table in frustration and hurled it at the Case Manager. We told that story to each other for a long time. When tears run down the back of your nose and into your throat, it feels almost exactly like choking on seawater.

Yeah, social welfare gave me humility.

Social welfare gave me a mother with four teeth in her head and a deeply concealed sense of shame. Most people believe the myth that their taxes are paying for the

healthy teeth of the poor. Perhaps we get our teeth pulled because we're so lazy we don't want to brush them any more? Social welfare gave me a mother who could keep us, but she couldn't keep her smile.

Social welfare kept me off the streets.

Social welfare gave me a ready-made social stigma to take to school.

Social welfare gave me sandwiches to take to school too.

Social welfare taught me about systems. Did you know that children who grew up on welfare are statistically more likely to spend some time on it as adults? Experts can't agree on whether this is because we're losers like our parents, or because we know how to fill out forms. I think it's because we have less pride to lose.

Social welfare taught me the meaning of irony.