

FINGER AGAINST  
THE LIGHT



Margaret West



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## Finger Against the Light

Finger against the light and you  
become transparent. Thoughts  
enter through this moment  
and emit words  
which take one as inconsequential  
or profound.

Finger against the light and you  
are dinosaur, seeking  
the warmth obliterated  
by such brief gestures.

Finger against the light  
and morning becomes small  
enough to walk through.

Finger against the light and you  
are goddess,  
god, the sun  
at your command.  
Ants overwhelm.

Finger against the light and you  
or all else  
become invisible, able  
to be  
or not.

Spit a hair upon lightning,  
turn worlds against themselves,  
time cicadas,  
sift and sort grains of sand into indefinite  
categories,  
carve clouds as marble,  
know truth  
or vanity.

## After Part's *Passio*<sup>1</sup>

A morning after bells so chimed

(and chimed)

(and chimed)

relentless

tolled through valleys

followed cool waters

crossed rocky places

moss

and thorns

(and thorns)

when flesh was broken

blood was drunk

(was drunk)

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<sup>1</sup> *Passio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Joannem* (1982) by Arvo Part (b.1935) was performed at Christchurch St Laurence, Sydney, on September 29, 1996, in the presence of the composer.

when air was torn apart  
washed clean

(washed clean)

and all dissatisfaction purged

(all purged)

when weeping's done  
and laughter's but a mockery

the bells will peal

(and peal)

(and peal)



## Like a fish

This morning I open  
my mouth like a fish — open  
and close it, feel the angled action  
of my jaw, cool  
air against the tip of tongue, the inner  
edge of lips, hear the slight  
“puh” as they part.

This morning I open  
my mouth seeking word-  
shape, feel  
fragments of letters in the interval  
between incisors, almost  
a word wedged between  
molars. Another swells  
soft in the crenellations  
under my tongue. A phrase  
is manipulated to be cut  
and cut again. Minced  
to hasty pudding.  
Flossing may flip  
some scrap against  
my mirror cheek, some fleck  
may catch  
my eye.

Do fish  
have ears — mine are  
vestigial this morning —  
deaf to cadence, faint  
rustling, resonance,  
reverberation. Here,  
no crescendo climbs  
or peaks. I flounder  
quiescent.

As I lean  
on the table jonquils beat  
uneasily with my heart. My drying  
pen sticks on the tooth of doubt.  
I might beguile the clearest  
action; but now the trees  
are still, the birds have fallen  
into silence; no parrot  
at the feeder.

The roof  
creaks with the morning  
sun on its back. A dog  
barks — once. The morning  
mute in drifts of wattle  
dust. (What is  
the sound of yellow?) Jonquil  
fragrance overwhelms  
their pallor.

The refrigerator  
murmurs  
a currawong  
a distant  
truck backfires.

A king  
parrot sets the feeder  
spinning, the husk-fall  
heard by earth alone.

## An Afternoon

The span of your hands  
pink tipped petals

the almonds of your nails  
tinged with smoke

the fragrance of berries  
ripe and plump

the stain  
that place

the sun lowing  
glowing on crepe myrtle

the warmth of your mouth  
as late autumn

the pen and the page  
marks of tears

the ghost of your smile  
stained with raspberries.

Jann

When you laugh and your nose wrinkles  
in animal delight, your thighs  
swell and flow  
with auburn curls  
and I notice for the first time  
the fine spacing  
of your slightly pointed  
teeth.

## Knees

These islands floating on fragrant morning waters  
are the lightly, damply furred knees of a young boy,  
all rosy warmth and restless angularity  
skipping to life

now pale before the stringent edge of lavender  
to weathered mounds — honed wind-stones  
holding still the will to climb and pray  
suspended, sense a cooling

dry while those of sons, lovers, mothers,  
grand and great-grandmothers drain and vaporise — all  
but fragrant pin-points left on wall and ceiling  
anticipating mould.

## Mauve

You taught me how to read  
shadows  
who knew them  
so even the dark hairs  
of you were lost within  
their mauve recesses, each ridge of knuckle  
knee, cheekbone, nose, brow  
drifting  
on mauve shades which were all  
that you were  
shades  
of drifting mauve.

So — a parking space is found,  
not through absence of any gleaming body  
but a break in the continuum  
of shades flung down across asphalt-um  
— sedans, a ute, pantec, something  
more bulbous —  
then nothing  
waits illumined.

Parking,  
I remember that mauve has the smell  
of sickness to it,  
folds  
as petal to the rot.  
And sweetens.

## Heavens Only Knows *(to a Painter)*

God knows, you say you do not know why you  
make marks. There you dance in the old cave  
sweeping wide your arms, swinging every naked

part of you, drawing the beast within  
your spell, the heavens roaring as you plunge  
your brushes at its darkening eyes.

Or slashing the bush to a frenzy, pulling streams  
against their ordained flow, up-ending  
rainbows, floating rocks like blue eggs to the sky

and rupturing the lily-skin of waters.  
You take the smallest model of a woman, wrap  
and unwrap her to nymph or giantess dancing

the raining of leaves, singing your bush. Wielding  
your brush you drag abandoned loves across  
the page by page their hair

your brushes mounted like guns or loving tools  
within reach the stained armour  
of your apron. And your painter's hands

giving wings to the halt; modestly seeking  
permission to row your boat in the heavens  
only knows.

## See How the Clouds

See how the clouds  
have slid onto the canal,

their mass  
burnished to bright surfaces.

I would join them  
but know the weight

of my belief. (There lies  
my face.)

Would place one foot  
against their leaden ledges,

climb the heavens,  
sing the shining

of all mornings, my voice  
full, flung to the wheeling

sun, the stars.  
Inverted,

I would walk, bold  
as a morning of parrots,



through casuarina tops;  
swing my dark hair

with theirs to reveal a whispering  
of ears, where sighs

slip into the moist  
and peppery air.

## Eucalypt in foam

I've watched  
the eucalypt bud for months  
now. In mid-January  
it foams in cream  
florescence. Such  
creams  
crowns  
thorns  
gowns  
strings  
stamens and caps conduct  
it's classification.

I could sip with the skink  
at its science; skim  
the gloss  
— particular, precise,  
attentive to bark and leaf  
and inflorescence  
or plunge into its foam,  
press my face sweet  
to its flush, float couched,  
prone to the vault,  
sway with it,  
flail in its gales;

eat  
of its floss  
and drink its mead;  
inhale its honeyed  
stringent pungency;

absorb with it  
the blare  
of summer,  
let ultra-  
violent sear  
my flesh, dust it  
with the golden talc

of pollen,  
quiver  
with the shift  
of apprehensive breeze,  
joust  
with fly  
with honey-eater,  
bee,  
swarm in its limbs  
with ants,  
snatch  
and rustle bright

with possum eyes,  
blink  
with owls  
and more  
than wisdom,  
weep  
with its loss;  
strive  
to prod life into the pulp  
of blooms;  
anticipate  
its ash.

## Late Monday Heaven

Forgotten — the fusillade  
of lime through teal, the bloody blare  
across the darkening  
air — its lingering  
more charged than any  
act with sombre  
premonition. Not even the adrenalin  
of joggers, the final joyous freedom  
of the dogs, the ravening  
impertinence of gulls distract me  
from this solemn  
joyous temper when sunset flings itself  
in flaming votive script across  
late Monday heaven  
and drifts and skims and slews across  
the sea.

Now hear desire shrugged off as evanescent  
lace from glistening boulders.

## Soft Upon Our Feet

A rose is a cloud. Tomorrow is a sky full of roses.  
Today clouds hang their heads, blush for the ease  
of lift and drift across our eyes,

pause on an offchance that yesterday will bear  
its perfumed breath to heal  
or wound, winding us in vapours, taunting soft against  
our lips and aspirations,

marking *was* and *when* with fine precision  
as the feet of birds imprinted in new sand.  
Signs scratched minutely into time fall and settle  
soften and wear with the breathing of each moment.

Again clouds gather to themselves — pink  
and red; and night feeds reverie against a day when  
roses know their place — and searching petals will  
rest soft upon our feet.

## A Suitcase Full of Lemons

A suitcase full of lemons  
to your passion for flights  
to exotic parts  
befriending emperors  
all manner of queens  
illustrious personages  
tweaking mores  
partaking of banquets with presidents  
knowing them  
always  
respectfully.

The priests  
invoked teeth  
(a suitcase full of lemons  
and cunts have teeth)  
as well as emperors  
and wives  
written off  
smacking  
your small white balls  
onto tables — ping  
and pong  
and off with their heads.

## Tarpaulin

Bundled  
under his arm the sky  
blue plastic sheet — home,  
and manor.

His sombre  
jacket  
hair and beard  
ambush  
reflective eyes.

His clothes once matched  
the night, but now  
are dusted  
by his life  
and living it.

In ice  
deep indigo  
he dreams  
wrapt in a sky  
of blue  
and rustle.

Then hopes seep  
crimson through  
his sleep  
and time begins  
again with fervid  
yesterdays.

Into the still  
glazed morning  
he folds  
the crackling sky,  
walks crazed  
on violet  
feet through gold  
and blare of early  
daffodils.

In mists his sky  
is always home  
blue  
and crackling,  
bundled  
under his arm.



## In memory, faces

In memory, faces all  
are flowers. I have known people,  
purple as pansies, open yellow  
splashes, their whites  
of eyes, flutter black  
lashes, more flaunting, less  
pensive (but scented,  
for Proust, like skin). Others as  
roses dewed fresh or fallen  
replete with heavy  
heads, or soft-  
powdered, faint, withered  
and rustling beneath the touch  
or kiss.

Have known hyacinths — so many  
faced — fully, sweetly  
suffocating; daffodils nodding  
this way and that; the small open  
faces of forget-me-nots — discreet, but there  
after washing; camellias' fabled beauty  
rotting, brown as old boots; chrysanthemums  
tossing white or golden  
curls, with capable hands, a scent  
of autumn gardens  
to them; gardenias  
glowing in moonlight, fragrant,  
exquisite, easily  
bruised.

## Her Armpits

The secret spaces of her armpits  
hold all that has long abandoned  
smooth skin. The crease  
at the edge of a smile she holds there,  
and moistly gleaming tears.  
Both fervid hope and humid disappointment  
ferment darkly. With time  
there will be such a flowering

## Tidal Night

Her pale fingers  
pull at the waters,

draw them to cover her  
bare and sandy parts,

to swathe in lace the spare  
hip rock. Her boulders shrug

beneath the silent scrutiny of stars.  
Each pebble cracks with her dragging

at the white  
and foaming sheets, as morning

threatens to disclose the churning  
of her nights, spurning blushes creeps

up her flanks with cool hands  
and warming kisses.

## Tomorrow it Will Rain Fish

Tomorrow it will rain fish.  
Every day clouds  
swim belly up in the  
undergrowth, settle on the long  
roads across the palms  
of our hands, crumble  
and dissolve into dreams  
of rock-men steaming  
in moonlight, weeping  
and gnashing their marble  
eyes, flanks  
quivering in the morning, pink  
as the belly of a wall underneath  
which two spheres, blue,  
turquoise, rise from the  
water trailing the stain  
of their absence across fallen hands  
of amber, against which days  
are darker — marked  
by the iron of wills  
and inconsistencies. They drop  
in long lines to our brows,  
settle across the palms  
of our hands, held out  
for the falling  
of fish.

## Twigs

The spur-winged plover cries:

Ophelia  
your hands  
your hands

I seek the twigs of your hands  
I would rest in the twigs  
of your hands.

I would nest  
in your twigs.

I would tear  
each finger nail and carpel  
fly,  
rake with my spurs  
away with your twigs.

I would rake without rue  
all the twigs of your garden  
and nest in the breast  
of your muddy-watered mattress.

Your Hand  
*(to a Carver)*

Your hand  
wind from a thousand places  
carves this water    slices  
strips    shaves    wounds  
binds    twists    winds  
its sheeting around  
a gasping of troughs  
and thighs

Your hand  
a wind    slips  
keen across the skin  
of waters

Your hand  
a wind howls in the chambers of your heart  
flesh  
is water    water  
flesh

Your hand  
wind from the tunnel of your throat swells vermilion, taut  
as a bubble of blood  
against the tide

Your hand  
wind of your mind tugs loose  
the counterpane disclosing  
stain  
and ecstasy.

## A small event

A small event — the death  
of skink or snail or sparrow — mine  
will be no more  
rare. The talk  
of time will shift to tide  
and swell  
and break.

At sunset  
we remark on the flare of gold  
the exquisite soft pink,  
the teal; then turn  
inside to flick the lights  
and shun the yawning  
depth of night.

## Ocean

Less earth than earth  
yet your mountains  
roll with the best.

Less air than air  
yet I free-fall  
through tides

and tides do mark  
my falling  
and the falling

of all waters.  
Less present than the slow  
crumbling of belief

into castles built  
as days sucked in  
the backwash await

the king of all tides  
to resume  
breathing.



## There is a Line

There is a line  
that runs  
from one  
end of this bay  
to the other  
marked  
by the deep sighs  
of footsteps  
which would follow  
on a whim  
nautilus  
or mollusc  
the stitching  
of crabs  
pull  
of the moon

## The first of August and the wind

The first of August and the wind  
is prompt and opportune. We're

underwater, over-air — swirling  
whirled, vertiginous.

Trees lash the blue and whip  
the clouds to mound and peak

flail faggots for an August  
burn of witches

their limbs abandoned to the pyre.  
The wires wail thin and plaint.

I throw bread but the birds  
have withdrawn.

## Fire Walking in Autumn

Autumn is a time when words  
rise like flames and the ground  
is deep with their embers.  
Wading, my nostrils sear  
and I am prompted  
by elements so fugitive  
their ragged hem ignites  
but briefly.

The keloid claws  
through warnings of amber, garnet, gold  
— part sensate and part numb  
desire — remembering  
with the memory of leaf  
withdrawal of sap  
to rustle and decay.

The air howls  
as hands fall  
to the ground  
and the sky  
rumbles  
splits  
and roars.

There is nothing  
mellow about autumn  
blazing  
its name in every hue;  
when vermilion slashes  
crimson bruises,  
and scarlet bleeds,  
into each day; and which  
comes with the sough  
of a man  
nailed to a cross.

The trees rail against  
these signs and the air is filled  
with the sound of burning.

## The Hands of Grunewald's Christ

On the first day two red leaves lie on the table — five fingers  
each more pointed than a hand — beginning to curl  
as they lose sap to late autumn, to time and time again.  
Crimson-veined palms pale to the point  
of separation, cool to a flame at each fine tip.  
Serrations scribe the stealthy drain of sap.

*(bleeding and drying)*

The red is of blood deepening as it dries. Three hours ago,  
moist with morning, they quivered in the hand to pace of foot  
and beat of heart. Now curling, gnarling — the hands  
of Grunewald's Christ, impaled by impending winter.  
(Death is cold and breathes its name softly)

*(pointing and dying)*

Such bleeding from the arms of trees, scarlet, splashed  
on earth and rock, on road, on grass (the greener for it)  
The stain of autumn spreads and deepens.  
Leaves crust and crumble.  
Shadows lie naked, deepen in dreams. The gable,  
called brown, is the colour of dried blood.

*(hammer and hand and nail and tree)*

On the first day the leaves are red, and red is the colour  
of blood. (They lose their sap) And red inflames passions.  
(These leaves lie open.)  
And red cries stop. But there is no end to the redness of red.

Their colour impales, rushes and roars in the night  
and in our eyes.

*(hammer and tree and nail and flesh)*

On the first day scarlet-handed wounds open in sky and earth.  
So many bleeding hands (so many stump-armed thieves)  
So many wounds upon the earth (See how poor Mary grieves)

*(the earth five fingered wounded, slashed,  
the earth with scarlet, bleeding, splashed  
hands for the slashing  
blood for the splashing  
hands raised in blessing  
gestures of blessing)*

On the second day these anguished flames gnarl and retreat  
into themselves, wrists thin as needles and deep blood-red  
with-drawl of sap. (Cry stop! against the light.)  
At its dawn the tree trembles in ruby windows, with ruby-  
studded hands.  
The fingers are flimsy for such jewels, but bear their colour  
boldly

*(pyx and pyre  
nail and fire  
burning and arching  
bleeding and parching  
hands on the ghats  
on the pyre,  
in the vats)*

The third day they shrivel, curl, red darkens more  
and more like dried blood than hands these leaves  
without care will crumble tomorrow. (Beside them  
the Filo-Fax is almost that dried-blood red;  
but supple as young skin, and smelling of skin luxuriously.)

*(drying and curling)*

Yesterday, I could have placed the leaves between today and tomorrow, between Good Friday and Anzac Day or my birthday and that first wedding day, All Fools' Day and the next, between one pansy post-card and another while the sap was still in them. Now their brittle convolutions resist my pressing thoughts and words.

*(dying and furling)*

On the fourth day how they shrivel, shrink. The right thumb crosses the palm in blessing. Here palms are dark against the backs of hands, the wrists mere stalks, and veins tenacious hold the shrinking skin. Maps held against the light trace time and time again. Serrations scribe the stealthy drain of sap.

*(drying and dying  
dying and drying)*

The fifth day they curl and deepen. The mystery of Magenta crosses the palm to tips of rose. Now less than half their half-size rustle to the unhealed leprosy of desiccation, one has lost a thumb, two fingers and a stump fold to wrist-fall (to nightfall) thin as a needle. Even the smallest parch as the hand of a starveling.

*(curling and furling)  
(drying and dying)*

On the sixth day two red leaves lie curling

*(drying and curling  
dying and furling)*

The hands of Grünewald's thorn lashed Christ are bleeding  
open on the earth, the colours of blood in splashes of hands  
on the earth curl in upon themselves — gestures of blessing  
rest on today and on tomorrow

*(hammer and nail and tree and flesh)*

On the seventh day they curl and crumble to dust  
dust to shades

(shadows of gestures  
gestures of blessing)

*hammer and tree*

*and nail and flesh*

*hammer and tree*

*and thorn*

*pyx and pyre*

*nail and fire*

*gestures of blessing*

gestures of blessing



## Away behind blue

This is the fifth  
snowfall this winter.

Somehow the sun  
shines through the flurries

and the birds at the feeder  
flash red and green,

red and green;

but written already  
into one snow poem

the children  
keep dying.

Away behind blue  
the sky turns dark again

and the birds at the feeder  
flash red and green,

red and green.

## Moon-face

It's foggy  
and grapefruit squirts  
into my left eye. My heel  
still throbs from the imperative  
of appetite last Wednesday  
night when the moon hung over the buildings  
like a Noguchi lamp, the air  
was lavish and the old man's  
face appeared to wince with me past Greek,  
and Indonesian, Indian, Japanese, Thai  
and nouvelle cuisine and plural pizzerias  
when conscience dictated frugality  
and donations to the Salvos, or Community  
Aid Abroad, UNESCO or St Vin's.

The parrots swing on the empty  
feeder. They must  
wait for my heel to ease, and the children  
to grow new limbs. Last night  
again I thought the old man looked  
disturbed. I thought I remembered  
a smile and tried to ascertain whether his features  
reflected the unsuspecting laughter of a child  
with its skipping rope or the pattern  
of its guts — a random  
fancy distilled from the action-painting  
of a land-mine. Currawongs ring  
sorrowful this morning. Tonight  
we will see how the moon  
weeps.

## Sitting in Silver Street

Sitting in Silver Street, I hear  
the seagulls cry  
and keen and skirl and see  
them soar  
and sweep the terra cotta,  
slate, the iron, the paint, the rust  
against the blue  
and white and balmy  
afternoon. The dappling leaves  
rustle rumour of endings  
and beginnings, and drifting  
voices lighter than the days  
before. A small  
dog yaps shrill and far  
as we cry and keen and skirl  
and sweep  
and soar.

## Click (at Glen Davis)

There is silence in birdsong  
the fine-grained high-tail of a fly  
barely disrupted by the careful  
spread of tripod  
legs

click  
of shutter or spines  
of the honey tree  
scoring blue  
sky

St John's bread hangs  
mute from dying limbs  
and the sky  
is ripped again by thorns of Fridays  
past and Fridays yet  
to come

a shutter  
clicks  
a foot  
scuffs  
hands  
move  
mute  
meticulous

click click

All is revealed in the truth  
of thorns.

## Twelve million knee-caps

*(the catacombs of Paris — almost . . .)*

I have heard a little  
of the catacombs, words  
remaindered from the visits  
of others, a couple  
of sentences in a guide  
book. That I did not  
descend there determined  
by ligament not time  
or inclination; but once beneath  
the earth in Rome I almost  
thought I saw St Peter's  
patella — a small disc —  
pale — the colour  
of bone.

I can almost imagine  
the tidied up untidiness of six million  
deaths out of minds' eyes — illumined now  
for the relish of a hundred thousand  
warm and gazing jellies,  
annually. Were bones  
more naked then than unclad flesh?  
Colder, lacking warm  
viscera, the comfort  
of adipose quilting, portmanteau  
of bellies, buttocks, breasts, the full,  
the flounced, the sleek, the cut-on-the-  
bias, draped, padded, tailored

or unstructured, the flimsy floating flaunt of flesh  
and skin. And pale  
more bare than dark, and bones  
yet paler still. (More naked  
still is death.)

I can almost  
imagine this bibliothèque of bones —  
the ordered stacks — the rictus  
of six million skulls, dark gape of twelve million  
eye sockets, twelve million knee-caps; thirty-six  
million racked lower limb-bones  
and arms; one hundred  
and ninety-two million  
ribs of which twelve million would  
have floated. (What floats here?  
The pale of bones is lighter than the deep  
and dark of earth; and bones scoured of  
flesh weigh little. What weighs  
a life sloughed  
of its flesh?)

I can almost  
imagine eight thousand six hundred and sixty-  
four million phalanges (times two, including  
feet) of toe and finger gravel, graded  
through sieves calibrated pinky-tip to  
the foot. And the crunch of gravel  
finger-tips, toes strewn,  
sloughed of all  
flesh for the walk to the end of  
this poem; or gathered,  
stored in banks of glass  
jars — desiccated

tots shaken to the rustling  
rattle of dried peas or jelly-  
babies — their rainbow  
bleached as old bones. (Something  
lodged in the tread of my boot — a small  
irritation — the persistent tip of a young  
child's finger.)

Packing books, prudent  
with space, strange partnerships  
occur — *The Tibetan Book of Living  
and Dying* (longer than usual) lies  
with *The Woodworkers' Bible* and Mary  
Kelly's *Post-partum Document*, Kandinsky's  
*Sounds* with *Indian Cuisine*. Who lies  
with whom in the catacombs? What absent  
thoughts move through the caverns of skull  
to skull, what whispering from caves of absent  
mouths to absent mouths from absent  
lips to absent ears rustle  
among these bones? What pelvises collide  
in such a catalogue? Thighs with whose femurs  
cross? Whose elbows jostle, shoulders  
shed the last pale chalk, one  
on another? What dis-located fingers touch?  
(And each saint multiplied, dispersed  
to pyx and reliquary)

So much  
dis-rememberment. And almost  
imagining gropes in dark  
corners, drives splinters under finger-  
nails. A sudden crack

of hilarity reveals “bones  
in a pot — all hot” (an un-remembered  
source), more bleach  
in paddocks, heave, hump-mounded  
in pick-up trucks, simmer (hot  
in pots), succulently are sucked (for decorum  
two fingers and a thumb) crunched

in the jaws of dogs  
or lions, give form to images  
of skin sacks tossed  
to mass graves, and turned by farmers’  
blades protrude, glistening in fields.  
I can almost remember the stench  
as they are ploughed in the earth  
with blood; and the sound  
as they snap.

I can almost imagine  
the rustle of dis-integration. How long  
the sigh of bone to turn to dust? Stock  
bones from beasts or fowl  
or fish flex for some days; skulls,  
pelvises and the back-  
bones of old cows — scoured by the sun,  
the wind,  
the rain — I know; but there,  
where worms do deep and churning  
work, where damp and darkness  
smother, almost  
imagining chokes on earth  
and dark predictions.



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