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## **Also by Laurie Duggan:**

### **Poetry**

*East: Poems 1970-74* (1976)

*Under the Weather* (1978)

*Adventures in Paradise* (1982, 1991)

*The Great Divide, Poems 1973-83* (1985)

*The Ash Range* (1987; 2nd edition, 2005)

*The Epigrams of Martial* (1989)

*Blue Notes* (1990)

*The Home Paddock* (1991)

*Memorials* (1996)

*New and Selected Poems, 1971-1993* (1996)

*Mangroves* (2003)

### **Cultural history**

*Ghost Nation* (2001)

# Compared to What

*Selected Poems 1971-2003*

Laurie Duggan

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Front cover illustration shows the author's father (on the right) dressed for a part in a school Shakespeare production in the early 1920s. Reproduced here by courtesy of the author. Rear cover photograph of the author, ca. 1980, by John Tranter.

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**IV**

**1986 2003**



# All Blues

From Boston comes the message:

    Go for it  
then throw it away.

If it makes you glow

    eat it  
then beat it.

Your life is a new address book.

Your visa is almost done.

But the pilot light burns in your kitchen  
    all night long.

# Mashed Potatoes

Sittin' here alone  
no place to go  
listenin' to myself  
on the radio.

## Compared To What

This house faintly resembles  
sets in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*,  
and if you walked across this room  
you would not diminish  
though the notes of St Matthew's  
Passion would recede to a hum  
around about your earplugs.



## Crossing Aragon

Around Morte La Nieva  
rocks and soil break through the scrub,  
terraces of loose stone with no apparent crop.

Near Caspe, the Ebro is sandy and shallow, choked with yellow slime;  
the earth cracked beneath green flats.

Road signs point across the river to Huesca, Teruel, Lerida,  
as apartments rise from the rubble of '36.  
The place was always a frontier;  
    'Caesar Augusta' corrupted to Zaragoza;  
its over-ornate church  
    stylish as formal cruelty:  
the product of obeying distant orders.

Monday after Easter, monks, hooded, in black and white robes  
beat drums and blow bugles in a death march out of Goya;  
haul crucifixes up a hillside  
    near the site of Bilbilis,  
the birthplace of Martial, who lived in Rome,  
and wrote often of simple life in the provinces.



and an old man in khaki,  
weighed down by enormous red epaulettes,  
steps out of a public lavatory.

# Mont Ségur

Yellow lucerne fields outside Toulouse.

Mirepoix, a small walled town.

At Lavelanet, a disused merry-go-round in the main street,  
the Christmas lights still overhead.

Directly south, towards Spain,  
the blue form of the chateau,  
Mont Ségur,  
its keep, an arrowhead  
filled with rubble from a broken well;  
the Cathars seven hundred years gone.

White Saint Barthélémy shines  
through a broached wall  
above the village of Mont Ségur;  
a sharp drop from the battlement,  
the clear sound of a rivulet,  
and further,  
mountains on mountains: Pound's Cathay.

A cuckoo hoots in the valley.  
Purple flowers bud at the base of the chateau.  
Lizards, black slugs and small brown snakes  
stir in the equinoctial sun  
immune to decrees of Paris or Rome.

The road twines through summer pastures  
to the village, an ochre amphitheatre  
empty at midday.

Cowbells ring in the streets;  
a faint odour of sweet shit  
hangs in the restaurant.

# The Front

1

The balloon-like mechanisms of reputation  
hang in a barrage, gas escaping in print  
and everything else consigned,  
as though the whole tent of it  
would blow away,  
but the struts are no more real, the measures of what is politic  
as insubstantial as clouds,  
a civilization that could shut down  
when the power is cut.

Here, the stone wall  
runs for miles, defining a sea;  
sand that would not define  
providing instead a barrier.

The city was an accident,  
a sport on the banks of what river?,  
a collection of plate and cotton. And this place?

This  
has the city's back turned upon it.  
Lights hung upside down once,  
along the road headed for the water  
where the trams fell away at night  
in a murk of razors and greenish limbs;  
where a curved horn, blown by a black man  
was an imagination of Harlem;  
where the garish light of hotels serrated across the promenade  
became the East River,  
and the caps of sailors thrown at the heavens turned to stars.

Money owns it  
as it once did, altering the image  
to suit a popular conception: cast iron pastiche.

What hope for the can of 7-up  
until the new interior decorator arrives?  
The water is no more constant,



the faces  
interchangeable in shades,  
an inscription circles  
loops into a knot  
and runs off the field  
onto a red brick wall  
a ballroom's side

in which the dance  
continues its measures,  
allotting time  
and 'coming attractions',  
looking out over the sea,  
waiting for the dancers to rise;  
their luminous ankles  
and jackets of weed,  
the clutch of bottles, broken,  
smoothed into mineral shapes.

Slurring  
from a hotel, the image of an author  
fond of clean sheets, manicured, impeccable,  
joins the dance, the despised music,  
who  
had been accustomed to extended periods and over-lush cadences,  
whose inkings crammed with detail  
lost the form itself, a point buried in incidentals  
– but he is dead and the mouth that breathed him out – inflammable,  
courteous, back-biting – has a notice slapped overhead.

Paint flakes, the dancers  
peel from walls, rain  
gavottes in the streets.  
Around the dance,  
curved track of the roller-coaster,  
its rope border.

*Penguin Modern Painters: Ben Shahn*; and Henry Moore's tube drawings, figures Vesuvius petrified; these, left behind in the bungalow by an itinerant drummer as back-payment. A room left pristine by the duo – Mr & Mrs – he ending in a police photograph, draped beside a '57 Holden near the gates of the pier. Seasonal workers floating in the city, filling in at the abattoirs, plaiting leather belts. The comic, who slid from the tiles. Others, nameless. These the inhabitants of One-ninety-five, drinkers at the Vic. and the Bleak; an archaeology of the '50's.

The sky moves over Williamstown  
 as smoke angles across Hobson's Bay;  
 lines let you breathe, or you fall into it;  
 a white stick tapping up from the salt  
 by those arches between shops  
 where two-up and the meat markets  
 arrange themselves over a time  
 and vanish

– as the smell of coffee  
 cuts off that trope. But there's space  
 to enter it all into. And a small triangle  
 of dark sky above the suggested location.

– hot steel

at the Works, the tyre specialist  
 closed; sand heaped against the shutters  
 some winter days.

– but I step ahead.

Best to concentrate on the guest house,  
 now obliterated, its strong wood gate  
 and the grandmother's balcony, children  
 sinking into a sofa, sniffing jonquils. The sand  
 mounts up; a sun-shelter on the beach  
 is a storm shelter when the waves

broach stone and wash asphalt,  
and the Motors concrete battlement. . . .  
its tin roof. . . .

– the Works are a stretch  
toward the estuary, on the bend behind  
a reclaimed swamp; the office  
confident nineteen-thirties, the Plant  
like a vast hangar; roads empty of address  
flanking the south wharf and the river,  
the swinging basin, Victoria Dock.

Southwest  
from the river mouth  
a truckload of sailboards wait,  
banners aflap, the surface, still, green,  
where a yacht tilts on its keel  
in a sandbar.

Its slanted mast  
cuts one diagonal across the anchorage as,  
plate glass of the Bleak hit by gusts,  
The Burghers of Calais lean  
out of whack with the poles  
and the curve the Bay takes en route to St Kilda.

6

Tuesday afternoon, back-streets  
are given to the cats. One floats  
on a crushed hedge. In Alfred Square  
a white, helmeted figure, raises a rifle, leans  
forward, its back scarred by the claws  
of *felis tigris*, facing, over the water  
a rusty container, slipping through a grid of palms,  
the You Yangs distant, clear today, unconcerned.

Two decades back one read from the Town Hall podium  
long lines, the smiling workers trailing down  
St Kilda Road to the beach.

A decade ago, another,  
now running to fat, urged the poets  
onto the streets; years later, his sign  
above a coffee house in Middle Park:

### Street Poetry Inside

a descent  
into artefact, as yet another sits, opposite ceramics and horoscopes,  
intoning:

### Poems on subjects of your choice

Most of my heroes are dead  
diffident, but defiant,  
the way they'd catch  
evening light on milk bottles  
becoming Edward Hopper  
too particular  
for wine and cheese,  
the brackets of 'discussion'.

I want to pull up  
this bevelled plantation,  
write, say,  
an area of sand  
not an old seascape  
forged  
that the present should resemble the past. . . .

— but enough of this real-estate Edwardian,  
this 'classicism', dated as an 'all-steel' kitchen.

Instead

trace the limbless graffiti, its red strokes  
on lavatory-green of The Met.

Try  
to argue with that.



Hewn wood, chunks of mallee root,  
brown against grey palings, carpets  
of muddied sawdust, patterns in hard  
concrete there for the invention of games:  
hop this one, miss the lines, step on  
a crack; ridges of moss on broken pipes;

old dog in a wooden box, flesh  
lapping against splintering sides,  
will sleep through noon, wake  
when a downpipe cuts off the sun  
and potplants strain forward. Observed closely  
this landscape induces vertigo;

the ball spins back from New Right graffiti  
to the half-cupped palm, is pitched again  
and takes a tangent from a white line across asphalt,  
shooting leftward over grass and nets,  
and the park's inhabitants, barrelled in prams  
or propped on sticks; its language. . . .

9

'Dreadnoughts of the Tramway Board  
Forge up the furious street'  
so, Furnley Maurice.

The city  
is no more than a map, and this isolated hook  
south of the river, a bay within a bay;  
sets of words superimposed,  
highlight, erased;  
black and white diagonals  
grimy on the rail-bridge, where there's a sign, black and white again,  
pattern on pattern; as wires dangle  
currentless.

The new line swings

from Clarendon up to the old,  
and derelict stations cling in the air  
down to the Port.

When power fails, a bank of passengers, muted,  
observe the city, its towers as promises;  
flags risen beyond a bunker:

a glittering idea

fit for some Chamber of Commerce to sweat over,  
that the suburb should twin the city, this line  
a causeway across low ground,  
green space marking the path of a creek;  
sludged channel  
abutting where the beach at slack tide emits  
weed smell,  
mussel smell.

Captain Cook stares out  
at a stretch of water he never saw;  
the imagination erects one locality, government  
erects another.