

## Still Shines: Vincent O’Sullivan (1937-2024)

HEIDI THOMSON

### Abstract

When Peter Whiteford asked me to write something about Vincent, he generously gave me ‘free reign as to length and style’. So this portrait of Vincent is a personal one, with an emphasis on certain of his works over others. For the thirty-four years I knew Vincent, he was always and everywhere a writer at work. But what made him so likeable was the fact that he never ‘acted the writer’. Vincent displayed insatiable curiosity for everything, but never resorted to ‘look at me’ affectations, and remained a resolutely private person while gregariously fulfilling his role as a public literary figure.

In order to remind myself of Vincent’s oeuvre, I revisited *Still Shines When You Think of It: A Festschrift for Vincent O’Sullivan*, the book that Peter and Bill Manhire edited to celebrate Vincent’s seventieth birthday in 2007.<sup>1</sup> The title of the festschrift refers to a poem from *Butcher & Co.*, published in 1977. ‘Still Shines When You Think of It’ celebrates the persistent afterglow of remembered beauty, which ‘even Butcher / yes Butcher too’ is affected by.<sup>2</sup> The poem displays a touch of Ted Hughes, with a Wordsworthian spin, raw beauty distilled into a revelation of persistent wonder. At that moment, in 1977, Vincent could still look forward to 47 years of creative productivity, and he certainly made the most of every moment.

When Leonard Cohen toured extensively in his eighties, he used to greet his adoring audiences with a reference to his last visit at whatever venue he was appearing at. ‘I was here fifteen years ago, aged 65, just a kid with a crazy dream’. You could argue that Vincent was ‘just a kid with a crazy dream’ seventeen years ago, when the festschrift was published. At a moment when most writers are celebrated for past achievements, Vincent was just hitting his stride. Still to come were: *Blame Vermeer* (2007), *Further Convictions Pending: Poems 1998-2008* (2009), *The Movie May Be Slightly Different* (2011), the Edinburgh University Press edition of *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield* (2012), *Us, then* (2013), *The Families* (2014), *Being Here: Selected Poems* (2015), *And so it is* (2016), *All This By Chance* (2018), *Selected Stories: Vincent O’Sullivan* (2019), *The Dark is Light Enough: Ralph Hotere – A Biographical Portrait* (2020), *Things OK With You?* (2021), *Mary’s Boy, Jean-Jacques and Other Stories* (2022), and, posthumously, *Still Is* (2024). I have probably forgotten something. Most online bibliographies omit something; there is just so much. These publications did not distract Vincent from taking on many additional commitments until recently, judging the Sargeson Prize competition last year for instance. While Vincent’s productivity was staggering, what is even more amazing is the versatile range of genres (theatre, radio, libretto, song cycle, short story, novel, scholarly editing, poetry, biography) he worked in, and the quality he managed to maintain throughout his career. If anything, he got better, all the time. Vincent’s writing makes sense of things. His poetry has a prose-like, interpretive quality to it. His prose is surprisingly lyrical. His scholarly writing is clear and direct. Vincent subscribed to Wordsworth’s idea that the poet should speak plainly, that the poet should not underestimate the feelings of ordinary people, and that recollection in tranquillity is often hard-won.

For me, as a Belgian New Zealander, the most significant period of Vincent’s career coincided with his tenure as Poet-Laureate (2013-2015) during the centennial commemorations (2014-2018) of the First World War (1914-1918).<sup>3</sup> The concept of war is a dangerous one to exploit in an artistic context. The possibility of producing ‘war porn’, gratuitous indulgence in violent

heroism, blinkered nationalism, and unreflective obedience to authority, is always there. Vincent minced no words in debunking the power of poetry in the context of warfare: ‘On certain days, at least, / I dislike statements about poets saving the world.’<sup>4</sup> Writing poetry is a risky business, a responsibility and a challenge both: ‘A door that opens, an invitation: “Right, have a go!” / You eye the bouncer. He’s toey as they come. / He asks you to take a breath test. That’s your cue’ (‘On certain days,’).

‘No one finds poetry among the rubble’ is the stark opening line of ‘Off limits’.<sup>5</sup> Vincent’s war-related poems focus on the literal, total destruction of the human body and identity. ‘No one finds poetry, it’s as well / to get that clear’ among the dismembered fatalities of a war-torn site. War is about total obliteration. And on a stormy morning at Orepuke, in deepest Southland, the poet-speaker considers the local war memorial, ‘a white / blunt column’, and ‘a boy it remembers’:

someone’s boy in his early  
twenties, dead somewhere  
in Belgium, where bits  
of the distant boy were gathered,  
one hopes, by mates.<sup>6</sup>

The most heartbreaking thing about this poem is its conversational framing. It starts off with a grandmother’s urging ‘Just do your best now’, getting a drawing right, improving your spelling, and it ends with the uniformed boy echoing these words back to the adoring girls, ‘Yeah, try to do / my best’ and his friends tease him for being a ‘Glamorous bugger!’. Heartbreaking, but never sentimental. It was Vincent who told me, over coffee in von Zedlitz 802, about James Joyce’s phrase for sentimentality, ‘unearned emotion’, and he took scrupulous care to avoid emotional posturing in his own writing. If anything, the more deadpan and wry the tone, the more poignant and hard-hitting the truth.

The requiem mass for Vincent on 3 May included two pieces from *Requiem for the Fallen* (2014), one of his many fruitful collaborations with the composer Ross Harris. In the ‘Pax vobis’, the glory and the ‘anthem’s blare’ transforms quickly into ‘mud in our throats when the singing ended’, not ‘knowing a cobbler’s face that’s no longer there’. In characteristic demotic fashion—‘I have even joked about it in my lemon squeezer hat!’—the ‘In Paradisum’ revolves around combining the spiritual homecoming with ‘the bliss we crave at last is what we have known’.<sup>7</sup> I vividly remember the February 2014 performance of ‘Requiem for the Fallen’ in Wellington Cathedral, thinking of this piece in the tradition of Messiaen and Schnittke. On a more intimate, familial scale, the chamber opera *Brass Poppies* (2016) explored the individual stories of Gallipoli soldiers. Again, reflecting on that performance, it was all about the horrendous impact of loss, with a particular emphasis on the women who were left behind.

Less than thirty years after the First World War, history took again a sinister turn. When I grew up in Belgium in the 1960s and 1970s, the legacy of the Second World War was still exerting a massive influence on our families. My parents, of the same generation as Vincent, were children at the time and they lived close to the port of Ghent. Their memories of the war are the memories of children: never enough food, disappointing birthday cakes manufactured from grated carrots and swedes, the frightening sound of sirens (and no, my mother claimed, you did not get used to them), sleeping in the basement during bombings, secrecy about neighbours who disappeared, playing in bombed out sites, the pervasive smell of fire near the port. My mother remembered how in the summer of 1944, Rieme, a small village nearby her home, was entirely flattened by bombs (‘friendly fire’) in order to destroy the large fuel reserves of the

occupying forces. To this day, unexploded bombs are found in Rieme, with a 500 kg specimen detonated in 2021. People now live in streets named ‘Bombardementstraat’ (Bombing Street), ‘Puinstraat’ (Rubble Street), and ‘Vredestraat’ (Peace Street). Vincent visited these closely layered histories of both the First and the Second World War in my neighbourhood when he stayed with my father in Ghent, in July 2016. Together they visited the cemeteries, the villages of Passendale (Passchendaele) and Mesen (Messines) in the Westhoek, and the ‘In Flanders Fields Museum’ in Ieper (Ypres). When I recently talked to my father on the phone about this visit, he mentioned how Vincent would sit on the couch with a notebook on his knee, writing a novel. In her eulogy Helen told us how Vincent would sit at home, with a cup of tea and a notebook on his knee, and I immediately conjured up an image of him doing exactly that at my childhood home in Belgium.

That novel turned out to be *All This By Chance* (2018), an intergenerational family saga which revolves around the Shoah, the most horrific legacy of World War Two, but which extends its geography and timeframe to a global and contemporary range. Purposefully fragmentary, a ‘verbal jigsaw’, in Vincent’s words: ‘Each section, whether set in Westmere or Africa or Athens or Wrocław, is the story of a splinter from a picture that doesn’t exist.’<sup>8</sup> The cheapness of individual human life in Ravensbrück, the Nazi concentration camp for women, spills over into later instances of human degradation on the edges of the African compound, or in the streets of Athens. Like Belgium after the Wars, Greece has an ongoing legacy of the military dictatorship which ruled between 1967 and 1974. Reading those vivid sections transported me back to Greece, the memories of living rooms with hard floors and rolled up carpets, smells of mothballs and kumquat trees in pots on balconies, having a glass of water and a ‘spoon-sweet’ in a tiny glass (*glyko tou koutaliou*), with crazy traffic and *nephos* outside, and stories of people who’d had unspeakable things done to them. Vincent made the most of portraying ‘really unattractive bastards’ (*The Interview*) in his writing, and Fergus in *All This By Chance* ticks all the boxes of self-obsessed, feckless nastiness. This kind of character appears in the poetry as well, all bravado, no substance, full of ‘claptrap’, another favourite word of Vincent’s.

*All This By Chance* wasn’t Vincent’s first exploration of what people are capable of inflicting on each other. Phillip Mann’s essay in *Still Shines When You Think Of It* deals with the staging of *Shuriken*, Vincent’s 1983 play about the massacre of Japanese prisoners of war in a Featherston camp on 25 February 1943. While staging this kind of play would no doubt be handled very differently today, the message would be the same of how a fundamental lack of mutual understanding underscores a volatile, violent dynamic, with the title *Shuriken* itself referring to a deadly, deceptive hand weapon. As Vincent’s Author’s Note puts it: ‘Two groups of men were forced into the closest association, with neither really knowing what to expect of the other.’<sup>9</sup> This no-man’s land of miscommunication, human deprecation, and the lack of public interest in justice is also the terrain of *Take the Moon, Mr Casement* (1996) which I saw at the Court Theatre in Christchurch. Roger Casement wrote some of the first human rights inquiries into the systems of ruthless exploitation of indigenous populations. He exposed the atrocities perpetrated in the name of King Leopold II of the Belgians in the Congo (1904) and the torture of the Putumayo Indians in the rubber plantations of the Amazon (1911). He was also an Irish Nationalist who was executed by the British for treason in 1916. Like Oscar Wilde, he was homosexual and portrayed as a deviant in police reports.

Vincent is drawn to figures whose identity cannot be easily categorized, like Pilate in the ‘Pilate Tapes’, the topic of Peter Whiteford’s essay in *Still Shines*. Pilate, presenting himself as a ‘liberal’, who has ‘killed a god’ and ‘dabbled in chaos’, who ‘vote[s] as you do’, makes us all complicit in the banality of evil.<sup>10</sup> Vincent refers to voting a number of times, always reminding

us that the act of voting alone does not absolve us from any further responsibilities, as in this satirical take on a middle-class woman: ‘I vote / of course as we all do, I’ve only to see / a flood halfway up a village wall / and I’m phoning with a donation. I / have the local bookshop automatically / deliver the best three books / of the month according to the list they get – good bookshops do’ (*The movie* 93). In ‘Feeding time for the elect (a poem for election day)’, scrutiny of voting papers merges with a visit to the zoo at feeding time where ‘even the hoot / and jabber, the temperamental yelp and the intestinal / belch, are indeed to each creature as speech / among ourselves’ (*Blame Vermeer* 48). And who could forget the Swiftian gusto of ‘Short story of a Labour Candidate’, which Vincent wrote for *Newsroom* in September 2023.<sup>11</sup> At times there is even a longing for an unadulterated understanding of good and evil, as in the poem ‘Freedom’ which opens with the stark lines: ‘I miss pure evil. / I miss the hiss when glaring iron / goes dunk into water’ (*Us, then*, 34). But this kind of absolutist longing is always rejected in favour of complex reality. The poem, ‘This time in 3-D’, is a humorous, low-key take on this. I wholeheartedly share Vincent’s opinion of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, with a ‘grey, unspeakably boring wizard / Making his Baden-Powell speeches on keeping / order in the Shire, serving the cause / of peaceable hobbits and shining, pure- / fabricked, waterfall-elegant elves’ (*Us, then* 24). Instead the poet-speaker exclaims: ‘I want Reality / for God’s sake, the way it was trickily made.’

Elusiveness of identity lies at the heart of Vincent’s brilliant biography, *Long Journey to the Border: A Life of John Mulgan* (2003). Like Johnson in *Man Alone*, John Mulgan also went through a series of identities. When he took his own life on Anzac Day 1945 he too was a victim of the war. The humanitarian role of having to figure out compensation for the victims of the war horrors in Greece would have destroyed many burdened with this task. Like Casement, Mulgan exercised a form of empathy which would have seriously affected his mental health, a concept which had not really been ‘invented’ yet. Vincent understands the pull between incompatible worlds.

Much of Vincent’s writing revolves around the limits and problems of communication and self-expression, personified in a wide range of characters who can never reveal themselves to the extent that they want to: Roger Casement, Katherine Mansfield, John Mulgan, Ian Milner. Bill Manhire’s contribution to the festschrift examines the working title of John Mulgan’s *Man Alone*: ‘Talking of War’. In a fine exploration of the words ‘war’ and ‘talk’ throughout the novel, Manhire suggests that ‘*Man Alone*, scanned through its original title, looks like a book which shows us the social and political dangers of monologue on the one hand, and of silence on the other. War is what we resort to when talk—the give and take of conversation—breaks down’ (*Still Shines* 159). The oscillation between talk and silence produces much of the creative tension in Vincent’s work.

‘Talk’ is never obvious in Vincent’s writing. In many stories the misunderstandings between couples are both comic and sad, tragic even. Excessive, burbling talk on the part of one character often highlights the loneliness of another character. In ‘Mrs Bennett and the Bears’, Edward experiences ‘a splinter of time that never should have occurred, a pure gift’ when he spends a serenely perfect day with Keiko Bennett during a business trip to Japan.<sup>12</sup> The narrative is framed by the obligatory phone calls with his wife and his cackling sisters who belittle him. Little do they know. Owen Marshall’s reading of ‘Not Always, Mrs Woolf’ in *Still Shines* dwells on the elegiac melancholy of a character’s braided memories at a precise moment in time: ‘Nothing is rushed, nothing seems unduly confined within ten pages despite the density, rather there is a sense of reflective perusal’ (*Still Shines* 285). The starting point for the story’s narrative is a calendar quotation from Virginia Woolf which Gerard, a conscientious



lawyer, reads at the start of his working day: ‘If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people.’<sup>13</sup> The story as a whole dismantles the aphoristic simplicity of the quotation: ‘This morning though he read her sentence twice then said decisively, although he was the only person in the office, “Well, she’s wrong about that one”’ (*Pictures* 116). Talk or truth is always embedded in the moment of remembered delivery: ‘the straight line of the past, as we so think it at the time, becomes a ravelled knot as we look back on it’ (*Pictures* 124).

‘The give and take of conversation’ lies also at the heart of Vincent’s lyric poetry. It is Vincent’s way of negotiating his position as a New Zealander in the world, of asserting an unmistakable authority with a light touch. Michael Hulse puts it well in his essay about ‘Voice and Authority in Vincent O’Sullivan’s Poetry’: ‘This paradox, of achieving authority by going out of one’s way to disavow any claim to it, is a function of the voice’ (*Still Shines* 85). Vincent’s lyric voice combines authority with a ‘down-to-earth tone as his preferred medium for matters of philosophical or theological weight’ (*Still Shines* 89). For Hulse, ‘Vincent’s most characteristic poems have the tone of a man thinking aloud or talking to a friend’ (*Still Shines* 90). Perhaps most importantly, this kind of lyric authority should not be mistaken for categorical inflexibility; Vincent’s ‘preferred rhythms and tones are those of contingency, of speech in the unfinished making, in the act’ (*Still Shines* 91). There are touches of Horace’s *carmina* and Coleridge’s conversation poems in Vincent’s poems. The poems are exercises in thinking aloud, in a relaxed but sustained fashion, developing a serious point without taking themselves too seriously. But while the settings may be domestic, the issues at stake are not. They remind me of Wallace Stevens’ opening lines in ‘Of Modern Poetry’: ‘The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice.’<sup>14</sup> Greek gods and heroes, biblical or mythological figures, are all taken down a notch or two, as in ‘Who’d have thought’:

On the day the eagle refused to come  
A beak graffitied the cliff face:  
‘No more liver.’ Prometheus  
Unheroicked. Simple as that. (*The movie* 70)

The moral speaks from the scenario, rather than from the pulpit.

Vincent loved travelling, called it ‘the shortest cut to independent thinking’ (*The Interview*), but he knew that he was a privileged traveller. ‘Avenida Ocho’ captures the guilty embarrassment of a tourist in Guatemala who refuses to buy the cheap souvenirs, knowing full well how poor the local population is: ‘He is an old man like my father / watching me eat and not willing to buy.’<sup>15</sup> In ‘Travel bug’ the tourists on the bus, ‘puffed ovals at the window, / those eggs that crack money’, are voyeurs who fill their diaries with fleeting observations ‘on the way from the airport / the children splashing in the burst / hydrant’ (*Blame Vermeer* 39). Or arrogant travellers and supercilious academics merge, as in ‘Plane People’ (*The movie* 126). Capturing the jabbering voices of smug conference travellers, the poem satirizes the carbon footprint of academics who recycle their work in an ‘eco-direction’ for the next ‘gig’.

Helen’s eulogy for Vincent included a tried and true recipe for a Vincent poem: take a quotation in a foreign language, refer to a philosopher or writer, and include a word no normal person would understand. Vincent would have been the first one to laugh along with this recipe. I liked the unashamedly intellectual references in Vincent’s poems (Kavafy, Rilke, Akhmatova, Dickinson, Wittgenstein, Chekhov, Seferis, Sartre, Stevens, Baudelaire, Ovid, Aquinas). I liked those poems even more when he threw in Norman the dog for good measure, as in ‘Partners, from way back’ (*The movie* 113). Holding up Norman’s ‘purity of blazing / being’ against the

lying of Blair and Saddam, the poem argues against Aquinas for the soul of a dog and against the supremacy of reason. The final stanza paints a serene, companionable scene:

Norman looks up to me,  
I look towards him.  
It is not part of our compact  
that we promise insight, truth  
about each other, yet  
the beat of his heart, his walk  
beside me, goes assuming both.  
Priority, as we know,  
is a very subjective swizz. (*The movie* 113)

Vincent enjoyed walks with dogs and children. My son's best memory of him is taking the dog for a walk and having a good talk. Conversations during a walk have the added bonus of being non-confrontational, side by side. Dogs, children, flowers, fruit all flourish in Vincent's poems. In his chapter about Ursula Bethell in *Still Shines*, Mac Jackson refers to Vincent's assessment of her work: 'When her poems begin at her fingertips, among her plants and shrubs, they ring most true' (27). The same could be said for Vincent's later poems with the references to apples, blackberries, or apricots with a taste that 'is the taste of the colour exactly', all testimonies of 'this, being here!'.<sup>16</sup> 'Being here' is one of my favourites because it delves into contentment, deflecting sentimentality by the practical consideration of getting rid of excess fruit: 'I hold out / my palms like the opened pages of a book / and you pile apricots on them stacked three / deep, we ask just who can we give them to / round here who haven't had their whack of apricots / as it is' (*Further Convictions* 173). One of my life's delights is to release the bumblebees which have become trapped on the windowsills in the kitchen and see them deliriously rocketing off into the sky; I cannot think of a better description of it than 'Knowing what it's about', the opening poem of *And so it is*. A woman liberates the bee, which is referred to as 'furred bullet' and 'fires back into the day, into / the sun's endless paddocks and the rocking / gusts, into a life "more direct than / ours", she says, "knowing what it's about."' <sup>17</sup>

Both *Nice morning for it, Adam* (2004) and *Blame Vermeer* (2007) start off with poems about children. 'The child in the gardens: winter', one of Vincent's most moving poems, records the child's intense experience of dying nature with uncanny accuracy, 'the slimed pond and the riffling of leaves.'<sup>18</sup> The child's experience is a solitary one, despite the father's presence. The child seeks refuge in his favourite colour yellow, the colour of the kitchen at home. It is a moment which could later be reconstructed with elegiac nostalgia, but for the child, in the moment, the only way is out: 'You touch the gates and tell them, We / are not coming back to this place. Are we, Dad?' (*Nice morning* 11). While this poem makes it obvious that the child's garden of Eden is the kitchen at home, the opening poem of *Blame Vermeer* plays on the child's incomplete understanding of her parents' secrets: 'knowing that something important / was dawning for the first time, something / about grown-ups and lies and her mother's / secrets which were very different from her / father's' ('Not one to let on' 11). The child intuitively knows that something is off, while being guided to secrecy by both parents separately, with both parents emphasizing how 'important' their secret is, but she hasn't quite figured out how to accommodate both versions into one narrative. As in 'The child in the gardens: winter', the conclusion of 'Not one to let on' carries a punch in a straightforward narrative line: 'And then it was time to go to her father's, / and the other lady's, although that is still a secret' (*Blame Vermeer* 11).

In 'Varnish' a small child bites the back of a chair, 'tall enough, just, for his lips / to reach the cold smoothness of', at the wake of his grandmother. He associates the 'bittery' taste of varnish with his grandmother in the coffin, a taste which unites them: 'he was / the closest to her and she to him, they knew what / the taste was the taste of, varnish, his tongue on the chair-back / while he watched the shine of her wood' (*Further Convictions* 200). In 'Screensaver' the perspective is reversed: a man looks at a photograph featuring himself and his one-year-old grandson, 'a child who / may never know him' (*Us, then* 47). The screensaver photograph prompts the man to consider his own mortality, and it prompts gratitude for the moment, for this 'is where we are', 'the luck of that' (*Us, then* 47). Growing up is not idealized: 'Adolescence does not emerge as the fur on willows / it knocks the living shit from a child of 12.'<sup>19</sup> And in 'The Reality Problem' the speaker captures a perfect moment of the generation gap, with an adult lecturing a young boy on how much material they now have access to online: "Whatever," the boy answers, / both thumbs busy as a primate's / shucking fruit' (*And so it is* 41). Perfect. Vincent does not shy away from satirizing his own generation. In 'News from out the Heads', the wry humour is balanced with compassion. The poem starts off with how a bereaved albatross joins the young ones in order to start all over. The second stanza describes a widow who 'loathes / heavy metal, rap, facebook, texting' and who waspishly claims to be too old 'to learn not / to spell, to pretend I have never heard decent / music'. By way of comfort the speaker tells her that she does not have to behave like a youngster. The widow's response is surprising in the overt admission of her desire: 'No, she says, but the wind / roars for all that, the sea heaves. It is not / just albatross know about what they've lost' (*Us, then* 18). Vincent was a master in the understated expression of longing, as in this poem.

In his long essay, 'On Longing', Vincent explores our relationship with reality through the lens of unspecified, deeply felt, inadequately recompensed desire.<sup>20</sup> Invoking one of his favourite writers he explains 'the kind of longing that interests me most: William Faulkner telling us on almost every page how "is" can never quite be prised from "was", the present never exhaust its longing to know how it got there' (29). Much of the essay dwells on the infinite nature of longing: 'There's a big room in everyone's private hell where out-of-date longings, used-up longings, longings that cost too much and Lord knows why we ever bought them in the first place lie where they were dropped or sway emptily on hangers' (17). Even stored away, unused longings are always there, with the result that you could be the biggest loser ever, yet 'your capacity for longing may be heroic' (23). So, the writer's task is to harness all of this longing into a form which is the opposite of the concept itself. While longing may be vague and random, writing about it should not be so: 'Things that are fidgety or randomly jiggling about are far less likely to be memorable. That is why form matters. That is why good writers, whatever else they might do, make us believe they're at home with everyday facts, that they can be relied on when they tell us how things tick. You won't catch James Joyce out if he is telling you how to fry a kidney' (28).

Vincent had a knack of recommending the writers whose work I needed for my own thinking. There was never any grandstanding about this; he would just mention them as an aside in an email. He introduced me to Anne Carson's work because he knew I loved Keats. He introduced me to colleagues from other departments who became friends in turn. When I wrote to Jan Lauwereyns, a poet in his own right who translated Vincent's poetry into Dutch for the 2005 Poetry International Festival, he responded that he now imagined Vincent at a same table as Miroslav Holub and Leo Vroman.<sup>21</sup> 'Vince was not a biologist, but he had the same infectious curiosity,' he wrote to me.

Vincent always gave the impression that he had all the time in the world to listen to you. He was unflappable in the most understated way, courteous and polite, and very funny. But you did not mess with him either. I have to tell you this one random anecdote: in the early 1990s we had a troubled, disruptive student in the massive ENGL 105 course. His behaviour got steadily worse, harassing students and staff, and I alerted Vincent, then Head of Department, to the problem. Vincent showed up at the next lecture and calmly sat down close to the student. To this day I have no idea what Vincent said or did, but all troublesome behaviour stopped. The abruptness with which all trouble stopped is connected with an inertia in the realization of it. Just so, at this stage, I can't quite believe that there will be no more conversations or visits with Vincent anymore. For a writer who strongly believed that we need to affirm the 'here' and the 'present' while accommodating the tides of 'elsewhere' and the 'past', it is so hard to think of him as no longer with us, here, now.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Still Shines When You Think of It: A Festschrift for Vincent O'Sullivan*. Eds. Bill Manhire and Peter Whiteford (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2007). Henceforth *Still Shines*.

<sup>2</sup> *Butcher & Co* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1977), 53.

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting snapshot of Vincent's thoughts and reading, visit the blog he wrote during his tenure as Poet-Laureate: [http://www.poetlaureate.org.nz/p/vincent-osullivan-new-zealand-poet\\_15.html](http://www.poetlaureate.org.nz/p/vincent-osullivan-new-zealand-poet_15.html)

<sup>4</sup> 'On certain days, at least,' *The movie may be slightly different* (Wellington, Victoria University Press, 2011), 74.

<sup>5</sup> *Blame Vermeer* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2007), 44.

<sup>6</sup> 'Nowhere further from Belgium', *Us, then* (Wellington: Victoria UP, 2013), 72.

<sup>7</sup> *Requiem Mass to Celebrate the Life of Sir Vincent Gerard O'Sullivan* (order of service).

<sup>8</sup> 'The Interview: Vincent O'Sullivan'. (Majella Cullinane) <https://www.anzliterature.com/feature/the-interview-vincent-osullivan/>

<sup>9</sup> *Shuriken* (Wellington: Victoria University Press), 8.

<sup>10</sup> *The Pilate Tapes* (Auckland: Oxford University Press), 13.

<sup>11</sup> <https://newsroom.co.nz/2023/09/23/short-story-of-a-labour-candidate-1/>

<sup>12</sup> *The Families* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014), 39.

<sup>13</sup> *Pictures by Goya and Other Stories* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), 115.

<sup>14</sup> *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 239.

<sup>15</sup> *From the Indian Funeral* (Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1976), 32.

<sup>16</sup> 'Being here', *Further Convictions Pending: Poems 1998-2008* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009), 173.

<sup>17</sup> *And so it is* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Nice morning for it, Adam* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>19</sup> 'What Sheila Tells Him, Softly', *Being Here: Selected Poems* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2015), 41.

<sup>20</sup> *On Longing* (Wellington: Four Winds Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Miroslav Holub (1923-1998), Czech immunologist and poet. Leo Vroman (1915-2014), Dutch-American hematologist and poet.