

# The Wake

By John Caselberg

## I

Your going maims God: God  
Let it be sung of and wept for forever;  
Echoing the savagery of your loss like that of the dread  
Avalanche or Adelie Land's boiling winter  
Of terror like the oceanwards flight of the river.

## II

Sirius, Dog-Star, stab night-long your dissembling  
Lights as if the blind uprooting of his flesh  
From the fond-wombed throat-hurt trembling -  
Hearted earth who grieves his death as harsh  
As Dante's Hell were not real;  
Were unimaginable. Stop your processional  
And weep, you cold stars. Weep Antares,  
Fomalhaut, Vega, Cross and Centaur,  
Whom yesterday he honoured by his ways,  
Rain down your scalding tears of stellar  
Lamentation on his going where he lies;  
Where he is; Where his breath was  
That now is mixed with chaos. Chaos and doom  
Tear up the templates now obliterating him.

## III

And you, trees, mute cypress-hooded Kauris,  
Bend your brows for him whose steadfastness proclaimed  
You kin, whose gentle mien and goodness named  
Him scion of the same heroic generations as  
Your own sweet sap has been distilled from.  
Clench tighter, roots, where you have felt your sires  
After their hushed bird-lovely thousand years  
Of succouring beauty murdered, bellowing, boom  
Upon the subterranean gloom and wet that you were  
plumbing then –  
And mourn again. Stand aeons for him. Allow your stems'  
Immobile masts the imaging of his limbs;  
Letting their alchemy of ever-green, blue-mercury enshrine  
His lost being. He gazed like you. His ways like yours will light  
The future dark. Like you he did no hurt.

## IV

Though they have earthed through me their brands  
and those  
Six lightning years have guttered out and flown.  
Since first you ran quick-silvering on the apple-green  
At Fairymeadow, learning, nostril-wise,  
Below her smoking brows, obeisance to a sun-  
Stroked continent's ravishment of scents, being  
Sea-stung in earshot of the ocean's shattering  
Her orange sands and rock the harbourers of a man  
Once (our world's vates) whose rapt heart as vast  
And shaking-portalled as your own no yet composed  
For dissolution there had rung the diapason  
Of such storm as you are drowned in,  
And its after-calm of sepulture, the wrecked, floundering  
Nightfall hurtle home – they echo thundering.

## V

Orion strides the firmament,  
The great dog at his heel.  
Scorpio's red heart  
Is inextinguishable.  
But stars explode  
Here. His death is irrevocable.

## VI

That all the daedal physics of the flesh,  
The chemistry of glacier teeth, the fresh  
Snow-splashed basalt body,  
The brow like regal Taranaki  
Albatrossing oceans and the hot  
Reverbatory engines of his heart  
with their concomitant  
Jonquil eyes and our tomorrow's  
Star-stabbed tui-throated  
Open-artery and sea-engendered-  
Rainbow-swimming days  
Should halt, dry, freeze,  
Corrupt, rot.

## VII

Grief, thee I'll wive  
In the midnight hours  
Since his departure  
Disallows  
That eyes again  
Expectantly  
Will ever start with  
His-and-my joy.

## VIII

But time cannot corrupt  
The beauty you have brought  
Burgeoning our rock,  
Precipice, peak,  
Ice, emerald,  
Sapphire, gold,  
Greenstone-rivered,  
Tasman-succoured,  
Abyss-born.  
Empyrean-  
High-hurled  
Ocean-shrouded world.

## IX

Your tempering is done  
Now, Dane,  
Fled (as you came)  
Galloping stallion sprung  
From a sea-plucked harpstring  
Headland, Icarus-brave in  
To the dazzlement of oblivion.  
Beyond the last of the world's whip and the sun's gaze,  
Blaze.

---

## About John Caselberg

John Caselberg was born in Wakefield, south of Nelson, in 1927 and was educated at Nelson College and Otago University, Dunedin where he studied science after abandoning a medical degree. It was in Dunedin that he met Charles Bracsh, founding editor of New Zealand's longest-running literary journal, *Landfall*, and James K Baxter, through whom he met Colin McCahon in 1948.

Together McCahon and Caselberg produced the magazine *Issue* (1952) and an artistic manifesto, 'On the Nature of Art', which was first published in 2001. When McCahon moved north to Auckland in 1953, *Issue* ceased production. However the friendship between Caselberg and McCahon continued, and in 1955 Caselberg also moved to Auckland, settling in Wood Bay, on the Manukau Harbour close to McCahon's house in French Bay, Titirangi.

In 1960 Caselberg married painter Toss Woollaston's daughter Anna, who was herself an artist. He was awarded the Robert Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago in 1961 and throughout his life wrote poetry, verse plays, short stories and critical essays. Caselberg died in Dunedin in 2004.