

John Leonard



Braided  
Lands



## **Braided Lands**

Also by John Leonard

*Unlove* (1991)

*100 Elegies for Modernity* (1996)

*Jesus in Kashmir* (2003)

*New and Selected Poems* (forthcoming)

**John Leonard**

**Braided Lands**



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*Braided Lands*

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## Rain in March

Rain comes in the night,  
Unexpectedly, pattering on the roof,  
Plashing in the street, then raging,  
Sounding to submerge the house  
In lashing scuds, with dull roars  
Of thunder.

Day dawns  
Misty, with driving rain still,  
Water dripping from eaves, spotting,  
Spattering through foliage. It follows  
A constant rhythm, sometimes fast  
With drumming, splashing fury,  
Hammering, lashing at windows,  
Then slow, slipping back  
To a whisper – a speaking rain,  
Regularity in irregularity –  
With metallic, single drops dripping  
In echoing downpipes – perfect  
Stillness with motion still.

Life contracts about the house –  
Just outside, gum leaves, wattle leaves,  
Glisten richly through the droplets.  
Dull brown earth shines  
With the silver showers, as runnels  
Start and flow clear through the beds,  
To swash out over paths. In the house  
Papers curl, carpets, curtains  
Unlock smells.

Cloud presses down  
All through the day, as the rain  
Drizzles and sputters on and on.  
Each near hill wears  
A white, fluffy shroud.

At dusk  
The far murk gathers and darkness  
Falls, sizzling with insect song –  
Chirping crickets and autumn peepers  
Trilling – with carolling of magpies  
And currawongs, and a brief clamour  
Of cockatoos.

In the muted darkness  
The front passes, single drops  
Spitting from a matt black sky –  
Rain has washed through the world,  
A faint, cool wind lifts  
Branches heavy with wet leaves.

## At the Hidden Ford

That afternoon twenty years ago  
Comes into itself...when?

There are roach flicking in the water,  
Swifts screaming in the sky.

But do these belong to then,  
Or to some other need apart?

And was this foresight, or interpretation?  
An afternoon so generous, and gone.

At the hidden ford, perhaps  
There was enough of life and thought,

But in whose prospect, and why  
Was it this that gave itself over?

## The End of Prophecy

We have to understand that we are not  
The chosen ones whose word  
Transforms the world by magic.  
Our ways are not those that can  
Bring the heavens down to earth,  
That resounding angelic choir.  
If we have applied ourselves at all  
It is enough to guess that we are no  
Prophets or examples, nor should be,  
And so, because of this, we have become  
Outsiders, heresiarchs, enemies –  
A striking repute for the after-time.  
The weavers of words can only  
Weave the garments of humility.

I can't believe I belong to these years,  
That I have lived in the times history pages  
Speak of. I want to think that  
My living is all in the now –  
Apt to roam, and be lost –  
Time all-present at once, and vivid  
As recollection and anticipation are not.

If I walk through that door into the heat  
And light – cicada scream – of this afternoon,  
It is to walk into the same heat  
And light of *every* afternoon  
Of the never-turning, so-granted season –  
To me their time is too short  
And inconceivable without intent.

Here belong cruelty, absurdity:  
The old, the never-young or -alive –  
Books about Blair remaindered –  
The former government and the next,  
And all those hungry without power,  
Whose only hope is hope  
With its sharp taint of despair.

I hold only to time's oneness,  
And disparity, the useless and rejected:  
Walnut forests in Kazakhstan;  
The crooked trees of the *Chuang Tzu*;  
Cranes at Lake Balaton, or cranes anywhere;  
The Caspian tiger, extinct in time,  
Still prowling and to prowl.

In the time of the great ancestors  
Creator spirits walked the Earth,  
The land itself was not fixed,  
And creation was in progress still.

And the people's stories were redundant,  
Yet had true meaning; the land was filled  
With possibilities, explanations, and the chance  
For every contest, every outcome.

Now in the days of the successors  
Our world closes about us –  
There is no room for thought,  
No space for retelling, dispute.

The land itself now has value  
Not meaning, and yet, in the time  
Of the one explanation, it is dying,  
And with it, all our possibilities.

It doesn't matter what you read,  
If you read anything at all  
You will come across it soon enough.

Those stories, told once baldly,  
After this, have a different meaning –  
Footnotes larger than the text.

Soon you will betray yourself,  
Forget loyalty, and so discover  
By accident the way of honour.

You were under the confusion that  
Schooling was simply what became us,  
And what we had become by right.

Instead you've found yourself apt  
To miss the intended point, to find  
Another, the real point.

## The Twenty Civilisations

The twenty civilisations that we count –  
Each had greatness, its own power,  
Style, arts, and every reason.

The twenty – each was like the others,  
Washing its hands in blood,  
But explained this in its own way.

With each sense the need  
For words – beyond what was said,  
Their understanding, lay what *was*.

In calm, and what they called peace,  
There was no calm – eyeless walls –  
They saw things as *they were*.

And think what they forgot;  
No one can bear control for long –  
The people, the empires' downfall.

We reckon ours – the twentieth –  
To have been the last, for we see  
No civilisation or barbarity, except ours.

The life we have does not exact –  
What we have, we give,  
And give in overplus and again.

But we cannot belie ourselves,  
Promise no twenty-first will spring,  
Grasping, angry and unslaked.



## Old Believers

'All theology is the work of doubt and criticism...'

Not for them the luxury of faith,  
Or opinion, with its infidelity –  
No room even for certainty –  
And no need at all for brokerage:  
Money, status, God.

They do not care what names  
People give to what it is  
They do, the stories they tell.  
For them the time is already,  
The reasons as they ever were.

Nor is there fear from them  
As there is no hope. Their ground  
Holds them, whatever their will,  
Was granted them when, and why –  
A trace that will not be erased.

# Thoughts

Though I treasure my knowledge,  
Nurture my thinking, in the end  
Nothing of them belongs to me.

'The world is broken into many pieces' –  
It is not important that I think  
It is broken, but that *you might*.

Can we remember our thoughts?  
Do they even have a beginning?  
What helps us to figure them?

If you do not know your feelings,  
Then you're halfway there –  
To understanding, to your own poetry.

You know which birds nest  
Round about, because when they do  
They disappear for the season.

Insist on a point beyond any sense  
And it vanishes; where then was  
The point, where was the sense?

These thoughts do not become themselves,  
Instead they have another occasion,  
They suit another problem, or another.

Thoughts must become habits  
Or else they die; objects must become  
Thoughts, or they too will die.

I have always thought of myself  
As a (w)hole. At the back of the mind  
There is nothing not present.

## Traherne

His beliefs would have been enough to condemn him,  
His writings would have seen him prosecuted, defrocked  
And imprisoned.

So he lived without publication, following orthodoxy,  
Loved by everyone who knew him  
In this public life.

What did he think of them? His friends,  
Superiors, employers – who would have been  
His enemies?

He probably loved, respected them  
Quite as much, thinking them another proof  
Of God's glory.

## Braided Lands

You must know that our time here,  
As ourselves, our spectral nations,  
Is nearly over.

Indeed it has already passed  
In those braided lands where time  
Co-exists with time, and the future  
Stands as corrective to our truths.

There, a history of necessity  
And chance is given to change,  
And to time's forgetfulness.  
In these wide riverlands it is  
For you to live the world's morning,  
Morning after the great bloodshed.

It is for you to determine the stories,  
The sacrifices, that will explain  
The every time, atone for its cruelties;  
Before time is given to time,  
You can choose the course that leads  
To you – remake time once more.

Truth is bound up in the world,  
And so truth baffles truth.

Love is a promise of the times,  
And so love fails love.

Care is bound up in society,  
So care defeats care.

Humanity falters in the crowd,  
Falls victim to population.

Thought is hostage to stupidity –  
Thought's default is deathly.

But life stands apart from the commonweal,  
Does not follow the way of blood.

Only life is not betrayed,  
But life follows life blindly.

## Marking Time

Doing what we have done,  
Doing what we do,  
Doing what we do best,  
Best to do what we do.

Making familiar moves,  
Saying familiar things,  
No surprises here,  
Nothing new at all.

Confusion lies beyond,  
The future lies before,  
Nothing to rely on,  
No one to look up to.

Past models no guide,  
Past models our models,  
Surprise always expected,  
No surprises at all.

No mistakes, surety,  
Only mistakes surprise,  
No surety in marking time,  
Surprise only in mistakes,  
Surety surprises – mistake.

## Judgements

The unhandy speak of skills,  
The shiftless of a lack of leadership.

The voiceless hear halting words,  
Those who are naive see unwisdom.

The lifeless talk of inexperience,  
The wicked allege wickedness.

## A Book of Kings

In this volume find written  
The lives of princes – at first  
Legendary, larger than life,  
Giving way nearer the present  
To wretched, starveling lives –  
Understandable, forgivable even.

Is it time, as such, transforms  
The pattern of rule from ideal  
To everyday? Or is it cold truth,  
Knowing more, which gives  
Rulers their due, but nothing else?  
Or could it be the very fact  
Of successive kingship – greater  
Reach in no greater space?



## Thought

Thought's not what you think,  
Or even what you feel;

Thought is not thinking,  
Or reaction, or opinion.

Thought is grass-green,  
Just outside context;

Thought is quiet, subtle,  
Melds with what is.

Thought is always present,  
Though it is not evident;

It can look at its contrary  
And remain still the same.

Thought lies outside you,  
Your thought is yours,

But it is itself – your role  
Is helper, not guardian.

Thought cannot be captured  
To be turned into dogma;

It cannot be predicted –  
It will never be constrained.

## Words'

When asked by the curious  
'What use, what value  
In poetry?', answer nothing –  
For unless your words speak  
For themselves, no gloss  
Will help in their cause:

Words' will – to speak,  
To speak out plainly so as  
To win themselves a hearing;  
Never to command, but sway  
Their hearers to think,  
To trust, beyond their best.

Words' feel – fetch and heft,  
The company they keep, who  
Has used them, to what end;  
The force, and beauty, of words,  
Simple words, simply used  
For eager, honest purposing.

Words' pattern – the passion  
Of searching phrase, clause,  
Question; beguiling prelude,  
Delicate, embedded qualification,  
Followed by hammer-stroke  
Of harsh, terse term.

Words' purpose – to tell  
Of the earth and starry sky,  
All living things between,  
Of sunlit, spindrift moments,  
Where only and once can you  
Find yourself, your time.

Words' vehemence – their sense  
In a world without truth,  
Of heart, holdfast, habitation;  
This home of all seeking,  
Home land never seen  
But as at first and all.

Words' strength – some befitting  
Words will be remembered,  
Repeated, passed on, as long  
As English lasts – or people  
Care to make it last – to use  
In best time for the best.

## **You Don't Write a Poem**

You don't write a poem –  
What you do is discover  
That there is a world,  
Quite similar to our own,  
Except that it contains  
This one extra poem.

And what you recognise  
Is that this one poem  
Makes all the difference.

**31/12/05**

Standstill – we cannot fit thought  
To the pattern of our lives;  
We can do nothing, we dare not  
Hope for anything, instead  
We wait for the blow to fall.

## *Propria Persona*

Get this: I'm not a poem,  
Or poems, I'm a person  
Who writes poems – is that  
So very difficult?

There's not one of these poems  
That approaches me as a person,  
But then, as a person I'm not  
A patch on these poems.

I am much wiser than they are,  
I never say half what they say,  
But in their time they will speak  
What I cannot.

## Confessional

Forgive me, Muse, for I have erred:

I have begun and ended with feelings  
And never touched upon causes;  
I have written lines of

widely-  
spaced  
words

To convey the immensity of those feelings.

I have written great slabs of verbiage,  
Devoid of argument or wit, though  
Redolent with adjectives, and have thought  
That tone and trope themselves made poetry.

I have taken refuge in stale attitudes,  
(‘Easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting’).

I have granted accidents an importance  
And a permanence they do not deserve;  
I have failed to spot the truly significant.

I have used places, and vegetation even,  
As metaphors for my thoughts, despite  
Their unconcern with my preoccupations.

And I have written long descriptive poems  
In which the weather or the landscape  
Were to mirror my mood and life –

But I forgot to tell what these were;  
I assumed that guessing was a game  
That every reader would want to play.

Finally, I have accepted my great success,  
And received, without correction, the praise  
Mistakenly heaped upon my verse.



## Autobiography, Part II

'His latter end was more blessed  
Than his beginning', or, scrubbing that out,  
*Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi  
Del tempo felice ne la miseria.*

What instinct is it, to try to end  
Confusion, to assume that you may  
Point or this or that, whilst  
Telling one story, or the contrary?

And whose life lacks either,  
Those two not so distinct parts,  
When each day interweaves the two,  
With a measure of carelessness for some?

Don't seek to lay blame recklessly  
For the inevitable chaos  
Of our lives; a clear view  
Sees nothing that is not unclear.

Expect nothing of yours to survive,  
Not your name, or intent,  
Or any of your special interests  
– Anything about you.

Expect at most to see your style  
Taken and applied, with a straight face,  
To something other, something perhaps  
Clean contrary.

Expect gross mistakes, misinformation  
Concerning someone, something, else,  
To usurp rightful place, any  
True ownership.

Expect to see motives attributed  
You never dreamt of, which could  
Have had nothing to do  
With your endeavour.

Expect only this – a quirk,  
A quiddity, a peg to hang  
Someone else's concerns upon,  
To be given a name (not yours),  
And to have a part in something  
You never figured.

There is no day, ideal  
Or otherwise, you can grasp at,  
No day you can seize.

Nor is there a day for you  
To rest in, imaging that  
It will always be so.

Each day is different – filled  
With different facts, moods –  
Never chiming with the next.

You want the day *thus*,  
It refuses to perform for you,  
Or stay to be remembered.

## *Odit et Amat*

He had followed tradition in loving,  
Not hating, first (not being able  
To do the both at once) and so  
His love turned at last to hate.  
But this hate lacked all energy –  
Was mere dislike – and proved  
As feeble as his love had been...

## Lovers' Words

Lovers walk grimly by the sea,  
In the blood-hued dawn –  
Grass rustles in the wind,  
Waves crash along the shore –  
And their atrocious words mock  
The world's dead slumber.

In their hour, in their time,  
The words, spare, keen,  
Not yet drawn out into  
Everyone's everyday, awaken  
Jealousies, start dismay,  
Envy in unfettled hearts.

The price of faith is religion;  
The price of constant war  
Is a warrior society.

We should not look for faith,  
Conversion, or even new faith –  
But look at faith's cruel hands.

We are forced into war  
To ransom hidden guilt –  
But we are not warriors.

If we trust, it should be  
To faith's forgetfulness, faith's  
Faithlessness, the interstices;

Instead of war and rapine,  
Think of enabling, trust,  
Embracing new friends.

We have no faith in faith,  
No courage for war – let us  
Give ourselves to neither.

## All Change

He snuffles the air nervously,  
Suddenly unsure now; his grasp  
Of the truly important, never lost  
Until this moment, is slipping away.

Not for him trivialities – life,  
The world, land (brackets within brackets) –  
But style, the talk of the town,  
Entertainment, what the press says.

In autumn, leaves blowing down  
From street trees set in concrete,  
He has to face change; though still  
Young, his once sure instinct for what  
His fellows think gone, he's superannuated –  
His darling time no longer his.

They may be true friends,  
But they are not good friends;  
Not much-treasured friends –  
Words more golden than gold.

They are voices that whisper  
Of doubt and fear as much  
As of confidence and hope –  
Troubling, urgent, malapropos.

They never say what you expect,  
They never say quite what  
You remembered them to say –  
Their reasons are their own.

In good time they might reveal  
Their true selves, speak plainly.  
But whenever *is* a good time?  
For now they are as they are.



## *Tastari De Corde\**

The player sounds the strings  
And fingers feel the notes  
And their connectedness. The music  
Then carries on as it does –  
Into the forms that make it understood,  
That allude to the first connections,  
But give them away in favour  
Of other likelihoods.

Nothing

In the first touch, however, first  
Thrill of sound, fingers renewed  
Knowledge of their skill,  
Entails this course, says  
That the music must fall into music,  
Follow the way that belies.

\*'Feeling the strings', short, improvisatory pieces found in manuscripts of early Italian lute-music.

## In the Time of

In the time of a heart-beat,  
In the time of a day lived,

In the time of a moment's thought,  
In the time of old age creeping  
    through a mind and body,

In the time of a cloud passing,  
In the time of the moon riding in the sky,

In the time of soil creeping downhill,  
In the time of a flood washing  
    in muddy sheets down the slope,

In the time of a poem's measured phrases,  
In the time of a poem remembered afterwards,

In the time of a whole note in the bar,  
In the time of thirty-two thirty-second notes  
    and their busyness in the bar,

In the time of ants scurrying,  
In the time of an ant-lion waiting in its pit,

In the time of the wind drying out grasses,  
In the time of the wind scattering seeds  
    and bringing rain clouds,

In the time of stories being told,  
In the time of stories ramifying,

In the time of law being made,  
In the time of law being broken  
and made new again,

In the time of the wind, time's messenger,  
In the time of restless thoughts,

In the time of time sweeping away,  
In the time of time sweeping back,  
carrying away and bringing back,

## My Self

I am further away from my self  
Than I want to think; if I say  
'Myself', already I am figuring  
Another – at best I bear  
A resemblance to my self.

As to what I have to say,  
I regret missing the *mot juste*,  
Not predicting the response, not  
Donning horns to run to the fair  
With the abandon of others.

And I've learnt I cannot write  
My name; the views subscribed  
Are not to be signed, lest  
Misunderstanding occur, even when  
No understanding has –

For that was some distance  
From the original, the returned letter,  
Uncut pages. But say it pleases me  
Anyway, that the customary  
Of the possible has a price too,

And that I want to join the mob  
Baying outside my house...when it forms,  
That I want to curl up small, stay  
Silent, even if I'll be asked anyway,  
Put on the spot by myself.

And why not salute the cast:  
My self, myself even, I,  
To name only the inner circle...  
And as for my name, forget it –  
Let the *Rogue's March* play,

My own self devise what it will,  
My literary self decode if  
It can, and I will sign that name.  
Is there anything in this not  
Familiar and everyday?

## The Theft Outright

(Riposte to Frost)

The land, such as it always had been,  
Was rich and storied, with wealth  
For sharing and feasting – prowess  
And arts were prized by the people.  
We who could not live under our law,  
Such as it was, we did not so much  
Give ourselves to the land, as help  
Ourselves to it, with both hands.  
And the only thing we withheld  
Was the full extent of our hunger –  
When we had swallowed all the land,  
This was known to everyone.  
And our stolen land, with enhancement,  
Brings us no luck, no content;  
We are a shiftless and unhandy people,  
And ever the drum beats for war.

## **A Roman Army Before the Gates of Ctesiphon (363 CE)**

No-one could stand up to them in the field,  
The Persians' strength being irregular tactics,  
Scorched earth, harrying and pursuit.  
The legionaries had won far enough to have  
Burnt their boats, to curse the King of Armenia  
And his missing armies – the failed reinforcements.  
They understood that the retreat from victory  
That lay ahead was already a defeat.

As for their pale, fanatic emperor,  
Brooding over the insolence of Antioch,  
The faith that he alone now sustained,  
And his model Alexander's Persian expedition –  
He understood that the genius of the Empire  
Was to desert him, that his battles at home  
Were lost, and that Persian arms would  
Never appear to answer his challenge.

## Not Being On Side

Trying for any long shot,  
Any panoply of ideas, complete  
With trumpets and attendants,

Naturally one would have colour,  
Reasons, plausibility and the rest –  
Everything to make the story long.

Not being on side, or wanting to  
Turn everyday fact into illustration,  
Naturally one is terse.



## Descriptive

Is it enough to have swooped  
Over the forest of words  
And metaphors, to have fixed  
Forever this gilded sea, or  
That brittle sunlight? And is  
Your verse altogether descriptive,  
Delating on memory and experience,  
The personal and predicted out-turn?

Or is it that the point of description  
Is not to serve those things described –  
Their unbounded life and duration –  
But to capture the describer in the act:  
Her lossy take, his attempt  
Upon free life, this welter?

## Son of the Father

When Barabbas took his leave,  
Knocked the dust off his feet,  
And found a new country as  
Far as might be from his past,  
What did he feel, and what  
Did he think?

Did he acknowledge blood-guilt,  
Think who had died in his stead,  
Or thank God that the cup  
Had passed from his lips?  
Or was all this now part  
Of another story?

Was it not enough to have  
Escaped, to have shrugged off  
The name that was not his?  
Having cheated death, was life  
Not sweet enough, and filled  
With new-found duty?

And was it not the case that  
Having escaped, he saw his life  
With new eyes; its trials over,  
It now belonged to others,  
To have their say, to prepare  
Their true versions.

## **Elam**

Theirs were a strangely elegant statuary,  
Graceful artworks, human-sized  
Architecture, and, which is best of all,  
A language unrelated to any other.

Then, amidst the wrack of empire,  
Their kingdom persisted for many centuries;  
Tributes were paid to their magnificence,  
Even by their bitterest enemies.

Now, amidst the wrack of empire,  
Attempts at ill-gotten magnificence,  
The suspicion remains that it was  
Greatness, magnificence, was their undoing.

## *Bildungsroman*

The kind of life to strive for

Is not the life to live.

The kind of life for living

Is not for living now.

Now is a time of watchfulness  
When striving, good is turned  
Against itself. We wait for a time  
That does not exist; the future  
Has become impossible, like the past.  
The sky is cloudless, implacable –  
Dried grass shivers in the wind.  
Our thoughts mock the hope  
That once filled these days.

## The End of Belonging

Citizen or circumcised, you're always  
Owing, mortgaged to Paul  
Or the Law – the end of belonging.

If you must be this or that,  
Then naturally you're bound to sin,  
Shut out from what you are.

You may stand to gain, at the last day,  
But to begin in loss means  
There is never an end to it.

And the others, who should have known –  
Their stories failed them, they gave in  
To the gamble, and lost everything.

Now, very time of the question,  
Question that cannot be posed,  
What is any life without belonging?

## Unlove Still

In the wide years, the weltering years –  
The dead, withered leaves on the tree  
Of life, the press of deadly fears,  
The then, and the here and the now –  
Who would dare to say  
There was anything at all of love?

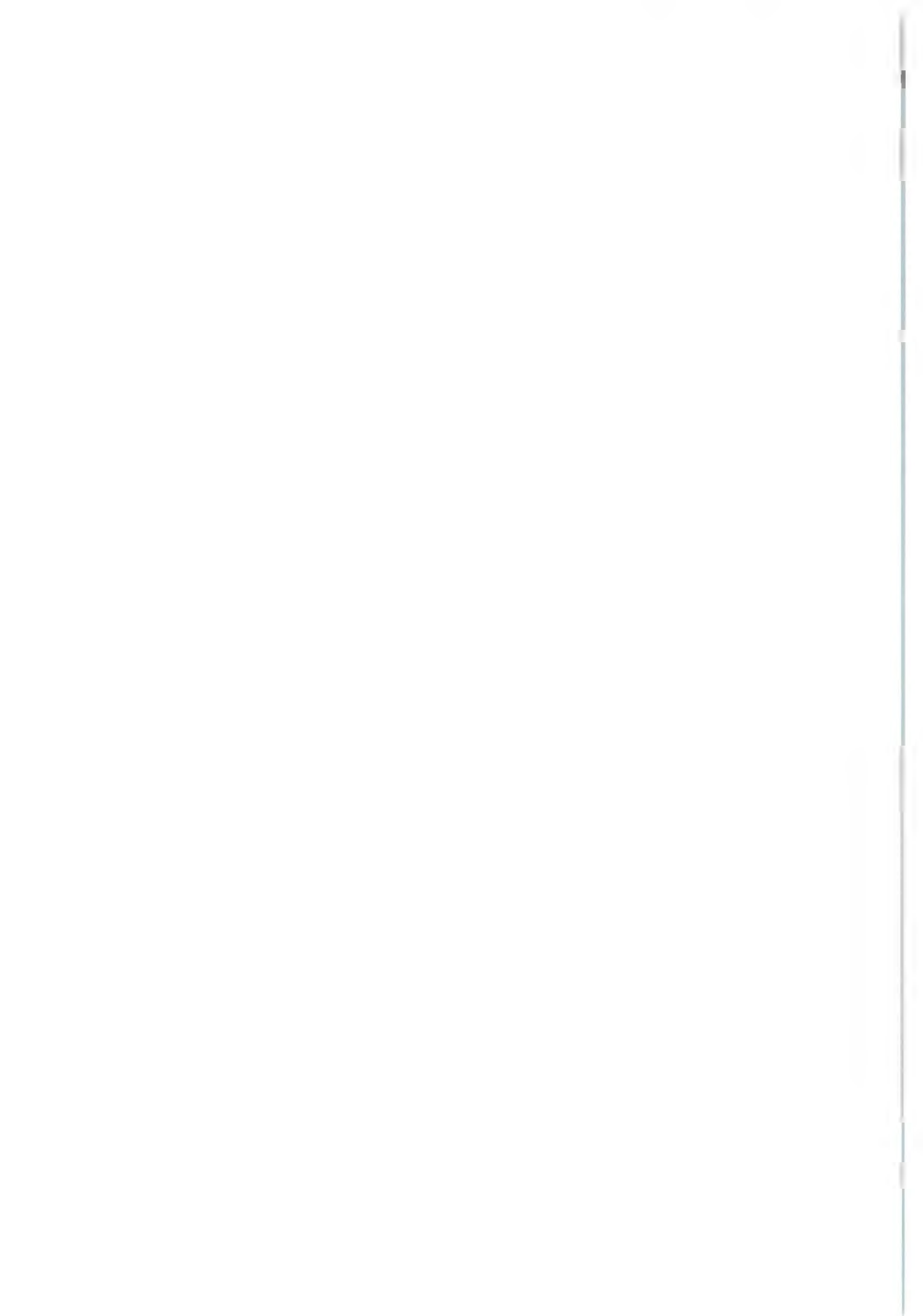
But love was there to be found,  
And you did not find it;  
Instead you were content with limited  
Magic – words' fall, their pattern –  
And your dried hands could not conjure  
The fact of love in unpropitious times.

## **The Blandishments of 9 a.m.**

At 9 a.m. the sun is unusually bright,  
The world is full of bustle and busyness –  
People scurrying here and scurrying there,  
Children being driven to school –  
And all its promises are bright:  
Things to get done, matters to resolve,  
Achievements, accomplishments, which  
By evening will all be settled finally.

In the midst of late afternoon despair,  
Everything still tied up, mired in itself,  
Think, was there a time that did not  
Promise the easy day that 9 a.m. did?  
There was, it was dawn, first kettle-peep,  
When the light was soft, no one about,  
And things promised well – they would be  
Fine, but with no delusion of promptitude.





In this, his fourth collection, John Leonard continues the dissection of modernity that has characterised his poetry from the beginning. This collection ranges from dense, but compelling, poems, to satirical, but humorous, epigrammatic verse. The poetry passes from ruthless diagnosis to poems where life is transformed by new meaning.

'Early on in this intriguing new collection, John Leonard tells us that modern people are no longer "The chosen ones whose word/ Transforms the world by magic". Through these superbly meditative poems, however, he has aimed for nothing less than an interrogation of our contemporary ethics and hypocrisies. His poetry compels us to not only remember our lost 'magic', but to also reassess our disenchantment at this loss. *Braided Lands* is a profound rumination on life in a time when "We have no faith in faith, / No courage for war".' – Ali Alizadeh

John Leonard was born in the UK and came to Australia in 1991. He currently lives in Canberra with his partner Felicia and their two sons.

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