



JOANNA MARGARET PAUL
Untitled, portrait of Pat Baskett undated
Pencil on paper

memoir of a friendship

By Pat Baskett

Our friendship began when Joanna Paul and I met as students in late 1965. It was a momentous time for her family. Blackwood, her father, had died less than a year earlier. Courageously, her mother Janet moved with her younger children, Mary and Jane, to Auckland in 1966 to enable Joanna to live back at home, and where there was a branch of the Hamilton bookshop, Paul's Book Arcade. Janet had also decided to extend the Paul publishing activities and set up an Auckland office of Blackwood and Janet Paul Publishing.

I had part-time jobs in the Auckland bookshop and in the Publishing office and I boarded with the family for most of 1966.

I recognised Joanna's need during that year to distance herself from the familial surroundings of art and literature in order to find her own way into that same world. Her struggles with the death of her father and her self-doubt led to a serious episode of anorexia and hospitalisation.

Looking back, she wrote of this time in **Written at St Omer**, in September 1990:

“Why this painful self disparagement? I do not know. Had I drawn in my mother’s creed of altruism without the ballast of her healthy self worth?...Heart-broken is an old fashioned phrase but makes sense of anorexia, the wasting sickness, if love is tied to the will to live & to be loved is required to be loveable, life worthy.”

This sense of doubt and her own unworthiness dogged her throughout her life. The search for meaning and her quest for truth led her initially to the Catholic Church. I went to her induction when she was 19, sharing some of her need for a spiritual absolute. This decision intensified her isolation from her family as she immersed herself in the formality and ritual of Catholicism, of which music, painting and language were an integral part.

Years later she rejected this form of Christianity for the simplicity and modesty of the Quakers.

Her first university degree, a B.A., filled her with a love of medieval history, French poetry and English literature. But like her mother she was never without pencil and drawing paper and so moved on to fine arts at Elam. Colin McCahon was one of her teachers. She shared with him the ability to transform landscape and the trappings of domesticity into a kind of semiotics of the spiritual. She painted the old black coffee grinder that hung on the kitchen wall with its curved handle, as an emblem of permanence and sustenance.

She painted portraits of poet James K. Baxter and short story writer O.E. Middleton (my brother) and these were hung with other works in the Wynyard Tavern, Symonds Street in her first exhibition, *Portraits and Drawings*, November 1969.

These two portraits have a simple integrity: Baxter’s eyebrows are slanted above eyes that look uncertainly past rather than through you; Ted Middleton’s sightless eyes are closed, his head tilted downwards in thought. Portraits never became a major part of her work but she drew her children and did leave a major painting of her sister Jane.

In 1971 she married painter Jeffrey Harris. The wedding was in the church of St Mary Star of the Sea, Port Chalmers, but the ceremony was not conventional. Days later she posed for a black and white photo in her wedding dress. It’s taken outside, hardly focussed and she looks as if she is caught, fleeing.

They lived for a year at Seacliff and later spent time at Okains Bay and Barrys Bay, near to where Jeffrey's family were farmers at French Farm, on Banks Peninsula. Magdalena (Maggie) and Imogen, were born in 1973 and 1976.

I was in England during these years and so never visited her there but others have described the cottage at Okains Bay as a "a very desolate and long-abandoned place without a garden." The Barrys Bay farmhouse, however, had a garden with fruit trees and the peonies she always loved and painted. She never complained about the hardships of winter or the lack of transport and wrote to me in 1975, after one move:

"So we are piecing-peacing ourselves together at the same time....A warm and tranquil landscape, wooded valley, fruit tree and harbour visible." She was reading St Augustine and that letter ends with a medieval English translation of a brief Augustine poem. Another letter ends "Am reading Levi-Strauss as a change from Virginia Woolf."

I have long loved two landscapes she painted at the beginning of this time. They were part of a 1989 Sarjeant Gallery exhibition titled *A Chronology*. She saw landscape in a way that isolated major elements into compositional components and contrasting blocks of colour. Each small scene is imbued with her empathy for the quotidian, her talent for finding beauty where others saw grass, trees, sky.

She sent me this poem she called *Ideogram*:

Greening willow
Drifting over
The rubble of fence posts
Iron manuka pig styes
Barbed wire etc
An inlay of
Old china
In a callow
country

This ability she had of transforming the mundane into the statuesque marked the whole of her work. She used the painterly elements of colour and form to uplift a jug, cups, plates from the kitchen table to the plane of art where they stand splashed with light as you have never seen them before. Thus, she lifted herself out of the quagmire of the daily domestic round.

Words were as necessary to her as paint and she employed them to similar ends - no more poignantly than in *Imogen*, the book of poems she wrote after the death of their second daughter at nine months. Joanna and Jeffrey had brought Imogen to Auckland for heart surgery which had not been successful. Here's the last poem in that exquisite small volume:

O my

white

white

white

white

white

white

white

one

Less available than that volume (republished in 2020 by Small Bore Books) is *UNWRAPPING the BODY*, the little book consisting of lines of related words, some of them with their equivalents in Latin or Greek, with facing pages of photographic images.

Here's an example:

AORTA
SCAPULA
GLADIOLUS
ZIPHOID
VAGINA
THYROID
PHALANGES

One feels her striving to derive any ounce of meaning from the experience of the ultimate loss – that of a child. The book is dated 1977 and its origin was an installation in Christchurch into which she had thrown herself immediately on their return from Auckland.

Nineteen years later Joanna marked the twentieth anniversary of Imogen's death in 1976 by re-naming that work *UNPACKING THE BODY* and presenting it as a boxed set of twenty-two A4 loose pages. She wrapped the box in white muslin, tied it with white cotton tape and gave number ten of twelve copies to my husband, Jonathan. It has about it a quality of exquisite seeking and exploration of the links of language as a means of reconciliation with the unreconcilable.

We shared a love of music and especially of experiencing contemporary classical composers. She wrote of hearing Stockhausen, wishing I had been with her, and when I did stay, after they moved to Dunedin, she could hardly wait to put on for me her most recent discovery - a disc of Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time. Schubert was her eternal, most profound love. There was sometimes a piano in her house and she wrote once, from Whanganui, "I play the piano occasionally though it's walking rather than dancing."

Their Dunedin house was at 14 Beta Street and was known as Bothwell. It could be one of those in the beautiful tondo she painted of that street in 1981, where the black pavement sparkles as if wet and the houses sit jumbled beneath power lines. What can only be a power pole emerges enigmatically

from the middle of the road. It's a logical part of the composition but defies the limits of realism - which was never Joanna's concern and we can be thankful it wasn't!

I have lived for years with another work with a similar minor disjunction. Her Wheelbarrow painting is another in the tondo series where she broke the conventions of the square or rectangular frame. Our visual world is round, we focus on a centre surrounded by the extraneous environment which is circular.

The wheelbarrow is off centre, to the right, sitting forlorn in a lawn and viewed through a window the curtains of which are slithers of pale grey on the sides of the circle. At the top a blob of yellow can only be a lightshade. The lawn is bounded by trees above which stands a red-roofed house.

This red links with the slight line of red that marks the edge of the lawn. Joanna had the painter's knack of knowing what the work required – regardless of what was there or not. But she erred in this work in a way that is typical of her impracticality. The suburban garden is bathed in bright sunlight, so the wheelbarrow casts a shadow. And the line beneath one of the handles is surely inconsistent with that beneath the body of the wheelbarrow.

So be it! It is a beautiful, powerful painting.

The move to Dunedin was occasioned by Jeffrey's award of the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship in 1977. Life was crammed for her with work in every conceivable way. Felix was born at the very end of 1978 and Pascal in 1982. There were always napkins to be washed.... And yet she could write to me in March 1979:

"It's very peaceful here just now....a clock ticking, a meal cooking, Schubert songs, a baby asleep in our bedroom, Jeffrey and Mag variously out for the afternoon. I like these rhythms.... I embarked on a year's delighted documenting of Felix, his moods, gestures, sleeping and waking, his face and hands. And now suddenly I've decided enough, enough drawing and peering through a camera. Saturation point.... So I order some hardboard. Next week a painting of Ted." (O.E. Middleton)

A year or so later she wrote from Aramoana where she was staying in a bach with Felix:

“Actually it’s also sometimes hell, when we’re tired and hungry and he screams... when he streaks across the road while I’m raising my camera...work and children don’t really mix, I ought to know! I’ve been doing some drawing and photography to protest the second aluminium smelter.”

We shared concerns for the environment and worked each on separate projects, Aramoana occupying a major piece of her mind and linking her with the Dunedin artists, including Ralph Hotere, Cilla McQueen, Ted Middleton, John Caselberg, who decried the sacrifice of that beautiful headland to industry.

Then in 1983 Joanna had her turn as Frances Hodgkins Fellow. In May she wrote to me:

“I am very much living in the present as I can’t envisage a better year or optimum balance of work with home.”

She passed her driving licence and bought a “light blue/green Wolsey which is slow but smooth, quiet, walnut-lined and I suppose beloved as the symbol of a new emancipation.”

But she was sometimes fraught with inner conflict. “...I do feel narcissism, solipsism creeps into the work now I have achieved some aloneness,” she wrote in September of that year.

It seems appropriate that the exhibition at the culmination of the Fellowship should have been titled “Black Work/White Work”. It included, the reviewer Bridie Lonie wrote in the Otago Daily Times, “jugs on tables, bowls of fruit and flowers, baskets of eggs.... Things which are used daily with knowledge of their parallel spiritual or poetic qualities.”

Less than a year later this idyll and her marriage were over. Maggie was in boarding school in Wellington and Joanna was also there with the two boys, living in a flat. What decided her move to Whanganui shortly after? I don’t know, perhaps it was the possibility of owning a house there.

So began the domestically demanding, turbulent years in the house called Balbraith at 9 Stark Street, Durie Hill. Initially, Joanna rejoiced in the house’s generous proportions. She wrote to me that she was making curtains using a sewing machine “of c.1900 – I love it!”

She had had, she said “some scruples over the possession of so large and dignified a house – but they are wearing off in the realisation that what I have chosen is a task.”

It was a gargantuan task full of conflict and stress. Not just keeping the house and garden but raising three children on a minimal income and maintaining her own lifeline to sanity through poetry and painting.

One result was that Felix was taken into the family of sister Jane in Wellington and subsequently spent a year living with Jeffrey who was in Melbourne. It was here that her nightmare of possibly losing a second child occurred when Felix was diagnosed with a brain tumour. She needed to be with him and so I bought two large drawings she had done in Taumaruanui on a trip through the King Country. This enabled her to buy an air ticket for herself and, a little later, for Maggie.

Felix responded to treatment and I think her experience of this second child's illness intensified her determination to avoid chemicals and plastics of all sorts. In a letter of December 1989 she wrote:

"I have made a new resolution, not to buy any more food in plastic, and if I do slip up to write to the manufacturer."

Did she make the time to write? The same letter ends:

"The energy goes in fighting constant rearguard battles for buildings and trees, and no victories but a new strategy of consultation by the city council's planning department."

Still, she found time to organise the 1989 exhibition *Joanna Margaret Paul: Chronicle/Chronology* at Whanganui's Sarjeant Gallery. This was a milestone. She was modest about it but quietly exultant, I think, at the confirmation of the direction of her work.

We saw each other either when she came on the lengthy journey by bus or train to Auckland, bringing a child with her, or when I flew down to spend a weekend in Whanganui. She still drove, although no longer the walnut dashboarded-Wolsey. On one memorable occasion when the children were taken care of she drove up the narrow tortuous Whanganui River road to Jerusalem where she had arranged with the nuns for us to stay the night in the convent. We returned after dark the next day, slowly, our eyes glued to the white marking along the road's verge.

Later, after another trip to Jerusalem, she painted a very beautiful image of the room in which we had slept.

Joanna reminded me of Frances Hodgkins in her need to be out in the landscape, painting or drawing, often exploring some remote valley or cluster of bushy hills, usually alone.

Once, when the children were with friends, she drove alone to Raetihi and then along the Desert Road to Turangi from where she wrote me this memorable account:

“I broke down on the Desert Road (the car I mean) and was walking back, the road winding through bush, forever to Raetihi, dusk and cars very fast, one at a time, when I thought – be hopeful! Enjoy the spectacle, baroque and dark under the mountain – and I stopped a car, a little slower than the rest. And found myself looking (O relief) into the faces of two young and sensitive ecologists, their car full of cameras, who drove me back the mile to my car. Did a temporary repair job with a bent twig on my car and followed me back to the National Park service station.”

The 1980s ended with Maggie coming to us for her last two years of secondary school at Rangitoto College. Felix returned from Melbourne.

In 1993 Joanna was awarded the Rita Angus Fellowship but this experience, unlike the previous Fellowship, offered no balm to her life. She and the two boys spent a year in the cottage in Wellington where Rita Angus had lived. It was tiny, gloomy and had no garden at all. They were predictably unhappy and the return to Whanganui a relief.

In 1994 Joanna quit her large Stark Street house and moved to a smaller one with a garden at 3 Maxwell Ave, close to Whanganui’s Memorial Tower. She wrote to me (on small pages of pink lined paper) of the Maxwell Ave house:

“It still charms me with all its lovely wild green-ness all around.”

She seemed now completely embedded in Whanganui. Her letters describe Shakespeare readings with friends – *The Taming of the Shrew* and one night up till midnight reading all 154 sonnets. She and I shared a love of French language and literature, especially the 19th century poets, and she conferred with me for her translation of *Five Poems* by Mallarme. The booklet she made ten copies of (I have number three) has the French version in her own printed hand – elegantly legible for once – and her English translation typed on the facing page. Mallarme would have recognised a kindred spirit.

She continued to make journeys. In October 1996 it was to the West Coast of the South Island.

“The Greymouth journey was rather wonderful, trains, buses, small hotels. Even, like a French impressionist, I managed to exchange a small drawing of fresias on the breakfast table for a night in a B & B (not in Greymouth, needless to say where things are a bit rough).”

She worked passionately to save the elegant early 20th century buildings that remained from Whanganui’s heyday as a destination for tourist trips up the river in paddle steamers. She wrote, in a letter of October (?) 1996? on paper with a photo of her garden:

“We have just lost, I think, a rather protracted battle for some brick and iron on a street corner near the Opera House. Our rhetoric turns the council nasty, and simultaneous to this exhausting compromise, a really lovely, nominally protected old wooden row on the riverbank is bulldozed (with nothing planned).

“I should have learnt this lesson years ago when a small group agitated to have the old whaling mast of ‘Bully Hayes’ retained on a knoll at Port Chalmers. The mayor finally agreed – erected a fence and, tidying up, chopped down the lovely backdrop to the mast of macrocarpa.”

The drawings and watercolours she made of Whanganui buildings are a special record of some treasures lost, and a testament to her devotion and appreciation of the elegance of proportion in architecture. She especially loved and admired Georgian architecture which she sought out in her two visits to England. In November 1996 she wrote of “filling in the gaps of my ‘Short History of Architecture’ tho taking photos threatens to become a vice.”

Did she make such a volume?

On a smaller scale, she undertook a campaign to have fruit trees planted on the “desolate playing field of Polson Park behind the house.” The project eventually succeeded but her general invitation for members of her St Barnabas parish to come for afternoon tea and plant some trees was responded to by only “one oldish man.” It was enough, she said, to have this pleasant fellow eating her cucumber sandwiches.

The cucumber is unsurprising - there was an element of gentility about Joanna as if she clung to vestiges of her Hamilton upbringing. Her letters, although written on the scraps of paper of whatever colour, size or shape available and not always dated or even legible, sometimes had a formal tone, like this one sent me in the mid-1990s:

“Dearest Pat,

I wonder if it would suit you if I/we were to come and stay on Queens Birthday weekend. I have rather rashly agreed to be involved in a poetry reading...”

The very last letter, of April 5 2003, from her was to Jonathan – “Just a quick note to most warmly thank you also for the pleasant hospitality.”

She and her new husband, Peter Harrison, had stayed on their way to Whangarei.

Peter was a Quaker and shared her ardent opposition to genetic modification. Not content to rely on her intuitive revulsion, Joanna read and studied to understand the science. In 1999 she added this PS to a letter in which she was describing the pleasures of the drawing class she was teaching at the Whanganui Community Polytech:

“Still pondering GM, try to give it a full day and evening a week. Otherwise my life is taken over and knocked sideways.”

In October 2001 she described a Quaker demonstration against GM in Whanganui:

“The Quaker fraternity are a great comfort here.... We had set up a noon vigil for the Saturday....everyone wore white or pale colours and it was as quiet and dignified as possible with 12 or so Quakers and one elderly Anglican doctor, for an hour standing between an evangelising Christian band with trumpets, and silent rhythmical Chinese meditators, sitting in bright yellow on the grass in the square!”

The very last letter I have from her addresses the failure of Jonathan and I to attend her wedding. We had had our daughter’s wedding at almost the same time and commitments to overseas visitors. She wrote on March 3 announcing their impending arrival to stay with us on their way north:

"My dearest Pat,

Now I understand a little more I feel a little better... The place will be there for you of course and your absence felt. Don't worry or mind or plot any last minute escape. C'est entendu....

PS I can't think of a finer or more acceptable present than fine linen."

The ordinary things of life were often difficult for Joanna. She swam in a sublime sea of poetic awareness that transformed the mundane, as well as the tragic, into a visual truth about our, and her, daily lives. Life itself was often not kind to her and it was perhaps this element of perpetual struggle that imbued her work with a special poignancy. In her last three months, however, she found, in husband Peter Harrison, the missing kindness.

He phoned me to tell me she was in Rotorua hospital. I picked up Felix, who was in Auckland, and drove to be with the family beside her.

At her funeral in Whanganui I read this poem. It epitomises for me her sensitivity to things greater than herself and her ability to express these feelings in a way which makes us see universal and contrasting connections. She sent it to me, untitled, hand-written in her most legible printing and signed JMP 2001/2002.

This is a marvellous year for pears
And bombs are falling on Afghanistan
The fruit are braided like grapes
And bombs are falling on Afghanistan
The red skins gleam smoothly, freckled
Convex, concave, inviting to touch,
And bombs are falling on Afghanistan
The branches are bowed to the ground
Here is a branch that is broken
And bombs are falling on Afghanistan
Wind blows. Small pears strew the ground
When the war began, the tree was in blossom
This is a marvellous year for pears

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