

# The Review Books

## IAIN BAMFORTH

Iain Bamforth is an internationally distinguished figure in the field of the medical humanities. He has worked as a GP in Europe, held positions as a hospital doctor at the American Hospital of Paris, and in the Australian outback, and worked with the World Health Organization, including spells on community health projects in south-east Asia. His publications include *The body in the library: a literary history of modern medicine*, a book of essays, *The good European: essays and arguments*, and many articles in journals ranging from the *BJGP* to *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Born in Glasgow in 1959, Iain Bamforth has published five collections of poetry: *The Modern Copernicus* (1984), *Sons and Pioneers* (1992), *Open Workings* (1996), *A Place in the World* (2005), and, most recently *The Crossing Fee* (2013), from which the poems published here are taken. His sometimes demanding poetry is characterised by a rigorous intellectualism wedded to an international vision. It shows a sharp ear and eye for local details, from the 'piped-in petrochemicals of the polar night' in Shetland to a 'mudflow saga' in Indonesia, and the poems often draw on an undertow of religious sensibility, insistent even when he writes of the potato: 'pabulum of the Christian faith'.

Bamforth is also a skilled translator, both of prose and poetry. His version of Hendrik Marsman's *Memories of Holland* with its Scottish-accented 'iridescent smirr' has an immediately attractive lyricism, though it concludes with a Bamforthian note of cherished menace.

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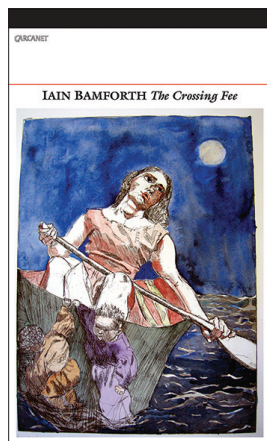
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## THE CROSSING FEE

### IAIN BAMFORTH

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### Base matter

*In Wanam there was the one river the  
colour of anthracite  
and a smell straight out of the pickled-egg  
jar,  
a warren of shops, gangways and a pub (the  
sign read 'Pap')  
with its two waria owners offering sugary  
refreshment  
and a mind-blow. The whole yawning village  
rested on planks above the sludge, with  
ropes and ladders  
descending to where the boats were  
tethered,  
one marked 'Bintang Laut' and the other  
'Polisi'.  
This was a town subdued to its elements,  
and they were one, and it was without  
radiance, being toxic.  
Every fish in the sea seemed to be in the  
Chinese processing plant  
back of town, ready to be dismantled and  
spirited away  
for reassembly in another part of the planet;  
the fish complacently waiting, in solid frozen  
blocks.  
Walking there as one of the visiting party  
I suddenly felt uncomfortable, almost  
ashamed  
to be standing on the walls of Dis in this  
vortex of immensity.  
And there was the treatment centre, with its  
benches*

*and two sickbeds, the only emergency care  
in any direction.*

*But who would be left to treat, when the  
land of mud*

*sucks everything into the sweet shared  
slime*

*of shiftless penultimate floors and landing  
stages,*

*and the world is an improvisation, where  
our feet might be?*

*The ferryman was waiting there, among  
such base matter,*

*ready to escort us back, if not to civilisation  
at least to the district officers who spoke on  
our behalf,*

*though the sea had drained away, weighted  
by lunar indifference,*

*and left a vista of such stunningly  
featureless flatness*

*only laughter could absorb the infinite  
slippage.*

*Low tide, it seemed, in our world of excess  
and depletion.*

Wanam is a small town on the channel separating the island of Kimaam from mainland Papua, which I visited in March 2007. Medical resources in the area were almost non-existent except for the rudimentary hospital and dispensary maintained by a Chinese fishing company, and its facilities were very limited. It was the only clinic for hundreds of miles in any direction. This rather melancholy poem reflects my sense of isolation in the native immensity of Papua, where the locals are left to their own devices. Rural Papua's infant and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world, and much higher than those of the rest of Indonesia.

### Wanam, Papua, April 2007.

