

I WRITE WHAT I FIGHT



*I Write What I Fight*

Poems

by

Mark Heywood

## Acknowledgements

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## Dawn at Kalk Bay

*An auto and biographical poem*

### 1

1981 feels like the beginning of life  
Learning to run  
Finding my feet on a cliff-top path  
Picking up pace, suddenly possessed, the sun, the sea below  
The heavy green that edges the path, all a whirl  
The joyous sense that I can move, have wings found in legs  
Inspires me to a glide above Bridlington beach, pursuing the path to  
Sewerby Head, beyond it Dane's Dyke, an ancient landing point.  
It is a long journey from here to the quayside at Kalk Bay.

Now as the dawn sun pulls itself

Above the sea-line, in a moment of stillness, before the day's life breaks  
There is an instant for thought, reflection, nostalgia, recollection  
A half-life swells up, gathers its energy, cries out to be unravelled  
Find patterns, reinvent persons, discover connections.

### 2

What path is this that started above a beach that summer?  
Above sand colonised by hungry 'Wessies', flying flags, digging miniature  
castles  
Searching for 'fun'. And laughter. Revelling in hand-me-down habits.  
This oft repeated dance of the diverse.  
Some young lovers. Oblivious. Enraptured. Lost in a Larkinesque landscape.  
Some 'old ones'  
Digging for pleasures that were once easily found. All in a clutter.

What path is this that runs through towns and cities, people's lives,  
Along railway lines, through

Ancient halls and ancient minds, through poems, through people  
Across history and technology. Across continents, into fear and disease.

What path is this that finds beaches, connected not by shore but by sea,  
Bridling mountains, Honnister Crag and Ukuhlamba, connected not by land  
but by sky.

And why should a poem not echo a song? Affirm another medium.

A minestrone. After all

In this great conflagration of memory we find that ancient paths, long lost  
To the modern world, run still. Voices of centuries past, our balladeers and  
poets, nestle side by side, evoking nostalgia, or something new. All alive.  
All dead.

In my life, book-people came real. Reading Gordimer  
On the banks of the Cherwell, I found Turner's daughter in Burger's daughter,  
A shared exile intensified the discovery of love and its loss.  
Years later, an encounter makes me a friend of the aging authoress  
In a world that – back then – was unimaginable. From a world that  
Has become imaginary. Spires, libraries, a reek of history.

So too people with real lives become  
People in books (or that's what used to happen)  
It's odd to kick in the dust of history  
And wonder when it will end.

In the march through our lives, we cross our ages, make revolutions  
Often without note or notice. Girls grow into women, a century ebbs.  
Our poets pass, like comets that light up our lives, and diminish in a distance

But retrospect makes pattern.

### 3

Once upon a time  
I was a poet  
I learnt, when young, to fumble with words and find pleasure in their  
alignments  
Adolescent anxieties gushed up, letters jumbled like sea spray and became words



*Juvenilia.*

For me too, love found its form in language  
People who would love me not, I loved still. And could say so.  
Helen Hudson, lost in a photo that is lost  
Ever radiant in that instant  
Naïve to the power of her breaking smile, eyes always brightly ablaze,  
    with a soft laugh  
And a sharp tongue.

Helen, at first the subject of private poem-drawings  
Later, albeit briefly, a lover  
A body and smile whose contours could be caressed.

It was, or so it seemed, the newness of life and love  
A late century's calamity of sounds, smells  
And emotion. A century later it's a fug of memories being unwrit,  
    occasionally jolted to  
A surface by a sight or a song:

My generation, like ones before and after, found anthems,  
Meaning and being in song  
Then the radio, the record, and, Johnny-come-later, the video  
Made it nearer. We bought excitement and immediacy in a new album  
Its cover shiny and seductive  
Already knowing some of the words it would unleash  
Shiny, like an illicit porn mag, or a packet of fags.

In those days, and probably these,  
(Although in expired-youth I can only guess)  
We integrated and dissolved our beings  
In others, who spoke better on our behalf  
As we, young livers, jostled with each other  
Across darkened and smoke-filled floors.

I am a child of Margaret Thatcher, Arthur Scargill, Steve Biko, Breshnev,  
    Greenham Common, Hector Petersen, Chernobyl  
Sid Vicious spoke for my contempt:  
The sharp riff, the fuck-this, the fuck-that  
*Quadrophenia* epitomized my alienation

The plectrum marking out a slow syncopated electric wail  
Here by the sea and sand. Loneliness  
Blondie's resonant sexuality,  
(Twenty years later still sexual, as it will always be)  
Carried on a voice of derision  
Made my life electric and new  
Bob Marley spoke for our hope.

Many years later I learnt that Robert Nesta made common cause with the  
Clash  
Dreadlocks and Mohicans, spoke unity to rejection  
But, with calm melody, Bob ordered the chaos  
'Words got me the wound and will make me well', said Jim  
Before he died.

4

Once I was a rambler  
Conscious of trying to emulate Esteesian wonder  
Seeking poetry and to rediscover, a century later  
In nature's drums and sirens, the choirs of change,  
That raucous silent symphony that you heard, and she heard, but we missed.

In a darkening field, enveloped in shadow  
You can be Hardy or Brontë  
Sassoon or Auden  
Attuned to and overwhelmed by the shadows cast by dusk  
The loneliness that can still be found in a too-busy world  
The terrifying depth of fields that have weathered all of time  
Dumb yet all embracing. Permanent but encroached.

In my head  
I hold the breath that blows between mountains  
The vision from a peak, where all is below, and all is above  
In my head I can  
Feel the sting of cold, clear streams that have run for all time  
Through boulder-broken lichen strewn paths  
Streams that run now (as I sit in an aeroplane),

That run even in my maddest of moments  
Run away from diseased streets, clogged highways  
Angry rats that gnaw at a material emptiness.

In my head  
Are lovers  
Still vivid, some lost and distant, or  
Draped and marked private:  
Thoughts I can't give words to  
Memories I can't give names to  
In this world  
That frenzies over love, but mostly ignores it  
Love's intricacy is overlooked  
Its unpredictability gagged by rules and rumours  
We self censor our emotions, amputate instinct  
Making love as predictable as religion  
And twice as dull  
In our world, intimacy must be stolen.

Why would you deny  
The beauty that belongs in fingers that tentatively reach, touch  
And on finding no rebuff  
Are soon enraptured  
Minds that meet, quiver, dance in not knowing  
But sensing, a communion  
The leap of faith as I touch your lips and tongue  
Tumble through your eyes, swim in our  
Quickening, beating, bursting feelings.

Strange beings are we, who deny our own complexity  
But celebrate it in others  
Our shrivelled moralists preach literature to beginners  
Claim alliances with its icons, hang learning like ear-rings  
But ladies and gentlemen  
James Joyce would not have been your *friend*  
Samuel Beckett would revile you  
Emily Brontë was your victim, and you are still her jailer.

These things I know now.

We used to write poems on paper  
 Ply our trade with pens  
 Many years ago, a chance meeting with Andrew Motion  
 Set off dreamy schoolboy emotions and wannabe poet ambitions  
 Dave Hughes, my teacher, warned how computers would  
 Erase our tracks.  
 Leave no more clues to the wasteland.  
 Hide our agonies. We forge our words, but leave no sight of the forgery  
 Polish without spit.

But words  
 Make more than love songs (and loves make more than words)  
 Words can well up like a late summer storm  
 Form clouds full of anger and pain. Put beside each other  
 They regiment meaning. Meaning-words make decision-words. Decision-  
 words forge life.

Once a pseudo-Romantic, a Keats or Coleridge  
 Then a punk-poet  
 Angry, anarchic, revelling in the shattering of false comforts  
 Yet afraid of it.  
 Celebrating anger and breakdown  
 Easy in poem or song, attitude and contempt  
 Dear dead Sid, icon to anger,  
 Victim of the inflated and fragile power of self  
 Alive and dead. Remembered but so forgotten  
 Clever bastards.

Next I was a communist.

Then poem-words, words that dance in the disconnect  
 Surrendered to words of intent, building blocks portending a new morality  
 Words of uncertainty gave way to words in uniform  
 Iconoclasm collapsed into order

And new heroes assumed the port of Mars  
Larkin gave way to Lenin, Marvell to Marx, Tolstoy to Trotsky.

Raine gave us Martians sending postcards  
But he never imagined poets in aeroplanes  
We poets are meant to be earthy people, bogged down in a laden past  
Anti-this and anti-that  
But a fine hindsight can be found above the clouds  
A rare stillness amidst the chatter  
That can focus our thoughts.

Up here, looking back in time, it seems  
We crossed the rugged fears of the last century astride red herrings  
Our eyes fixed away from the forces that were really redrawing our world.

From the safety of our homes we watched the wall fall, the square explode.  
Timid people become tremulous. Twenty years was a long time in our lives,  
A road from a different world. A road from boundaries,  
Certainties. Patterns (or so we thought). Black and white. Good and bad.

Back then, penned in by the cold of a winter's evening  
Ports of meaning were fewer and simpler  
'This is the BBC calling'. 'This is *the News*'.  
Those official oracles broke down the doors to our dreams  
Flayed senses that would prefer to be lost in love  
Discovering one-an-other, in dancing, creating, acting, aching  
Like icy fingers on a widow's pain they come as a dark reminder  
That the world we made, you and me, was not our own.

We wanted grass-green, stream-clear, clouds scuttling across clear blue skies  
A pantomime backdrop to you and me, and you-and-me and youandme

But with withering/wizening youth came choices.  
I chose to chase the bad  
Hitching instinct upon other people's theories  
I chose to stand by the miners, the Sandinistas,  
I fought in the battle of Wapping,  
Manned the picket lines of Cwymarady,

Shouted 'scabs' at broken bedraggled men  
Who crossed imaginary lines on cobbled streets.

6

As if it was all that simple!

But still, we chafe against the status quo  
Those of us that read, that imagine, that can imbibe ecstasy and agony  
See inscape and find epiphany  
How can you read Hopkins, and not care  
How the other half eyes the stars?  
How can you imagine the drudgery of Germinal  
Tread the road from Wiggan Pier to Diepsloot  
And not hear the murmurs of your own heart and dignity?

As I write, ensconced in a garden of peace that I have grown around me  
Secure in love, with peace  
And time to watch the peach blossom break through winter's grip  
Bringing a bit of pink to the brown highveld blight  
As I write, not five miles away  
Young children, capable of love and life and creation,  
Inhabit another world:

Diepsloot,  
Meaning *deep ditch*, deep indeed  
Deep in smoke-filled shacks  
Deep in lives that flee neglected lands to squat in a smell of promise  
Taunting, tantalizing, repudiating:  
'You are born on the wrong side of the fence, the railway, history'  
Equal rights.

In this topsy turvy ditch of stained and stymied life  
Where I am chained  
Held back from birth, I wonder  
Where shall I shit today, where shall I wash today  
How shall I protect my loves in a den of thieves?

'What is this black shit?' sang Serote way back then  
Apartheid's gone, but still this life lies unacknowledged  
Undrawn by the poets of post-apartheid post-colonialism post-communism  
Posted. Forgotten even by the early balladeers of poverty  
Who have moved on and now invent excuses for the rot.

Unnoticed too by the citizens of a wealthier suburb  
*(Dainfern*  
A post-apartheid construct, a new township, free behind its walls),  
Who can gaze through a haze  
Of gin-and-tonic and shack-city smoke  
At the soft contours, dusky silhouettes of another mountain range  
Oblivious to the middle distance.

These disparities dog our lives. And so they should.

7

Fast backward  
Once I was a freedom fighter.

This path took me from dreaming spires to skewered dreams  
From a city of imagination, ancient and alive, to a city of faded hope  
Vivid still the smell of piss in lift shafts, the rising damp  
Oxford to Hackney, Hackney to Hillbrow  
Grey areas both  
But in the cos-mix of late century London was a grey resignation  
Grey people painted into familiar grey paths  
The grey of the rain, the grey of the streets  
Canal grey reflecting on a grey grey day  
A sharp contrast with the grey of black and white  
Johannesburg, waking, mixing, moving, testing  
A time of plentiful life and plentiful death.

Heady days.  
In times of light we walked through darkness  
The rabbit holes of Alexandra  
Where cramped people in cramped lives

Were patrolled by kids in machines  
Where Casspirs roamed like overgrown cockroaches  
Protected by children with R4s  
That made them invincible.  
I can still feel the fear, white boy in dark city  
Moving between a casbah of shacks and scared life.

Hillbrow.  
I remember the day Chris Hani died  
I was standing in Esselen Street, talking to Titus-the-taxi-driver  
Brother of Philemon-the-gun-runner  
A current carried the news from person to person  
Spreading like a wave's ripple down crowded streets  
(Or a Hollywood earthquake).  
A week later, Orlando Stadium was packed  
(Or was it FNB?)  
And angry young men  
Wanted blood. Feet thumped stadium stands  
Crudely sharpened metal spears  
Rocked and rose to a crescendo of blame.  
That was the closest I came to the sharp end of anger  
Before being pulled to safety by calmer comrades  
Oh great irony, oh understandable anger.  
Amy and me.

8

Once I was a father.  
Death and birth came in the same instant  
A life in waiting  
Gone before it could find a path  
A person of possibilities and could-have-been beauty  
Is now a shadow who walks beside my elder son  
I know despair's depth, the agony  
The mind's incomprehension  
That life can be so fragile, the ice so thin.



Because I know death I know life  
Because I know love I know its loss  
Because I have lost I know your loss  
Motherloversisterbrotherchild of mine  
You are not just another  
Not an electronic projection on a TV screen  
Howling in the rubble of life  
Switched on and off on and off on and off.

Sarah, I fought for you because I felt for you  
Our first meeting found you shrivelled, cornered  
But I knew that poor as you were  
You felt maternal ambition and hope  
Knew love and the springs that feed desire  
Feared life quenched by a virus  
HIV, HIV, HIV  
Loves me, loves me not.  
Ronald, on the days that I find wings and fly  
Tread in ancient walkways  
Run on beaches as the day breaks to the waves' endless symphonies  
I know what you have lost.  
Charlene, I saw you die, imagined I saw a tear  
(Thought it was recognition)  
Slip across your eye. Half an hour later I told your friends  
Watched them cry.

This is not the plague of yesteryear  
The Black Death, the 'bring out your dead', the sulphur, the pox  
By imagination we live and by imagination you deny  
Extinguish names, hopes, millions and more  
In word plays, make an epidemic imaginary  
Because you won't count its victims.

But I know our heroes, they are ordinary people  
Not the giants that walk in children's history books  
But people with blood and sweat and semen, contradiction, uncertainty  
and torture.

Heroism gets sanitised in history  
Made black and white, turned into ants on a page  
Rubbed clean like a teacher's blackboard  
In history our heroes lose their vitality  
Life its romance, mystery, uncertainties  
In death they become  
Plastic toy soldiers in other people's wars  
Unable to answer back.

9

I am a child of Dylan and Chaucer, was taught how words can make rancour  
and rhythm  
A child of Shakespeare and Serote, McGough, Morrison, LKJ, Cobbett, Laatje  
A poet born of poets, left alive in a making, breaking world.

Our predecessors lived lives confined  
Could only imagine an othered civilization  
Dwelt on the past through its artefacts  
Some still choose the parochial  
Write as if poetry can only be found in the dour, grey surround  
Trapped within the boundaries of suburb or city.

But today we can fly. Find cities and cultures in hours.

Some months ago  
My path put me in Nijmegen, not a place I would have visited in imagination  
Nijmegen is an ancient city, ugly and unpartisan in its post-war make-up  
Once it was flattened by bombers who mistook it for another city  
Ancestral imaginations were obliterated

Here, my wings lead me among spring-waking trees,  
I dance in soft air of near-summer, inhale the faint smell of  
lichen-covered bark  
In the dark, dark shadows of a roman wall  
– one part of history missed by the bombs –  
A bird sings above, could be a cuckoo or a sparrow  
To me its sound is its significance

Its name irrelevant  
One voice amongst endless generations, ever spawning, ever singing,  
Ever inhabiting tree boughs, registering changes to its world  
By when the leaves come again, and go, and come and go  
Ever oblivious forever to world change  
Not hearing the conversations of generations of lovers  
Talking of war, talking of peace, of haters, of writers, of royals  
Or football players.

Our paths are a mixed and contorted myriad of chance  
Chance meetings that upend the best laid plans  
An echo carried to me across years and continents  
Can change life and lead us here  
To my autumn and your spring  
My million browning strands of grass, miraculous and spontaneous  
Waiting for fire and later for rain  
Correspond with your awakening  
Hard soils growing soft, old seeds or new  
Making new life.

It is like the middle of life  
Midstream in a frantic world  
Splendid in depth and imagination  
Terrifying in stupidity  
This world where we bomb our histories  
Love's labour is lost to the bombers  
Paths to our 'civilization'  
Physically erased, left only for story-tellers and teachers.

We are giving up our choices  
To the crudest of our kind, those that rob our world's riches  
Rake and rape our civilization  
Fill private galleries and shelves with our glories  
Make still objects of things that once were full of mystery.

We have crossed to a world of dying words  
Live in a world where we stop reading and yet read more  
Computer read, phone read  
Suddenly everybody's reading

'Text' without text  
Equations, abbreviations, all sorts of nyms  
The end of reading.

10

How do I end this when  
We have not  
    Reached  
The end?

Endings and beginnings  
Connections that have only just introduced themselves  
You and I tracked our lives at a distance and came together  
Before the summer's end

Now we peer at past and present. Wonder about futures  
In this morning's calm, undented yet by the roar of cars  
Repeating yesterday's path, foreshadowing tomorrow's  
Caught up in a blind forward propulsion  
I can gather up the past's present(s) and study the storm.

Beauty. Poetry. Lies. Hurt. Dignity. Mountscapes. Politics. Death. Memories.  
The locked gaze of two people in love. Interpretations. Choices. Subjective  
deceits. Self justifications. Small men (and some women) making decisions  
that damn us all  
Which path?  
Into love and away from love?  
Towards beauty but away from dignity.  
Into loss, stench, amputation to find respect and dignity.  
Choices.

All our preachers and politicians tempt us with another epoch,  
Persuade us that we sit on the cusp of a new world  
The last advance to order and equality, a world where all would  
Have the freedom to revel in our imaginations – or religions.

I doubt it.

I see manipulation, justification, cover-up.

I will find my morality in the poets, not the politicians  
People who sing from the margins  
Know the best of life, clawing to get in keeps everything alive and important  
We keep alive love and its springs, instincts unbent by traditions  
The power to create  
In a mish-mashed world

And yet in all this we know  
That there will be another Kalk Bay sunrise, tomorrow, yesterday, today  
Every day. Occasionally I see it, most days I don't.

Oh shimmering sea, your beauty is seen  
In a million places – by those with eyes –  
Breaking waves dapple the sunlight, shimmer on denial  
Beauty, imagination, history  
In a city, whose edge you adorn, gazing over a sea that has not changed  
Are all the threads of life  
The waves' chorus sings in the day's new sun  
And make loud the  
Echoes of lives lived and unlived, bouncing against time  
You missed poetryloveimaginationopportunityequality

I didn't.

## Voices

South Africa, 2007  
An interminable chatter of voices  
As loud as birds building nests  
As unintelligible

Seeing life from a car window  
Caught in the daily surge to the city  
Nestled up to people we never know  
(One settler one car, sometimes more)

Each enveloped in the voices  
Nodding in warm assent  
With the secure person's lament  
About crime, the traffic, the arrogance of (black) politicians

Loud voices, unquestioning about why  
They are so confident of their right to complain  
Or how they became so loud

It makes you wonder

How would our world be if the chatters  
Saw something other than their own humanity

Try this for an unlikely refrain:

'I saw a hungry child this morning  
Or a man amputated by unemployment  
In a society that needs so much work.  
What is it to stare in the windows all day long?  
Something must be done.'

'I passed something gloriously called an "informal settlement"  
Saw, but could not smell, the foul leakage  
Making ponds of piss. Seeing a school child  
Winding her way round the stream

I asked "where is the dignity?  
How do you shit, or love, or dream  
Or raise a child in a shack?"  
Something must be done.'

But listen in vain – this is not the bird's refrain –  
And wonder why knives and stones  
Are the way so many people's voices are heard.

## Browning Tea

1

She drinks her tea brown  
Says it should be the colour of the earth.  
He watches the clouds move in her eyes  
Sees openings that lead to blue skies.

They talk about futures and pasts  
At mid-point, for him at least,  
Life suddenly seems too short  
Choices have to be made now  
Or choices made decades ago defended  
He leads a life as dangerous as literature  
And as real, keeping his soul alive.

Quick storms gather, white clouds shadow brown eyes  
Burgeoning tumbling winds throw up  
Great cumuli tall as skyscrapers in the sky  
Which break against invisible currents of the mind.

He refuses the ordinary. She says she does too.  
But what, she asks, is ordinary?

He says it is all around, dampening, bringing early death  
He talks about a woman eyed on the plane  
Face etched and painted  
Greying slowly into oblivion, predictable and porous.  
If we could do a post mortem of the brain  
We would find paths foreclosed in youth  
By the patterns and expectations she gave in to.  
An ordinary life and fattiness of the soul  
A body left to overgrow  
Will be gone without glory or note  
Even by herself.



Meanwhile, mean men, cluttered on kerbs  
Stand daily with minds unexercised  
Denied your opportunity to grow, to feed on pasts  
To mould a present where the danger is in you  
Selling CDs, cellphone connections, plastic toys  
Meaningless pieces of paper dished out to the disinterested  
In return out for a paltry living.

Plane lady, bus woman, ordinary mother or father  
Sheltered suburb dweller  
He says he is no god to judge  
But cannot help see contrast  
With the legion lives denied by birth and position  
People you do not think about  
Because you have no perspective on yourself.

## 2

Our unease reflects the autumn's frowning  
Green to brown, the whimsical withdrawal of life  
Raising questions about life itself  
Vapours of unease, like a ground mist, obscure the path  
But this is better than dull predictability.

He points to the future she avoided, married into a routine  
Progression to old age, tripped only by things accidental and inevitable  
Cancer, the death of those that brought us to this stage  
Giving birth, accumulating possessions and a drab past  
Living in fractions.

She wonders on immature rumblings of unease  
And how they linger  
Early rebellions in the soul, expressions of love  
School girl defiance.

He imagines the pretty vivacious one  
That others wanted to be, one so easy to trap in the ways  
The world wants her to act

She says she refused to be caged  
Grew older, developed beauty and resonance but kept nuance  
Didn't allow self confidence, the blessings of beauty and opportunity  
To rot the soul.

Her prescience, he thinks, is borne from  
A rejection of surfaces that has become an art of thought  
The way she analyses whimsy, contour, malice, even love.

At sixteen she destroyed her love letters to stop others acquiring  
Half-painted pictures of her soul  
Since then she has traversed continents and centuries  
Treating as living what many see only as paint on a page  
Recalling sentiments and emotions, snared for eternity by poets.

In two thousand and something she took him on a tour  
Together they visited Reading Gaol, crossed vast seas  
Made gentle love aboard a packet ship, fleeing from dusty Columbia  
Backwards they went, finding meaning in centuries old  
Expressions of love, discovering the circuits of the mind.

### 3

They both feel that there is fog in these days of blue  
The trumpet of politics masks a silence  
A centripetal pulling-in of the mind  
Seeking shelter from nothing obvious.

She asks him what this feeling is?  
He cannot answer with poetry  
He thinks it is the turning of an age  
It is revelations of life and about life

In jest he says: Marx said quantity gives way to quality  
Ages implode, horrors accumulate  
Marx sought god, but the atheist teleology lies in shards  
All we have left is pieces  
And no heavenly order.

She says he looks for government  
But she sees only myriad repetitions, self-serving, uncoordinated  
Meetings on meetings that crush ingenuity and initiative  
And draw the life from the poor.

This thing is too short, the decisions too great  
Dylan will die with songs unsung, new words  
Are being gathered, arranged, coincidences wait to mug us  
There will never be time enough to follow the thoughts  
Or lives of every person past whose life attracts us  
To discover as new something that is old  
Find life and leads to life in the dead, old words that still  
Surface with the intensity of the storm  
That is now raging in her eyes.

## Bob Dylan will die

As I write

Somewhere out there Bob Dylan is alive  
Thinking, sleeping, drinking, reflecting  
Living life's inescapable mundanities

Our lives overlap, yet do not cross  
But Bob Dylan will die and so will I.

It is odd to have  
So many memories of a person never met  
A life so entangled in another's love  
Painter, poet, writerman  
I have borrowed your poetry and made it my own  
Taken words so perfect and given them to others  
Found strange echoes of my own loves  
Emotions so unique  
And ordinary.

Your originality makes me think  
We are a species condemned to endless repetition,  
Working at the edges of our prisons  
Chipping poems and philosophy from the limits of our genes  
And imagining that there are no limits.

Death is not what it used to be.

In centuries past our bodies and voices were robbed  
By the heart's last beat  
Whether young, or aged, already noted, or folded away in a future-present  
A fortunate few lived on through language  
Passing imagination to unknown futures  
Living on in a name that historians constructed lives upon  
Paper trail voices inhabited by unknown others

Their ghosts inflect our lives  
Or at least those that seek ghosts.

But what will have died, when a voice lives on?  
Not a monotonous drone  
Its own cast, able to mount its own performances  
Through a million vocal inflections  
Witness to the contempt, the comedy, the self-parody  
The groaning of an age.

As you said, back in '66:  
"Play fucking loud."

Bob Dylan will die.  
And so will I.

## Elegy on Dying Young

The problem with dying young is that you never learn how to live  
Your glory comes in tragedy, the most final of final acts, decision no revision  
Cannot erase the fact that it is  
A full stop.

Amy goes down, made ashes within days  
Leaving her surly demean, centrefold punk sexuality  
Four minute snatches of anger and instrumental equations  
Songs to haunt those that hear more than melody  
Keys to your soul –  
But the lock is now broken.

Did you think that because technology  
Can keep so much of you alive  
That it does not matter if you die?  
Did you think  
There might be beauty in the blaze of death?  
Your autumnal bathos, preserved forever dank, in pictures.

Kevin is resuscitated two decades after death  
Celluloid making him a friend and inspiration to those who never knew him  
Is this vindication?  
The beauty. The nobility. The defiance of death in death  
(Perhaps reinforcing dark thoughts of death in someone with a similar  
anguish)

But in those missing years what did you miss?  
Lost was the opportunity to find fullness in life  
To follow literature as it ravel and unravels  
Happen upon pasts  
To find true love

for such a thing there is.

## May Blue

On early winter mornings  
The sky-blue seems as deep as blue can be  
The first frost has chilled the air  
Compacting life  
Browning the grass overnight  
Making it susceptible to fire

The weight of autumn with its browning ambivalence  
Its neither-here-nor-there-ness  
Has given way to decision and clarity

After months of rain the last flowers  
Linger on with fast fading foliage  
Isolated now and exposed. The dandies.

Sparrows dance round bird tables  
Ignorant of time-creep  
Suddenly made dependent scavengers

Choices must be made  
Stands taken against foretold inclemency  
Wiser stronger birds have set sail for the north.

## Nature Reserved

I find love and death  
In this brown land  
Its many hues of yellow  
The cracked dryness, the dust  
The insect-busy earth and great vacant sky  
The evensong of the cicadas, slow  
Constant, rhythmic,  
The sole sound, surround.

We are safe.

Standing on a balcony  
Of a designer rondavel  
All mod cons under a roof of thatch  
We stare across this land  
Harking back.

A weekend retreat  
Wrapped in ourselves  
So easy to love and live.

But

Hidden in the blur of acacias merging in space  
Is another story.  
Amidst the animals scurry men and women  
Crossing a border, fugitives  
Darting from tree to tree  
Parched and hungry  
Much like the old world war two  
Heroes, except stripped of the romance  
Not white, or royal-this or royal-that,  
Not 'the resistance', not Steve McQueen



Just people crossing dusklands  
For water, a job and the faded claim of 'a better life for all'.

I wonder  
If the new century's tourists  
Germans and Americans, lingering by shimmering blue pools,  
Lethargically contemplating the night's game drive,  
Know that one man's beauty  
Is another man's concentration camp.

## Palliative Love

I don't want  
A sorry-for-you love  
Anaemic, ungiving, reticent

Don't give me empty 'I love you's  
That take from me more than they give  
Sap more than they support

The love I want (from you)  
Must scream and jump and be spontaneous  
It must bounce and bang  
Alliterate and run  
Call up poets and challenge them to a match

Then, it must relish moments of quiet tenderness  
Slow, soft, us-ness, pronounce whispers that grow into cries  
Show tentativity that turns to certainty  
Unison, wrapped and rapt  
Then youneeon

So, rather put it to death than play a half-life love  
Make a shadow that mocks its corpus  
Live with the memory  
Than die with reality.

## Wandering Berlin

I live amongst the deprived  
A free colony  
Busy and blind, in a rush to make itself  
Where untended scars made by the torturers  
Haunt the present  
Where gun slingers, knife wielders, wife beaters  
Shadow our freedom.

Some build walls and think they have saved it.

They hide the things we would like to see.

Why do we no longer wander in the sky?  
Or seek solace in the marvellous workings  
Of long gone beings, still traced on  
A city's architecture? Imagine the energy –  
The imagination that inspired the  
City builders, slaves to a future wonder.

A day's journey from Johannesburg  
Can find a million other worlds  
Where old and vast monuments finger  
Our capabilities, intricate figurines, sculpted from stone  
Take us to the old-imaginary  
Fire our minds with a vision past and present.

In streets that jostle between old and new  
In a peace that, you say, I know, was made in others' turmoil  
With wealth sucked from our world to theirs  
I debate with a woman I love, tease  
Want to provoke your laughter, as we walk these oldnew paths.

*Tiergarten*, now oblivious to its witness  
'Look how dense trees and leaves that drip to the ground  
Can still create a forest-dark in a city-centre'  
'Look how a half moon reflects on a city's escape'

I wonder  
    how long  
        the peace  
            will last

That same moon, that tonight we claim for us  
Was there when this city was built, and burnt  
Shone through other  
Loves,  
Shone for the builder, will shine for the breaker.

But tonight does it shine for us

And our wonder?

I wander.

## Jasmine Dreams

A late August wind  
Brushes this broken land  
Lifting the fragrance of jasmine  
Making the heads of Namaqualand daisies  
Nod agreement with each other.

Agreement with what?  
That winter is over  
That the breaking buds of the peach signal something new?

Small patches of green break through bough-grey  
They too flicker in the breeze, consent to the fumbling touch  
Of the warm, dry  
Dust-laden wind.

What do they say  
As they dance to the spring's communion?

These questions have no answer:

Seasons have a predictability an immutability an immanence  
That their observers do not  
We are lucky to be alive  
It is not the frost, the storms or the lions that we survived  
But the consequence of our own ugliness  
The pollution of poverty  
The rage that has no season  
A contradiction  
A sign that nature has broken down?

But they do not notice  
The questions  
In the fleeting fragrance  
The sensuous purples of the yesterday-today-tomorrows  
Isolated in their gardens or holiday retreats  
They celebrate by turning the sod  
And locking the gates.

## How can we control our souls?

I can move my limbs  
Choose action and movement  
Make a kick or a cry  
Respond to signs of danger and of joy  
Talk.

But I cannot control my soul, so prey  
To thoughts unbidden, fears, jealousy  
Irrational and unsound, driven by love  
Beyond control.

Passing thoughts – like dreams – must be bottled in the instant  
Or lost  
How did that phrase compose itself, from what wells did it  
Spring?

And, why suddenly so mortal  
So aging  
And losing  
So backward looking  
And desiring.

## A Martian sends a postcard home

(with thanks to Craig Raine)

*Fourways Crossing. December 24th 2007*

If you arrived here from a different planet  
It would be hard not to see  
What we have learnt not to see.

To reconstruct we deconstruct these strange inequalities  
That are so graphic in our 'malls'.

She asks:

Who are these hoards of overfed, overconfident people  
– mostly white –  
That cruise supermarket alleyways, awash with cash  
Plucking goods like fruit from a tree, filling baskets.

Listen I say:

Different versions of '*So here it is Merry Xmas*'  
Cast everything in a nostalgic glow and make us believe that  
All is merry.

Then watch:

They roll their trophies back to gleaming chariots  
Each in competition with another, shining, ready to roar  
Traffic-jammed in car parks.

There appear to be no eyebrows raised  
No rub, no conflict of emotions  
By the contrast between black and white  
Is this normality on this planet?

The shop slaves give an impression of happiness  
To each a different uniform  
– that can't hide class or race –  
Supplicants, lined up, ready to wrap,  
And wish you a merry Xmas.



My friend from Mars wonders out loud  
About these exchanges, the absence of discomfort  
About purchases that are available for the white ones and not the blacks  
About whether secretly the black ones also yearn  
The ability to reward a loved one with a shining token.  
Surely they too must have children, or lovers  
Have a shared desire to give?

Is there no iniquity in this? she asks.  
I wonder.

## Trains and Thoughts

Sweet friend of mine  
It's two am your time  
I trust you're asleep and  
You will not hear my muse.

Strange world I found today  
This is the USA, smart and shiny  
In parts  
But with a grey side  
Almost as apart as apartheid.

Looking from the window at  
Dark blocks, hollowed-out buildings, once proud  
Now abandoned to leer  
And threaten  
As the train pushes a path between them.  
Crack houses.  
You can almost feel the disenfranchised kids,  
Smell the guns.

Funny to feel scared in the first world.

\*

On another side of today  
A strange encounter with academics  
Producers of knowledge  
That has no social use  
Clever little rats, scurrying around  
Each other's entrails  
Each trying to be bigger than the other  
Mincing words  
Making me feel small.

This was not how intellectuals used to be  
When the world was small enough  
To give ambition to ideas –

Enough to make you miserable.

\*

But then, in the same place of learning, minutes later  
I listened to proud ‘negroes’, survivors of Tulsa  
(A massacre I had never heard of)  
Old people exuding wholeness  
An architecture in the archaeology of their memories  
(Not like the disposed beyond the train’s windows).

Don’t lose the wonder  
I thought  
These ninety-year-old raconteurs tell of a mildewed massacre  
Recalling minutiae of life  
Things seen, not recorded, but etched forever in the psyche:

A six-year-old whose doll’s dress was burned  
By the Klan  
Made me think  
That history doesn’t forget.

A warning to Mbeki.

\*

Darling  
In this old world  
Our new world seems so small  
This city seems bigger than our country  
Mixed, confused, diverse.

\*

Most days I take the train  
Into and away from the city  
Twenty minutes down the line  
You come upon another country  
Where browned leaves, soggy in an autumn rain  
Lie like litter embalming a country road  
That is at peace with itself.

Here children roam, smug in Halloween  
Safe in a parent's bosom  
Joying the season's change  
The first bite of an approaching winter  
That will empty the trees of their summer green  
Make all bare, ready to hold the first snows  
Of winter.

I wonder about these disparities.

\*

Fear and freedom  
Are joined in an aging city  
Of red brick and ancient masonry  
Dignified, yet built by slaves, wrenched and wretched  
Overseen by 'founding fathers' who stole their freedom and  
Dreamed of their own.

This oldnewgreengreyfreefearful city  
Foundry of dreams and nightmares  
Makes me remember my own  
Want to add them up, stacked side by side  
A monument to hopes snatched  
A birth denied.

\*

In another train, days later, I snuggle into anonymity  
The world wrapped around me by a newspaper  
Discovering things I never knew

I am carried with consent but not volition  
Back to the capital.

I expect to sneak in like an intruder  
But it is not like that –  
You ride the river of ordinary lives.

The same stream that carries ‘commuters’ in and out the world over  
Most are unthinking  
Carried along in daily rote-ine.

I do my business, talk the talk, try to tell people of my world.

Hours later I wander E Street at night  
Big buildings create shadows in their own empty rooms.  
Looking up at lighted apartments  
So many me’s and you’s  
What are they composing?  
Dreams of a better world, or pigeon-hole life plans  
Holidays and purchases  
*i* this and *i* that  
New technologies bringing home worlds they can never enter.

\*

I wander on, making little packets of poems  
Stuffed full of a bit of Patten or Larkin or Dylan  
I think of you  
Getting ready to wake, as I  
Pass a man on a street, just like my Jo’burg  
Preparing for the night, wrapping blankets of tarpaulin  
Offering to shine my shoes.

The streets are cleaner here, less mean, less threatening  
Almost inviting.

‘No thanks’ and I give him a dollar  
Wish him ‘good luck’  
(What you would say?)

Hoping words are as good as money  
And make you sleep better.

If I were braver or less tired I would take him for a beer  
Try and find out about that life.

\*

I walk in the night time glare of Capitol Hill  
Peeking like the moon, between blocks,  
Grand and imposing, not polluted like we imagine  
Cleaner, more forgiving than its inhabitants  
Irredeemably a statement about dreams and equality  
Not knowing the society it grew under its nose  
(But then does any cathedral?)

I learn that societies are not the black and white cut-outs we make them.

In this belly there is warmth, ordinariness  
The plod and rustle of going-your-own-way  
The preoccupation, loves and angers  
The 'buy you a beer' as we talk about this and that,  
Camaraderie  
You find it anywaywhere.

I pledge not to give in to other people's paintings  
So easy to believe  
Strange how we have been captured.

You will wake soon  
I hope you slept well  
My love  
I see through you.

## Echoes at Ntabancobo

### 1

There is nothing majestic in these hills  
Majesty lacks dignity  
Carries the carbuncles of riches, hides the internal decay  
The hypocrisy, the deceit.

No, these hills are not majestic  
Their grandeur denounces royalty  
Their design decries class  
Moulded instead by the timeless pelting  
Of rain and hail, intense heat and cold.

As we scurry through our polluted lives  
These hills, cliffs, valleys, hidden pools  
Are oblivious to the names we have tied them to  
They speak for themselves, whatever our language.

Looking at 'Rhino's Peak' (I know no better name)  
In humility, I can only observe  
You finger the sunlight, dally and divert it  
Let clouds cover you  
Making you severe and opaque, cross and threatening  
Before you pierce the blanket.

### 2

These ancient mounds are lumps of rock  
Riven with the work of an age-old process  
That forged valleys and streams  
Bleak winters, harrowing winds, unrecorded, unnoticed  
Not seen by satellite, or anything else, carved caves out of the sandstone  
Patiently, grain by grain

So that in later ages they could be peopled by 'bush men' who wiled away  
hours or days

Drawing crude pictures that mirrored crude animal lives.

In ancient times rocks tumbled down steep slopes  
Not noticed, blind and not conscious of the wonder  
They would evoke in unknown generations seeking escape from  
The carvings of modern life.

For me these rolling hills  
Can be unmoved, immovable,  
Their green and grey and blue  
Are just the colours I have been taught since childhood  
Their shapes, no more than forms floundering in a still empty landscape,  
Unpainted yet forever present  
Not present but forever past  
A deep blue sky is merely deep and blue  
These things we know  
We cannot escape depth, or the blues  
It is all around us.

But when infused with other streams  
These hills roil our thoughts  
Become a place where  
Our emotions and imagination run wild  
Weary retreats for a pelted mind, revive imagination.

### 3

With you I see a rainbow, a strange flash of new colours  
The sky's necklace, awning for the grey cliffs and their shifty shadows.  
With a joined imaginary I notice  
The pastel multiple greys of a cloudburst  
As if nature is mocking its mimics  
An impression in space, here and gone, in my eyes and passed to yours.



'Look at the stars, look, look up at the stars!'  
Look at the crashing sunset, the mix of activity  
(Not made by me or you, or technology or TV or god)  
Truly independent and uncaring, exultant only because we make it so  
The slow crossing of the day's last rays over crags  
That are lit up, clean and shiny after an effervescent and fleeting storm.

I see shadows slide across a mountain side and wonder.

4

Seeing eyes see better when they make a soul's narrative  
Establish a communion with another  
One which is  
No more religious than these hills are  
Majestic.

## Garden Castle

For days we have circled  
This spot on the landscape  
Viewed it from different contours and corners of the valley.  
Now coming down from the hills  
We encounter a different picture.

Hidden in the trees  
We come across the rape of Mzimkulu  
The inheritance of the conquerors  
Nature now prostituted to profit  
Moulded and made ready-made.  
All threat, unpredictability and vulnerability erased.  
Instead littered with swimming pools, golf courses, satellite TV  
And leagues of black people  
Obsequious and silent, as if still enslaved,  
Servants to whimsy.

Ntabancobo  
I look up to you  
You have seen it all  
Untouchable but powerless  
After days of feeling your rough hew  
The vulgarity is like the strongest wind  
The smell now of entitlement.  
Welcome to planet of the apes  
Dainfern from Dainfern.

This journey is over  
In these few days, apart but together, we have trudged paths of the mind  
Led by slender partings between the grass and the hills  
Beyond us, this world continued oblivious,  
A friend gave birth, politicians were murdered  
And life and nature moved on.

## Walter Booth

Walter Booth

1860–1930

Who were you?

Soon a century of walkers will have passed your grave

Marked on maps, yet unpretentious,

A slab, silent and secure

Sitting for as long as forever lasts

(Or until you fall prey, ground under a developer's holiday cottage)

Framed in the embrace of the view

That may have brought you here in the first place

(Ironically, the same one that will draw the developer).

Now part of the landscape, not an intruder

Watching (and part) of the clash of natures.

Conscious of your presence I affirm and condemn you

Think I know the thrill

You found in this spot.

Imagine the slow gathering of bricks,

The raising of a house, the planting of the seven steadfast oaks

That have outlived you (and feel the poetry in that)

They hang today over walkers' huts

Keep your witness, for those that think about it.

Around you and me I see the landscape that a later

Lack of imagination chose to call Garden Castle

Why 'garden'? Why 'castle'?

I see a wall of cliffs, hemming in a valley

The strange shapes made by sandstone that point to the sky

Arbitrary carvings of rain and snow and sun, behind us,

Beside us, the Mzimkulu river. Above us, Mvuleni, Mvulyana, Ntabancobo.

\*

Walter Booth

1860–1930

So still now, apparently so innocent,  
Were you an invader, did you steal this land, whip its inhabitants  
Or did you come here to escape the ugliness  
That grew around you?  
Were you the benign idealist of imagination  
Equipped with the best of life, Shakespeare, Keats, Coleridge  
Finding an affinity in nature's claim to neutrality and its own logic.

Or did you come with conquerors?

Did you pass quiet evenings, stooped before this painted landscape  
Whilst, beyond this valley, another logic eked out its geography  
Made the map of a century, the geology of a country?

Were you alive while  
Dispossession emptied these lands, made the people raw and thin and  
diseased  
Made mountains of men and women  
Who left the solitude of corners like this, unconscious and unintending  
That man's nature would make them carry a mantle of history.  
Time passed, but passed you by,  
Witness to more seasons than we can imagine  
Whilst behind those walls wars were fought, families destroyed  
Rape and rupture ruled days and years, white trumpeted over black  
Imagined destiny, claimed Gods. Good men and women starved in prisons  
While your streams continued to bubble and flow  
Your stars still shone, passing full moons danced with different types of  
shadow.

Walter Booth

I leave you, with questions unanswered,  
Climb through Black Eagle's Pass,  
To discover new views.

## Of Ducks and Dusk

Each night, as far as I know, the ducks return  
Taking their signal from the slant of the sun  
They wing in from the east, riding the dusk  
In groups of twenty, they circle,  
Each lap slightly lower, as if tracing the shadows of the fading sun,  
So that you can hear the beat of their wings,  
Feel the effort to battle with gravity (like cats with wings)  
Then brake and drop, suddenly lost in the arrival of dark.  
The tide's global sweep has pushed away the light  
Now only a meaningless chatter, who says what and why  
I cannot know, neither do I know their journey's origin  
Or whether, when or where-to they will depart in the morning.  
These things I have not observed, or looked for.

I know now the day's routine that blinds us,

The shunt to the city  
As the sun's first waves poke light back to being  
Triggering a billion small unseen actions that make a whole,  
A society, an economy,  
Each part feeling alone  
Rarely conscious of the connections that make the merry go round  
Go round and round and round.  
Viewed from above, this river of shiny, insulated humanity  
This habit-driven surge to office or factory or home  
The taking-up of tools, the drive of the hours, most actions a rebound  
Each acting out what it thinks is its part,  
Seems as inexplicable, as unconscious, as the ducks,  
But devoid of its beauty. These things I am part of.

Standing alone, soon too to be engulfed by the dusk  
I am just an object of nature, a rock or a tree  
I do not interrupt or intrude, my thoughts have no motion  
Do not break the air like a stone, or the silence like a shout  
But all the worlds are alive and warring in my mind  
The ducks make me think of the need to slow down, depart the race,

Protect that unknown electricity  
That makes us capable of thought and feeling and observation.  
Life is too short to forget that the sun sets every night  
And, as it does, makes theatre  
That a vast array of lights shuffle on to the night stage when the blue or grey  
    departs  
And shine down through our transience,  
Making our impermanence glow.

## Poem with No Title

In youth, so many years stretch ahead that they can be discarded  
Like loose cards thrown off the table in a fit of anger, easily re-gathered  
The one left under the table  
Not noticed, not needed

But as older age approaches, the steady march to oblivion  
Becomes more pressing, making you want to squeeze each second  
Giving meaning to words that once upon a time lacked resonance  
Larkin's reminiscences on sex,  
The advance of the fools

The lengthening of memory  
And the shortening of life

## Good sir, good night

It was a mistake to put you on the boat  
A surrender, a premature departure from what you knew  
And those that knew you too. At last  
It placed you wholly alone with your thoughts  
Pushed by wind further from love, tormented by the heavens  
You drew so well, mocked, marking a journey of slaves.

In the bosom of a God you quietly denied  
The god you did believe leered at you from a mantelpiece  
Fevered dreams traced the inconsolable decay of  
Bodily instruments that can make your thoughts fly,  
A view on to marble steps showed you heavenly aspirations  
Carved for ever (or so it would seem) into stone.

Were those letters really unopened? Why?  
Did the sight of my hand burn your soul  
Make life unrequited, nearing death – a failure of love  
Once we were divided only by a wall, and the suffocative *mores*  
Of those who think they know best, sublime petticoats  
You were, you wrote, too prudent for a dying kind of lover.

You told me you would, one day,  
Give our correspondence to Murray  
It would tell of our blood love, a story  
In words undressed, of love unfettered  
Free except from the shadow of death  
But those letters were not known even to you.  
John, what I said was nothing new, but a last  
Good night.



## An Afternoon in Villa Serbelloni

Contrary to my expectations, the snow  
Stayed on through the early spring  
And on the last day blue skies made way  
For a grey that brought rain over the lake  
And a blanket of new snow to the peaks

From my study window I can think of  
Shelly two hundred years ago  
Looking over the same array of breaking greys  
Wind-bent olive trees, clouds drooping down on the lake  
Draping, wrapping the surround

The mountain passes are closed to me today  
Given back to wind and sleet  
Empty but for cows with bells, the unheard  
Jingle-jangle cock-a-doodle-doo  
Silent, subservient

From this stone perch above today's  
Grey lake, the sun is shut out. I thus command  
The valley bowl, ferries that shunt the lake  
Stone houses, ancient and observant churches  
Are all within my clutch  
I conduct them like an orchestra

From here I can poke at the  
Still smouldering seconds of yesterdays  
Explode them like an atom  
I could forage for an age  
Journey their endless possibilities  
Oh, there is just too much!

A second given over to travel up a mountain path  
Surrender to wander  
Is a second denied to a quiet garden  
Resplendent, flower smell, bee buzz, breeze blush  
A micro-world oblivious and intent

A second given to one thought  
Is a second taken from another  
To write a poem or play with prose  
To enter the world of some ancient author  
Or make new with words what already was before

This cloud that I watch break has no mind  
Hanging, falling, forming shapes, mixing colours  
I am the man with easel  
Watching its work  
Wondering on its meaning

I should write now, not wonder  
Go back to putting pieces together  
Faltering with what is unfathomable  
Meaning out of reach of knowing  
Chased by multitudes yet unyielding still

We have so much common meaning  
But ultimately we revert on ourselves  
In this view I have more stories  
Than I could ever hope to tell  
Who built that church?  
Who lives in the villa across the water?  
Why is the sky so grey?

The music abounds me  
The books beside betide me  
The histories that envelop me  
And so finally I make quiet surrender to life  
In a world that lives on.



