

What we leave behind

What we leave behind

Nigel Winn

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Foreword

Nigel Winn was born in 1950 and died in 2006, leaving behind a family who loved him very much. He also left behind a collection of poems, a short play and other pieces of writing. He wrote actively during the period 1996-2006, and during that time studied for a BA in English Literature at the University of Lincoln, where he gained a First Class degree. He went on to teach at the university, where he was popular among students. Following his death, colleagues established the annual Nigel Winn Memorial Prize for Creative Writing.

The poems included in this collection were often dated, revealing two main periods of activity: A collection of 38 hand-written and numbered poems were prepared in late 1996 to be sent to 'Daphne' for typing up. Those account for about a third of the collection. It's unclear whether they were received by Daphne because no typed versions of those poems exist. A number of them were sent to poetry competitions and a handful were selected for publication. A further third of the collection are also hand-written and date from the same period but are unnumbered. Later poems from around the turn of the century, exist only as digital files and account for another third of the total collection of 103 poems. Some of the earlier poems were bundled by Nigel into a folder with a note to say that:

“Among other things this folder contains poetry written by me that I am rejecting. In doing so, I feel as though I have had a good wash, when one was needed. I am glad I wrote it but I cannot bear to see it around anymore, read it or have anybody else read it. I really must take more care with my writing in the future. Do not throw away. Could have some novelty value in a hundred years or so.”

Well, it is just a decade since his death rather than a hundred years for the poetry included here to be read by anyone else and we think it holds more than just novelty value and at the very least tells the story of a difficult but fulfilling and reflective life. The sixty-four poems that were selected for this book are not only the better poems in terms of their form, but were principally selected on the basis of their biographical detail. As a result, this is not a *'Best of Nigel Winn'* but rather an attempt to draw a broad account of his reflections and observations on life from what he left behind. The poems are arranged alphabetically by title

rather than thematically or chronologically and where dates have been included in the title it is because that was how Nigel presented the title, with the date referring to the year of the poem's subject rather than when it was written.

In his accompanying letter to Daphne the Typist he asked that she "watch out for my spelling...also the correct use of apostrophes." In my preparation of this collection, I have done as requested and made occasional corrections to spelling and even fewer to punctuation but otherwise the poems are exactly as written.

Joss Winn, 2nd June 2016.

Africa

Where you left your
impression on the bathroom
floor it looked like
Africa, to me, then faded.

But you're still Africa
to me. Deep in the heart
of your lily, dark and hot,
Africa to me. An almost

willing cargo on my Slaver
dank and hot. A childlike
laugh from you; a tear from me
dread and hot, a shape

that fits into me, and
disappears, like Africa.

Air supremacy in Autumn

It was the time of the year, a lot of spiders about –
house guests with their own agenda –
casting intricate webs for bloated flies.
The corners of a fallen house,
a breeding ground for God's little monsters.

And yet, mansions enough in *My Father's House*.

Slam, shut – windows, doors, we'll 'smoke 'em out.'
All evil spiders, all diseased flies.

We dwell in an autumn, like no other autumn,
for scary spiders and lunatic flies.

And that's the truth: An obituary

Derrida is dead and that's the truth!
And Superman passed the moon a minute
after midnight. And so the text is read –
another day of newsworthy death.
Deconstruction Daddy, crippled Kryptonite,
too soon laid to rest in the land of logic.

Annoying Tit

Aggressive attitude. A bloody nuisance to his neighbours. Out and about at first light, performing his airborne dance and peck, peck, pecking at the window pane. In a trance of rage, jealousy and territorial rights, blind to what others clearly see – the cause of this unreasonable behaviour – a feathered facsimile, reflected in the glass. What a loony! A short break to recuperate, rub his throbbing beak against the bark then back into the fray. He's got it planned to threaten himself like this all day – till darkness falls.

'Take some time out, give yourself a rest, give us all a rest. Find some nuts or grain. Tomorrow, the weather could turn. Your reserves are low and you know you're not at your best.'

But no. He's at it again! When he acts this way you can't talk to him – peck, peck, pecking like there's no tomorrow – this guy is such a pain in the arse.

A smile for Christmas (1966)

Sweets in bed, so my Mother said
were, "For being good".
And a mother who carried her son
from pillar to post and to one
begrudging relative after another,
Was only trying to make life sweeter than it was,
The only way she could.
Dental hygiene came low on her list of priorities so
out came the 'Crunchie' bars and 'Turkish Delight'.
A welcome ritual for me;
Sweet pleasure that came with the night.

But years on ---
She could never understand the grief,
That a mouth full of rotten teeth
caused an adolescent, trying to impress 'The Birds'.
So I learned a technique of talking tight lipped,
Guarding my smile and mincing words.
Until, at last pride overcame fear
and in the second half of my seventeenth year,
The price had to be paid
and thirteen appointments were made,
At the Dentist!!

And as the dentist's nurse led
me to the 'Great Black Chair', she said,
"You should have your new teeth for Christmas".

And her smile was like pearls from the deep ocean bed.

Babylon

After the sun: the burning;
then post-coital embers
turn ash before sirocco.

What I've done, like our fathers,
is put a match to a map of Babylon
and watch you burn beautiful.

After the night: the coldest;
the horizon's littered with
a thousand conquests.

What I've done, like our children,
is put a gun under your pillow
and tell you it's loaded.

After the day: the longest;
my shadow licks at your open doorway.

Battle scarred

Unrestored, they abide quietly on the workshop floor
waiting for a new life after years of abuse.
Survivors all, pushed and dragged, leant and trod on
victims of incontinence, shine and structure all but gone.

A piano stool, sheet-music-less, soon to have an upholstered hat –
Liberty-print, or some crap like that.

An acned mirror with blistered face, frayed rope behind its back –
it almost broke – it nearly broke.

That tuneless box, gutless and unhinged, with peeling veneer and
loose lid.

A debased chair, low in the leg, stuffing hanging from a wounded
seat,

still smells of smoke; reeks of smoke.

A crippled table, missing a limb; a shattered frame with jagged glass
stabs a sepia-faded photograph – a war hero?

Wasn't it someone just like him

that let ash fall then rubbed it in to that stinking chair?

Just sticks and stuffing, glue and tacks, but candidates for
restoration

waiting there, where the air hangs heavy with shellac.

Beastly appetites love strong meat

Beastly appetites love strong meat –
We are what we eat, not what we should be.
The beast in me, the beast in you,
There's something in the meat,
Can't you taste it?

We are what we eat, we are what we eat,
We are what we eat, not what we would be...

Best and worst (1979)

“I’ve seen her at her best and I’ve seen her at her worst.”
And as we walked out through the labyrinth of ‘Prefabs’
that passed as a hospital,
These were the first
Words that Bob said to me.

Her best to him were exchanges that took place years before.
Gently poking fun, teasing, bridging the generation gap.
A middle-aged woman and a long haired layabout,
Acceptance of one another and more,
Bringing her into our world:
An introduction to Bob Dylan.

Her worst to him was now, frightened and drained in a hospital
bed.
Her ‘sixties’ soul and sparkle had deserted a sinking ship,
Yet for me, the son, facing the pointless struggle that lay ahead,
I was glad of his irreverent wit,
To lighten the load that pressed down on me.

So what is best and what is worst,
A prisoner of a cancer cell
or a prisoner from the first
breath taken?

Some people are born with a ‘Life Sentence’.

Best times

Those messing about times are the times I like the best.
Not those serious, decisions about career, kids or house times.
But those light, playful, happy interludes,
Those times, we both feel most at rest.

And not those important big occasion, proud moment times,
Those long awaited days that allow no time for play.
It's just those silly, rude joke, funny face times,
We need to keep us close, from day to day.

Bird table

So many unscheduled flights:
tumbling, swooping in from
grey, blue bright, touchdown
take off in fright, callous cat
round every corner.

For crumbs they live their lives.
Spat on, shat on from a height
under endless skies of blue
that stretch by satellite
to my table.

So the pecking order survives
and scatters wide in wounded
flight. I throw crumbs.
All is silent. I lift my eyes.
Overhead, in circles

flies the raptor.

Budgie (c.1970)

When my Mother worried about the lack
of oxygen
it wasn't rarefied mountain top air
that caused her concern
or an attack
of respiratory illness robbing her breath
but a suggestion from me:
"Mum, you need some company."
I, being aware
she missed us.
"You should get a Budgie."
To which she replied:
"I don't want one, using up the oxygen."

At the time she gave me a laugh and often since,
I've conjured up a mental picture that I'll carry to my tomb:
A heavy breathing, barrel breasted, monster Budgie
bursting at the cage,
Perched in the corner of the old living room.

Butterfly

About that kiss you left behind, that mouth outlined,
that printed, identikit rose-wound on tissue;
lying amongst the bathroom waste
– lips slightly parted.

You blew a kiss in the glass and then took flight,
the new day embraced, just a lightweight
paper-kiss of you left. But what if? What if
it were really the last – your last daybreak kiss
in front of the mirror...?

And with a glimpse of long emptiness ahead
I let it sit, feather-like, in the palm of my hand –
nail-wound on me – then fold into a paper square
and close tight. There...

I've caught you! Like a butterfly.

Cack-handed

Three years to make a teapot stand
crafted from the hardest oak.
A slow start to an unlikely career.
Regarded as a hopeless case by the woodwork teacher,
whose comments echoed in my ear:
'If there's a difficult way to do a job, boy, you'll find it.'
Cack-handed with a sharp chisel,
a danger to myself and not a hope
of becoming a woodworker.

But that hexagon of oak took pride of place at our table;
functional, durable, though stained with tea
so, with my ambitions not yet depleted
I discuss my plans with the woodwork teacher:
To build a 'Long Playing Record Cabinet', due to be completed
before leaving school the next summer.
And as he barred my way to the timber store, he hid his enthusiasm
from me; airing misgivings about the project.

Where are they now, those childhood forays –
that unjustified optimism for woodwork production?
The woodwork teacher encased in oak?
Years of plans and schemes gone up in smoke;
an unfinished project now rendered obsolete
by the timely introduction
of CDs.

Wood shavings fall to my workshop floor
as I contemplate a life I wasn't cut out for.

Concert lovers

Four empty cans, a half filled plastic glass
abandoned, with the concert not yet over.
A space, that had been claimed by now
absent lovers, violated by the crowd.
That episode closed forever:
the litter strewn grass.

They were not Romeo and Juliet
but seemed an awkward pair,
those open-air concert goers
sprawled on their patch of green.
Him, his neck marked by some condition
she, who struggled to conceal
beneath her coat, legs that were bare.
And me, observing, them unaware,
was glad they'd found each other.
I guessed there was honour between them.
But then, with a touch so light
to his scarred neck, she stood
and he, stroked the skin so fair
to warm her pale legs; and to his feet.

Both disappeared through the crowd.
Who knows why, to who knows where.

Dave's Drill (1962 or 1963)

Dave's Drill: a plan for a five-pound note.
Not much change
so, a compulsive purchase, a rushed decision?
No, calculated, well engineered, like the drill
but allowing no time to gloat,
Over endless possibilities for spending a fiver.

I had spent mine a thousand times and more
in my imagination.
Sweets, guns, knives, more sweets
so, it was with breathless anticipation
that I watched the envelope from my Father
flutter from the letter box and settle to the floor.

Would it be Scrooge or Father Christmas this year?
We never knew.
An unburdening of guilt or a tightening of the belts?
The envelope could appear
or not;
Was Christmas on this year?

Yes! Christmas having been duly recognized
Dave's Drill was bought.
A 'Black and Decker' financed by a 'Home Wrecker'.
But, for me a sort
of anti-climax – A loan reluctantly extended to my Mother.

Feeding the Golden Pig

Not much of a life for a *Pig o' Gold*,
to be impaled on a carving knife,
disemboweled of cash, relieved in part
of my brother's stash. Only to be put
to the blade again the following week.

My brother, always the one
who played the part of the dutiful son,
fed his golden pig with loose change,
regularly, from his trainee's wages.
And he must at first have thought it strange,
how the pig lost weight during the week,
but with mild protest he fed it again.
And this went on for ages.

But an agreement, unspoken,
between Mother and son,
not worth the paper is wasn't written on,
nevertheless existed. Instead of asking
for a loan, come Tuesday or Wednesday
when no one was home my mother
would ascend the stairs, carving knife in hand!!

And, with surgical skill, she would extract
from the pig undigested swill, then taking
note of what she owed, carefully stand
the *Pig o' Gold* back in position.

And my brother kept feeding the pig.

Fire on water

We must never let the fire go out
But keep the dancing flame alive.
Fire and water, floods of water
So much water, so little time.

We pay a lot to fuel the fire –
Screaming kids, a lost career.
Flames can burn cold, blue not gold,
When we count the cost the cost is dear.

But if ever our flame is just a distant glimmer
And our passing glances take a chilly turn,
We must rush back to where the fire started,
Jump right in and risk the burn.

The risk was always worth the taking
When we walked on fire and water too.
And didn't give a shit for all that,
Just your love for me and mine for you.

Forcibly removed (1962)

A Morris Oxford pulled up outside
it had arrived:
The day of reckoning!
And, like parting a snail from its shell,
I was prised from the safety of mine
to be delivered into the hell
I knew as school, by The Attendance Officer!

My Mother's plea for clemency went unheard.
"He's a sensitive boy, very nervy".
These were the words,
Describing my disposition, I had grown accustomed to,
During my three months of absence from school.

That lack of bladder control in the night,
Had been investigated by the hospital and
although I put up a fight
Against the injections, it was better than going to school.
But negative tests and X rays,
Signaled an end to 'Halcyon Days'.

Those days being home with my Mother all week
had finally come to an end.
Me: Forcibly removed.
My Mother: Losing a weekday friend.

For my Mother's sake (1997)

Two photographs side by side now on my desk
occupying quietly the same space.
Brought together on my terms to be placed
in such a way that memories, can be laid to rest.

Their little pieces of history laid down in me,
Now, in innocence from black and white they stare.
The time is gone to judge the wrong or right, just where
The final resting place should be.

For two photographs could never a family album make
and to me framed upon a wall would tell a lie,
So close between two pages of a book, and for my Mother's sake,
Just for her, a place the years cannot deny.

Go into the rain

Titanium rods fell from the grey
with a light, yet steely determination.
And so the worst in you, a terrible flowering,
bloomed one summer's day.
Foul seeds germinate in forgotten corners –
your nemesis in-waiting, stirred by a rain
that has no mind for the seasons.

But the best in you will face it down.
Believe me! The towering mass finds
shoulders broad enough to bear the
pain. I've seen it! So go into the rain.
Though the waters may yet cover the Earth
in this, the most inhospitable of regions.

House clearance (1995)

Financial Times in piles, arranged around his easy chair;
Easily accessible.
Ancient cigarette smoke hanging invisible on the air,
Lifeless.

'Fablon' used in devious ways to decorate
Unworthy, sad pieces of furniture.
In an attempt to create
an illusion of renewal.

And, resting uneasily on shelves, ledges and in the bookcase,
Inherited religious books and cassettes,
Not having been discarded but given a place,
In this strange scheme of things.
Tangible assets or hedging bets?

And so, two sons survey the futility and move amongst the gloom,
Turning over a father's effects,
In a distant, dead not living room.

How and when

How will it end this life and how?

In a blaze of glory, witnessed by adoring fans and then the final bow?

Or perhaps a bolt from the blue!

In the midst of life and love and rush and hope

And me and you, and me and you.

Or will it drift into the corridors of pain?

With the visits to and fro and the kind young men

And women and what they never say but what they always know –
and the visits again and again.

When will it end this life and when?

Today, tomorrow next week before the next election,

Will it be the cat first?

That cat has outlived some good men and that cat has outlived
some good men.

Will it be a Sunday a summer's day or night?

Will the bills have been paid will the jobs have been

Done will the paint be dry will the time be right?

-- Sometimes the time is right.

Never mind the weather that cat can go out tonight!

How do you love me?

How do you love me? Let me count the ways.
With a fist to my face and twinkling eyes;
With bruises and burns; with sensitive sighs;
With spitting and hitting; with physical grace;
With a knife to my neck and amorous cries;
With split lips and spite; with thoughtful surprise;
With scratching and screaming; with smiling for days.

There's a void, shit-daubed on these walls of mine
By a God with a love of graffiti.
They're cleaned with cruelty, erased by pain,
Then a quick loving polish reveals me.
I am washed by the cunt of the litter.
I am soaking in love that is bitter.

How small

How small people's stories are.
No sooner started than they are read.
Fragile, fine elastic,
Stretching, springing back,
Between living and dead.

How small people's houses seem.
In little rooms they spend their lives.
A cellular existence,
Bees in hives,
Buzzing.

How small people's coffins seem.
Big people, larger than life people,
Seem to be reduced at their demise,
Into a convenient size
for packaging.

How small.

If the shoes fit (1995)

What kind of man should wear these shoes:
Shoes for stepping out in, shoes for kicking up a fuss.
Bought in desperate defiance of old age and illness,
now hardly used.
Should I wear them or give them away;
Can I choose to walk so close to him yet,
not follow in my father's footsteps?

Can I choose? Would I wear them, or they me?
Hardly used, barely moulded to his shape;
Anonymous in any walk of life. Yet,
Shoes on or off, walk or run, can I really escape
the mirror image for all to see:
A man undeniably
In his Father's shoes?

I wait for you

Every day is the last day,
that's how you seem to me –
a strappy sandal by the door
and slip away you do, like velvet,
through my iron-glove hand.

Pass over me. Tanned skin
draped in linen, velvet/blue,
you come and go through my mind;
And after the sun's kiss quick you
are to kick aside that loose shoe
as slip you do, like a hot secret,
neath cool sheets – baring just a
foot to the moon and me.

And every day I wait for you.

Kennedy

I asked: “Do you think I am happy?”
And after a pause appropriate to the gravity of the question
you answered: “I think you **try** to be.”

Too frightened to be happy – that’s me.
An alarming early morning news item confirms it –
I’m a prime target in a conspiracy theory.

And you – you made a declaration of joy on my behalf.
But I couldn’t believe in it.
Well I wouldn’t, would I?

So, I asked the world the same question.
And after a pause appropriate to the effect of gravity on a lead
balloon,
back came the answer –

No!

Then how can you expect me to be?

Laugh or cry? (1995)

“Don’t knock them off.” He said
My father, staring wide-eyed from his bed
at a blank wall on which only he could see,
What he called ‘little insects’.
My brother insisted, “There’s nothing there”,
Sweeping his hand across the bare
surface of a nightmarish landscape,
Fixed in my father’s vision.

We had been called into this, his last domain,
To share his thoughts, horrors, pain.
And during more lucid moments discuss practicalities:
Stocks, bonds, investments and wills.

Could this really be the end? I couldn’t believe it
Of a man who, if he couldn’t take it, wouldn’t go, wouldn’t leave it
for others to squander or invest unwisely.
That, for which he sacrificed everyone he ever knew.

“No don’t knock them off,” he was lost again,
His cigarette ash falling helpless, like him, onto the counterpane,
That caught the ash of a dying man,
Allowed the luxury of smoking in bed.

“That Solicitor charged me five hundred pounds, don’t use him”,
This disturbing thought now brought him back to solid ground,
While fumbling in a briefcase for papers that had at last escaped
him,
And were by him never to be found.

What reaction should I give, what did he expect from me?
As he, confused, counted up the money his death would set free.
Should I say: “Thanks for dying Dad,
I knew you would come up trumps in the end”?

When he died, when he finally coughed it up,
His estate paid for it all, even the sandwiches and flowers.
And I searched myself for a reaction but couldn't find one,
Yet (feeling ashamed) remembered an episode of Fawlty Towers.

Miss Gatsby: "You're very cheerful this morning, Mr Fawltly."

Basil: "Yes, well one of the guests has just died."

Long long clock

Old long clock, standing, watching. An ancient time tomb.
Taken from a draughty hallway in the wake of death
to a crowded auction room,
And sold into slavery for another life time, and so continue
to bear solemn witness to the achievement, futility, stupidity and
wonders,
The monumental breakthroughs, the monumental blunders
of the past three hundred years.
Dark, hard oak case. Behind the long, long door.
Fine light dust of peace,
Dark dust of war.
Wind up,
Tick tock.
Run down
Stop.

Making the most of it

We're here to make the most of it
Nothing more than that.
The trouble is for most of us
The most of it is crap.
Now when I say the most of us
I'm talking global now
Of the most who get the least of it
And those who wonder how,
Just how to make the most of it
While knowing that it's true,
That the most of what's on offer
Is held onto by the few.

Still, we're here to make the most of it
Make the most of every day
And most of us make the most of it
By looking the other way.

Mum's jargon (c.1967)

CANT. Noun...

As the definition in the dictionary goes:

A tilted or sloping position. Insincere talk, jargon.

Then why was this the word my Mother chose

To describe our house?

Her command of the English language was more than fair.

But in order to describe the shabby, damp, yet clean interior,

She sat in her fireside chair,

And called it "This bally CANT".

This exclamation usually came

After much consideration, during periods of quiet emptiness.

No radio on, no paper to read, just thought,

And the conclusion always the same:

"What a CANT of a place".

A CANT of a house that defied all womanly endeavor,

To make a comfortable home to be proud of.

Only jargon? Maybe, but definitely sincere.

Yet, as my mind's eye travels back to survey the peeling walls,

I know now. Never never

Was a word better chosen.

Nearer to God

Malevolent, mutant blowflies –
two fighter bombers –
drone in figure of eight,
looking for somewhere to vomit
now that the war is over.

Oh, to be in England now that summer's here.

A cat freezes at the corner,
he wants to show them liberty –
that mouse family – those at number 3
flowerpot, in the shantytown
once ruled by a cruel dictator.

Oh, to be a Gardener now that democracy's here.

Fat slugs beneath the hostas
have stockpiled WMD –
a security precaution – in undergrowth silos.
Enough pellets for a thousand years,
yet so near... to God in the garden.

Oh, to be in Gethsemane now that night draws near.

No distance

I am both of you and you both of me.
Not two plus one or one plus two
But one, split into three.

I am the starting point from which you roam
Shifting, restless, changing shape
Searching desperately for a home.

I am the anger in the mirror you see.
Confusion, misunderstanding, imprison us alone
But the whole will set us free.

I am the laugh never far away
Stretching around the world and way beyond,
On the second of the minute on the hour of each day.

I am both of you and you both are me.
Not lightly or seriously, or even consciously
But constant – something that will always be.

I am the sadness and the fear
From which you run or stare hard in the face,
The trembling hand, the stifled fear.

Of gods and kings and underlings

The King is dead! And those who'd witnessed his demise said, 'he didn't suffer.' Here in my arms this formidable, mousing machine still warm, soft and limp and glassy-eyed, mouth slightly bloodied... Befitting royalty –

the King had subjects, many. Custodians of hunting lodges that cleared up after his 'little indulgencies,' prepared and kept a comfy bed, or two, about the place, should he call and grace them with his presence.

For oft by day, though mostly night, King's Gate would swing and clatter. He is arrived! A peasant of the hedges, about to be taught a sharp lesson: drawn and quartered at his leisure. But all the time, looking down, we gods decide what killing to prioritise.

And the privilege we giveth, we taketh with a 4 wheel-drive. To appease our Great God Tarmac, another sacrifice, the blood of furry mammal. To be followed by an inquiry; then the tributes; then the accolades bestowed upon this, his house, posthumously.

Yet... the king is really dead; so with due respect is buried. And a memorial is raised for all who visit to pay homage. But the king... The king is dead.

Long live the scruffy blackbird! He touches down and cocks his head and shits upon the hallowed ground.

In memory of *Archie*. (2000 – 2003)

Our mountains

May 1997

Twenty six years living together, and I've never known how to work the washing machine – not exactly a clean record when it comes to equal rights. You've carried me. And I've let you take responsibility for a crap job. A woman's lot: of dirty socks, hankies and underwear – accepted (most times) with humility and never, not once, have I walked toward that machine with serious intent to clean up my act.

Is this what love means – to climb:
that twenty six year mountain high of dirty stuff,
and your gift to me of freedom from the washing machine?
You give; I take; but we both build mountains. It's enough to know a mountain hasn't come between us.

August 1997

Today, I had to learn how to work that confounded thing. I fathomed out the dials from scant instructions and loaded it with your sheets of pain. Meanwhile, on a hospital bed you lay – with a mountain to climb – contorted in a salmonella dream. You had seemed possessed when I left you to that sanitary space, your personality all but lost, on this, at last, my day of reckoning. Now, disdainfully, I load this alien machine to eradicate every trace of your possessor.

Wild unpredictability has set this scene:
You – grappling with an invisible foe.
Me – gazing at a whirlpool sea
where salmonella sheets toss in their watery grave;
and what we've done and what we've been;

and the bitter-sweet taste of what we've yet to know,
before the cycle is finally over.

Over addressing

Over and over the same letters,
her pen she would impress.
And what started out quite legible,
became obscured, scrawled, a mess.
And the effort that was spent
on the envelope, in the hope
that it would find the right address,
was misplaced.

So her letters were written and posted,
the address always worked on the same way.
Not satisfied with letters written
at a stroke, she would devote
a disproportionate part of her day,
to additional emphasis where none
was needed. And I'd ask her,
"why do you do that?"

"Do what?" she would say.

Ripping into Archie

And I read poetry, stupid poetry.
And for all the world the day
that'd wrapped itself round me
like an abrasive, boa constrictor
now lay at my feet – old Arch,
stuffing knocked out, motionless.

And I read poetry, stupid poetry,
that wouldn't pay for the tea a
plumber drinks on an emergency
call-out. But, after such a day,
it had to be Brooke's 'Great Lover.'

These I have loved:
My first hard-on to explode!
You.
60's optimism;
Us!
Homemaking with hope and a hammer;
Our misty, morning first-born;
Moving on –
The incredible Luke.
70's hair and an earring –
my incredible, lost youth...

Yes, and more:
Thatcher's dream –
the business me that never was.
Scholarly me –
bequeathing my student loan to the nation.
Academic me –
headhunted by Oxford and Cambridge:
the gutters needed cleaning.
Well...it's a worthwhile job.

All these have been my loves, and much more.

But Archie, threadbare old dummy,
stuffed bore,
I can't stand you!

Rooms & Minds

A shaft of sunlight laden with dust
streams like a comet through the glass
into our room. March sun lances our bed.
Ten thousand particles in that line, for us
a taste of space and infinity – a time
to be at one with it all... Then peace.
Then rise, crash the light! And without a care
a thousand souls are displaced into the shadows
of crumpled bedding and our minds. Then move on
and attend to the new day in duller places...

Right now, in rooms & minds all over the sphere,
the faces – the refugees of lost-love –
look out from the shadows.

Round the bend to the corner

'You're no Charles Dickens,' I was told. And I agreed.
But secretly I thought to myself, I just could be...
I'll read up on the old bugger, educate myself, get a degree
and be the 21st century Dickens – sort of literary Damien Hirst.

Let's see... I'll chop up some old favourites. Heart warming
character abuse – Mr Pickwick pickled, unrecognisably.

Yes... I could do a lot worse. I've done worse... That's it!
I am Charles Dickens! Charles Dickens is me!!

Yours truly, in anticipation,

Charles D.

Poets' Corner,
Westminster Abbey.

Seeing the funny side (c.1967)

Coal Gas, that insidious house guest.
Lurking in pipes of lead, beneath floor and overhead;
A tap turned on without a match
just a whisper of escaping gas:
‘This way out of your hopelessness.’

In the days before natural gas,
The oven stood in the kitchen,
A dual purpose appliance
a triumph of domestic science and
suicide on tap, for the masses.

What a gas, what a convenient gas,
When used in threat, designed to get
a wayward son’s attention.
I knew she didn’t mean it; she knew she didn’t mean it
So I quickly decide to point out the funny side
of suicide:
“You can’t do that mum, we’re all electric.”

And a smile from me, she could barely hide.

Shareholding (1965)

20736, “Don’t forget, they will always pay
for my funeral, you needn’t worry about that.”
So my mother would say
about being a Shareholder.

20736, “Don’t forget, to give my number.”
Another entry in the book and then on Dividend Day
she would collect.

20736, “Don’t forget, don’t forget.” Etched on my brain
from the cradle to the grave, living and dying the Co-op way:
On ‘Appro’.

20736, “Don’t forget”. How could I?
My first job from school, at the Co-op!! --- In Menswear.
But the writing was on the wall; outdated stock in a dismal display:
My attempt at window dressing.

20736, Lest we forget, easy to forget
that worthy concept: Profit sharing, people caring;
Gone into decay. Would Blue stamps ever pay
in the end?

20736, I forget, I forget just when
that dog eared share book was thrown away.
Long long, before the day
of the funeral.

(Appro: Taking goods on approval, leaving a deposit)

Shouting at the wind

Let's get together before we all die
and there is nothing left of us.
Just fading memories for those swimming with the tide.
And try
An acceptance on mass
Of all those silly things that
Confirm our limitations and failures. And with relief,
accept that really nothing ever conspired against us
but was readily taken.
Then agree. That to ask why?
Is like shouting in the wind.

Smart boys

Designer war with a slick name, flick
through the channels for the best shots.
Smart bombs, smart boys, hot shots in the air
can't miss, never miss. Mustn't miss
Coronation Street, put *Desert Fox* on hold.

Not weapons of mass destruction
or men with thick brown moustaches
or women with dark eyes appealing
or children with olive limbs missing.
But armchair voyeurs, waging war in news-slots
and the smart boys' shock and awe on the box.

Sonnet, Y2K

She was in him the twilight:
shapes against the sky and
traces, like splits dusky pink,
neither dark nor bright.
Her wounded gash ran deep.

“I’ve told you before, write
what you feel, not what you see!”

“OK, I won’t forget.”

He shivered, the sun had slipped from view
and barely taking breath,
she was asleep. He knew:
there are only two things to discuss
with little in between
and one of them is death.

(The close of day, 1st January 2000).

Special words

From certain people everyone should take a word.
A special word to carry but not reveal.
Not empty words like the 'good' and 'great' but
a word like **bucket** to remind you they were (are) real.

From my father I took the word 'bloom.'
From my mother, no disrespect, but 'stench.'
From my brother an unusual one, 'scragging.'
From an old friend a fishy one, 'tench.'

Then from time to time these words I recollect,
when the donor's gone or just impossible to see,
I summon them to roll around my tongue –
words-in-waiting in my vocabulary.

Still unable to accept

On hearing of a tragic death
We reflected on our lives bereft
Of any certainty or reason.
Still unable to accept
The years go by and so increase the debt
That must always be repaid.

So we found consolation in our fashion
And buried our grief deep in our passion
Trying desperately to gain immortality.

Strong meat (a case for vegetarianism)

To those in the habit of sinking their teeth
Into dead meat, blood red meat, will learn with relief
From the abattoir spinal cords are now whisked away,
That delicacy is not on the menu today.

And to those in the habit of eating sheep's brain
The word from above is you ought to refrain.
So whip off the head and dispose of with care,
Avoiding eye contact and that sheepish stare.

And to those in the habit of showing their pets
Much love and affection with visits to vets.
No need to worry from where comes the heat,
The power stations now are running on meat.

And to those in the habit of using for feed
Sick animal puree, garnished with greed,
Can study their books and weigh up the cost
Then set out in search of confidence lost.

But to those in the habit of using their brain
And have a strong preference for remaining quite sane,
Step out of the entrails – do it today!
And give back to the animals, what we've stolen away.

Sub-continental shopping list

600 million
doesn't sound much when you say it quick
does it? 'The poor are always with us.'
What's on your shopping list? Clean water or

an operation to remove the scales from their eyes, or
for their shack, an ornament from Marks and Sparks –
not expensive but made to last, or, a dam – that's a good one.
But satellite T.V. would enrich their lives and a

tiny, tiny mobile phone, with a long memory
no need to memorise all those numbers, all 600 million.
Or a packet of condoms, giant size – that reminds me:
does anybody know where I can get vanilla flavour?

Give them a square meal - 'Every little helps.' - don't you agree?
And do you want to know what kind of guys write crap like this? -
Rich ones! (not me, of course)

Well, somebody's got to do it.

Sunday driving

Crows enforce the law and chase a kestrel off their manor.
There's an irony in that, I say and 'yes,' you agree,
possession being the law and all... And we drive on,
through a leaf storm, then break the canopy into a big sky
and pass places by where nothing much has happened
since they laid the road a hundred years or so past.

Just there an empty fag packet ('Woodies'), 20,000 days now gone,
was dropped into a furrow to nestle beneath the sod.
The green and brown insignia bled, carton was consumed by
worms,
and the foil leaf unearthed on a Tuesday, June '72,
by a treasure hunter out with his toy. Remember?

Tell me this matters: what we leave behind.
Treasures beneath; black-cap birds overhead.
A thousand years ago I buried my hoard, watched over by a rooks'
court,
then walked toward the horizon leaving my rag-tag family to the
wolves.

Our god is their judge; and a cursory dismissal buries deep. So...
Wake from the dead! Historians, you're history!
'So will **we** be,' you say, 'if you don't watch the road.'

But tell me all this matters, though, what we leave behind –
like this crowd of letters cajoled to stand in line.

Sunday the 27th

We love on Sundays.
You might say the other days
lay beneath those heaps of
discarded clothes; the best place.
Crumpled up recriminations.

Bury days, past and future,
until doubt pitter-pats at the pane.
I'm thinking: 'How it went –
could have been just seventeen.'
You're thinking: 'That beach – Spain.'

You feel the chill and make your move
to the bathroom, I follow, it's washed away;
we dress ourselves in crumpled clothes.
Later, we walk in the rain.

Super heroes

To stand in the mirror and twist up my mouth
as a small boy,
Mimicking my absentee father, who a rule unto himself,
Was born with a hair lip.

“Operated on by one of the finest plastic surgeons.”
Was the story my mother told;
And me looking for a super hero was sold
On the idea of a fast car driving icon,
That flashed in and out of my life.

Far too busy and preoccupied
for a wife, children and besides,
The business wouldn't run itself.
So, after a fleeting visit from the busiest super hero alive
I would roll up a piece of card into a cigarette shape
And looking in the mirror
Put it in my twisted mouth.

Swine! (a Lincolnshire story)

When first to Lincolnshire we came, – as southerners – twenty five years now gone; we knew it all so we thought and during the course of our DIY rampage across the fens, we came upon – a vendor of bathroom and sanitary fitments; from whom we bought an avocado bathroom suite. But the transaction couldn't be completed on the day at his business premises, and we were directed by phone – or was it a sign, I really can't say – to a house on the Grantham Road.

The purveyor of bathroom suites opened the door dressed in a less than business-like way – with cardigan, slippers, and absence of tie – he greeted us and said casually: “We've killed a pig today.” “A?” – “We've killed a pig today.” – “Oh; ok”.

Two vegetarians stood at the threshold of the semi-detached slaughter house, and considered for a few seconds... Did he do it in cold blood with his slippers on, leaning over the bath? That cardigan looked unscathed, and his was the face of innocence – he was happy he'd had a good day. He'd made a killing. Avocado bathroom equipment; a dead pig – what's the difference? We paid him, arranged delivery, and went on our way.

The Beak

He broke sensitive boys that old bastard
Our old headmaster known as 'The Beak'.
If Shelley, Byron and Keats had been his scholars
He wouldn't have allowed them to speak.
He would have marched them around to the quadrangle
And then caned them all, six of the best,
Then made sure they had cold showers after rugby
To serve as an example to the rest.

For emotion was a sign of weakness
And weakness undermined his rule,
And rules were more important than boys
In the regime we called 'our school'.

The difference (c.1963)

Silver and gold bought and sold.

The sign she had seen so many times
walking to and from town.
And on her finger the plain gold ring, the only thing
that had never left her,
Since being slipped on, by him.

But more than that, a sign of respectability,
Two sons born in wedlock.
And for all anybody knew, a husband who
had passed away prematurely,
A loving father.

Yet, a plain gold ring turned in thought, could be a sort
of practical solution
To this week's little crisis.
Yes, she would take it in, she would cash it in
a substitute ring
can always be bought at Woolworths;
No one will know the difference.

Cash for Gold, broken promises sold
for a miserable fifteen shillings.
But, when I saw on her hand a gold coloured band

I knew the difference.

The little misunderstood

Wasps hunt in pairs on the coast.
Aggressive blokes,
in pursuit of sickly-sweet trophies –
a highball of fast-food and hairspray;
careless flesh – an exposed thigh to die for...
And tattooed in yellow,
round a rock-hard abdomen,
a warning of their lust – a violent thrust
and someone's got stung!
Is it all for the want of a good woman?

Wasps hunt in pairs on the coast.
Persistent thugs,
they appear the most useless of creatures.
Blame the parents!
Nowhere is their home. Dad's on the razz
in old lager tins and litter-bins fit to burst...
And Queenie, can she be a mother *and* satisfy
sugar-drunk lovers, bound in her tissue paper cell?
The only love these little guys have known
is sweet lipstick imprinted on a half-eaten apple.

They hunt in pairs on the coast,
and it's been a hell of a year for them, and us.
Some say it must be the worst.

The old moon

We chased the New Moon in its southern flight,
down out of sight; and moving on
left the concrete Costa winding like a snake,
making for the sizzling heart – air conditioning full blast –
that is Espana. Northward, for miles, before
climbing the craggy stairs; and then, up there
in the high Sierras, chiselled from a hill –
half a millennium past –
the ancient face of Ferreirosola.

On foot now, down through whitewashed alleys
too narrow for cars. Eyed, by lazy-in-the-shady dogs
that drop to the ground – just anywhere –
on margins of bleached grass, or right there
in our path. And glimpsed through twisted metal grids,
crystal water chuckles neath crazy tumbling streets:
snow laughing all the way from the highest peaks.
And far off across the valley, white-dots roam
to the tinkle of tin bells, under an azure blue.

So we wind our way, shouldering the midday sun,
give a sidelong glance at a group of Elders that stand
and confer in the shade (a Mediterranean, man thing)
and I think to myself: we come here uninvited,
like a Neo-Franco advanced guard – hiking boots instead of jack-
boots!

We say “hola”, they nod and as we pass
talk in deep, olive-skinned murmurs.
Will it be the ‘tourist squad’ that puts them, finally,
to the whitewashed wall?

But they do languish in a kind of heaven – a thousand meters high.
And we try to blend in with our rented whitewash.
And the days pass. And not a cloud appears in the sky.

And we take our walking, sunbathing, integrating –
seriously: “Hola; gracias; adios.”
The lazy dogs don’t even prick an ear or lift a lid now
as we walk by; and then, one day, around noon,
you say to me: “Look, the old moon hasn’t gone down yet.”
And sure enough the old guy was still showing through;
hanging there, clipped and faded, homeless in the blue.

Ferreirola: a village in the Alpujarras, Southern Spain. August 2000.

The same place

Young Mums walking, steering infants
in twos and ones to a learning experience.
Regular, these morning runs
setting off before the night is out of their hair
mothers and children alike, heading for school,
cutting the morning air with family noises.

Young Mums: a look of tired innocence.
Their early morning face almost beautiful,
they follow the well-trodden path
to the same place.
While, chattering a fantasy through, the young ones
go hand in hand to the same place.

The same place.

The song

Two continents – two sons
Leaves a father here contemplating
How time runs
Off and away with everything
We ever call our own.

The time and tide that ebbs away
Taking the uncertainty of youth
To return one day,
With new grown men who stand and gaze,
Politely bemused, at figures once tall but now diminished
Since their being away.

And parents having let go, yet still holding on,
To little boys they shaped and moulded
In days long gone,
Don't always through their eyes
See the face the shape they recognise.
But sometimes with eyes closed, sons and parents both,
Recognise the song.

The stranger knows

‘...it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live as we dream – alone.’

Joseph Conrad (extract from *Heart of Darkness*)

Sometimes I lose you.
I could still touch you but you’re gone.
You are in essence missing, floating free
and not really belonging to anywhere
or anyone. Have I ever known you?
Those times, the involuntary moments,
it’s the stranger that I see, who could be
walking down the street with no past or future,
anonymous, devoid of us – despite my admiring glance –
and not the slightest hint or touch or trace of me
about you. Although it seems as if we move
in the same direction – and perhaps we do –
whether locked together at the brink of ecstasy,
as in death, the stranger knows. We are each alone
at this moment.

Turn the pillow

There were sleepless nights when I was young
When I tossed and turned in a red hot bed,
And my mother would tell me,
“Turn the pillow, turn the pillow over, the other side will cool your
head.”

So I’ve turned the pillow often since then
When nights have been hot and nights have been long,
But I can’t remember telling my boys,
I can’t remember passing it on.

“So then man to man before it’s too late
Why should these things be left unsaid?
The place where we lie is the bed that we make,
Did you choose the place where you lay your head?”

And I know that some advice that I gave
hasn’t always turned out right.
Yet, turn the pillow from time to time, to see,
If it helps you through the night.”

Untitled

Until such time as breath is short
We will shout the odds in sharp retort,
Making sure our voice is heard
Spilling out the spoken word.
With not a thought of from just where
We gain the strength to blow hot air

Until such time.
Until such time.

Waiting for the money

Come Tuesday again, things started looking bleak.
The money if it came at all
And sometimes it didn't
Never lasted the whole week.
So we pinned out hopes on Thursday.

Thursday was the day; eight pounds the amount to be paid.
The details arranged by a fat solicitor,
Whom my Mother held in high esteem;
While he held onto her legal aid.

And we all held on till Thursday.

My father knew how to hold onto money.
His attitude was, let them wait another day
Or better yet keep them waiting longer,
If they wait long enough: perhaps they'll go away.
So Thursday came and the Postman didn't call.

“Perhaps by second post”, my Mother would say.
A second post – has there ever been such a thing?
Or was my Mother just trying to make the most,
Of the predicament that she found herself in?

Now we will have to wait till Friday.

Watching eagerly on the Friday morning.
The Postman meander down the road,
Quite unaware that it was him on which we had pinned our hopes
And in no hurry to shed his load.

No luck; still there's always Saturday.

Saturday was the worst of the waiting days

Facing the prospect of a 'No hope weekend'.
But don't worry, this isn't just another 'hard luck story'
This week it turned out OK in the end.

The money came on Saturday.

My mother was relieved and I was happy.
As we walked into town my heart had wings,
And she was eager to make amends for all the waiting,
With fish and chips and cream buns and things.

And we forgot about the next Thursday.

Words in the dark

the words in the dark were not real
that caused the spark
that shot the stars
that lit the night
that tumbled down
that found the pit
that was desire

That moment.

That moment.

That white hot fire.

