LIFE BLOOD

A Book of Poems

Joel Hayward
Lifeblood: A Book of Poems

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For my "girls"

Kathy, Shoshana, Rachel and Michaela

With all my love and gratitude

Gold coins
falling
as tears from above
can only be counted
as my given love
A treasure chest full
I offer to give,
enriching you,
sweethearts
for ever I live
About the Author

Dr. Joel Hayward is a former Senior Lecturer who abandoned the political correctness and creative constraints of academia to pursue his goal of living a rewarding, creative and less stressful life. Author of several successful, internationally praised works of biography, history and analysis, and scores of specialist journal articles, Joel now concentrates on poetry and fiction. His efforts in these genres have, along with some of his non-fiction, been translated into many languages including German, Russian, Spanish and Serbian.

Joel lives in Palmerston North with his wife Kathy and their daughters.

His other books include:

Stopped at Stalingrad: The Luftwaffe’s Defeat in the East 1942-1943

A Joint Future? The Move to Jointness and its Implications for the New Zealand Defence Force (editor)

For God and Glory: Lord Nelson and His Way of War

Born to Lead: Portraits of New Zealand Commanders (with Dr. Glyn Harper)

Jenny Green Teeth and Other Short Stories

Tears in the Mind’s Eye (forthcoming)
LIFEBLOOD

A Book of Poems
Oakville, Alabama*

For a stranger he unwrapped lace cloth from treasure:
a scrapbook of oversized newsprint.
Its yellow sellotaped newspaper clippings
were his life-savings. Photographs, stories
of his dead uncle and the stranger’s hero: Jesse Owens.

The stranger listened,
aware that the apostle’s explanations
did not always match the newspaper stories
he ran his finger over with exaggerated motion.
Illiteracy?

“Ain’t just then, suh, that they hated
us,” he said, hunting but kindly the stranger’s eyes.
Blue, embarrassingly.
“It’s only a while back I couldn’t get a burger
in the fron’ of M’Donald’s. Had ta go round back
afore that.”

The nephew walked him down
to the Jesse Owens Memorial Park.
A local authority granted the family this land. Reluctantly?
It could have been beautiful. With quality grass,
and children. And life.
None. The birds conveyed disappointment.

“We had a bronze statue here, but very first week
white boys come and put chains round unca Jesse’s feet,
pulled him down with a pick-up.”

The stranger saw a well-formed concrete base,
crowned with two bent rusting bolts
and anyone’s drink can,
but not with a bronze athletic god.

They walked back for iced tea and talked
more about their hero.
The stranger noticed the beauty of utter poverty's luxury: photographs of smiles everywhere. On tables, fridge, walls, mirror, doors. Children loved by parents. Parents loved by children. Some came in as the two sat close and shared. They said ‘hi,’ heard a strange accent, shook hands (except the girls, who still said ‘hi’) and asked where he came from. With those photographed smiles.

The stranger left America carrying new luggage: greater respect for a hero and memories of a day spent with fine people. He still wonders whether the council’s promised replacement statue stands, or did for a while, in the Jesse Owens Memorial Park.

* In memory of Jesse Owens: history’s greatest track athlete, a fine man, and a deserving hero.
This Dialogue

Poetry is style
over content,
mystery over meaning.
It’s as much for the reader
as for the writer.

Editor or stylist?
Is a poem clever and empty? And its writer?
Who, then, quietly murdered the muses?
Can poets not pour out their hearts, or
heal the scars on their souls?

Clichés! They’ve all been said before.
Hearts don’t pour, and, as for souls ...
Readers want the fresh. They want new idioms,
and to read clever, cutting things.

Clever? That worst of words.
Does it mean the ordinary dressed up in f-words,
bitterness and the vernacular of adolescence?
Has beauty also perished? Has the magic of a moment
been banned? Have our souls and hearts
really become clichés?

Who wants to publish beauty,
or the magic of a moment?
Who cares for a poet’s thoughts, if a reader
can’t also own them?

I do. My name is poet.

My name is editor.
Emily

Vast natural cavern stretching, brilliantly lit in some places. Shadows stare out with few blinks and black eyes from where they dwell behind stalagmites caused by the dripping of rocks. Wounds of unfulfilled dreams?

Helmet-lit cavers – “intruders!” the shadows hiss – explore each twisting, tight tunnel and cavity, searching for anything. They see leering shadows gesturing and mocking their pale weakness.

They ignore them, as best they can. Is it the dread, or an unwillingness to see themselves among the uncouth brutes?

They cannot ignore one: larger than all, unwilling to let them enter further into this echoing mind.

They may hate him love him envy him curse him but they greet him cautiously, with deference: Heathcliff! Which of his creator’s secrets does he guard?
Wampires in the Lounge

They sat and talked on chairs that moved closer as she pressed him for more on wampires. He, giant from the Balkans, couldn’t sound the V and made the watching children’s hands and squints hide smiles. Goth finally facing the real thing, she lusted for his culture and grey eyes. Did he notice? What did he see? A wolf’s willing victim? A weird westerner writing herself into Stoker’s story.

An intruder asked if he knew Stoker. No, but Coppola’s film lacked any Slavic royalty. The truth? The Turks; it was all about the Turks. Her excitement and lust for the wolf enchanted her chair, which pulled itself towards his with the power of four hours’ conversation. She offered her throat, but was he reading her thoughts? Could mundane conversation around them penetrate the Carpathian mist? Could coffee and biscuits exercise greater spell-breaking power? As evening came the pull of his lair grew stronger, and he offered her a ride. She entered his lustrous black stagecoach — a Mirage — for a journey home.
Castlepoint

Low-tide walking at Castlepoint
she, free spirit with brat's
eyes and concealed fires
singeing her heart,
left deep-toed footprints in the sand
and waded, proud of
water-adoration and her
ability to babble. Was this a mediocre
or an excellent demonstration of
both?

He, far freer spirit with sad eyes
and scarred psyche,
imprinted his boot soles as he walked
with her and heavy thoughts,
not all of her, so deep
that scuba-divers wouldn't find them.

Sand on both lips made kisses
dry and their intertwined
fingers gritty. Sand
couldn't deny them
the silkiness of a brief moment
of what they considered some kind of love.
It seemed an eternal split-second.
The intensity of heaven's or hell's blessing.
Would it survive long after that gash in time?

He sat high on cliff's edge above
waves of fury and
salt-wind that held his cropped hair
to attention, and felt it wouldn't last.
He hoped, and maybe she hoped,
that no harm would come to the other.
Triumph Bonneville 750

Newly rebuilt top-end and re-sprung suspension.
An oily maestro’s work; not mine.
I can write, but I lack his brilliance. A trade?

It barked with neighbour-punishing volume
and savagery. Black, flashing sunlight in my eyes
after hours of tender massaging
with a soft cloth and scratch-resistant liquid.
Gold pinstripes signalled British regality.

Joined as one – horse and rider –
we raced crescent moon
on Saturday night down that long straight
between Massey and the Manawatu Gorge.
We chased and ran down, crushed,
any visibility cast thin by the headlight.
A victim every blink to my mount’s adrenalin.

No cars front and back. I, we, ruled the road.
The death of insects on my visor
revealed my supremacy.

Incomplete! A movement!
In my mind? In the nothing ahead of our light?
Black as the fields on either side I couldn’t see,
the cow crowded my vision and our pitiful beam.

Hooves I couldn’t hear clomped
to escape something
descending with a roar of murder.

Beast without road rules.
Cow humped right; not left.
Not that way! Left! Left!
My steed panicked
and swerved at that thumping brute.
I panicked and pulled it back.
We panicked together, swerving this way, that. We slow-motioned past the cow at 100 miles per hour, Death asking, “What, you made it?”

We stopped in flattened grass on the verge and waited. For me to find me. We abdicated royalty and putted back. Home by another road.

This Man’s Life

Erred decisions that tear heart in twain The fruit of searching for meaning’s mystery Ever occur but result in cruel pain Seem the cursed part of this man’s history

Ne’er till after will some sense be made Of going back whence mistake crept in Apology given but harshly repaid Let no guilt be felt; for ‘twas no sin
When the Light Goes Out

She listened
for any rattle
in the light-bulb.
The tell-tale sign
of death.
He heard his
grandfather.
The tell-tale sign
of death.
She replaced the bulb.
Light
returned.
He held his grandfather’s hand.
Darkness
dripped.

Her Journal

Through her summer dress
sunrays warm her. Between cloud gaps only.

She picks three fragile blue flowers
from her wild-weed garden
to dry – in flat foreversness – between the pages of the journal that only she and her fears know she keeps.

Her pages hold truth: the oily transparent petal stains from tears that slipped from her cheeks onto her delicate creations before the pages closed.
You Know Who

You bury the living and feed the dead
with equal effort. And pleasure? You buried me,
with lying tears,
and from the grave I watch you feed promotions
and fat compliments
to an overfed body with no hunger but clumsy hands.
A mortal ghost who pays you well.
Eyes twinkling, in darkness,
you take his payment of deference
and pretended diligence
and fold those proudly into a bulging wallet.

I live away from your view, but not you from mine.
From the unimagined freedom
of the grave I watch
and laugh at your sincere cruelty. When I arise
where will you be? What will you see? A haunting?

Situations Vacant

The situations vacant advert said your
boss urgently needed a temporary secretary
due to maternity leave.
I would talk with you
and wish you well, and
encourage you to give your child
a name with one syllable,
but I don’t know you.
You’re a memory lying cold
under no headstone.
Where are you?
How can I bring flowers?
I bought a Second-hand Book

I bought a second-hand book with yellowed pages and a dying spine. The cover won me.

A cold lake without ripples or shimmers before dark mist hills. No sun.

Next to the elegant title in lazy script, “Scottish Love Poems,” a brooch hung. Encircled in silver rope a golden-haired woman with blue eyes and thick lashes (or thick mascara) smiled.

Not at me.
Not at any reader.
But at her name on the cover, in the same lazy script:
Antonia Fraser.

I had often read her poems. I knew them. But right then I couldn’t recall one.

The chilly mirror disappeared. Her smile remained. I opened the cover, noted the publication date and the passing of twenty-five years.

I tried to lament, imagining her old.

My mind said no and told my hands to return the book-cover to my eyes. She remained there – still does – timeless, without ageing.
A lecturer’s Pen

The ink bottle on his desk’s edge,  
near full to its top covered in dust,  
reminds him to search for his favourite pen.  
It’s probably suffocating under a pile of papers.

That gold-nibbed fountain pen came as a gift  
from one class. Students who enjoyed.  
Seeing him hurting they wanted him to know  
that his efforts  
had enriched their learning.

He seldom uses that beautiful thing.  
Its ink flows slickly.  
It gives his words luxury  
when dedicating copies of books  
to friends and strangers who enjoy  
seeing an author write their names across his title page.

Refilling it leaves inky fingers  
that soap hates to battle.  
He prefers everyday the simplicity  
of chewable buck-twenty biros.  
He throws them casually into his bag before he goes home.  
His pilfering kids use them for their homework.

That gold-tipped beauty, wherever it is,  
contains a perfect inscription  
from a group of young people who chose words  
that he likes to feel with his fingertips,  
but mostly, eyes closed, with his heart.  
They remind him  
that pain passes and  
the pleasure of teaching  
ever does.
The First Casualty of War

Truth

scorches forth, back

pulling spectators’ eyes this way, that.

Grunted serves and backhands keep

truth

spinning

and the players hoping

to win the crowd

while scoring points.

Fifteen-love? Thirty-love?

Impossible.

These matches have no love.

Crowds care nothing for the ball; only the score.
Absence makes …

Separated by oceans,
lovers poles apart
suffer knowing
that they live in different days.
One sleeps while the other gains
pleasure from differences.

Stoic resignation and Xs on calendars
are armour often worn when time’s
arrows streak in to slay.
Each lover dons an iron helmet,
though some forsake the breastplate.

Can time be defeated, or merely
kept from ravaging love when
unprotected hearts do not grow fonder?
Can phone voices, lacking the power of eyes,
persuade imaginations to sit quietly?

Visitations in dreams are sought
and desires sometimes rewarded.
They fade with dawn and leave
wisps of anxiety that only
the meeting of eyes,
pressing of lips
and holding of hands
can blow distant.
Our Lady

Fear one Goddess above all!

Her name is Sleep.

Her power is frightful.

Who else can
  inflict paralysis
  steal sight
  numb the senses
  madden the mind
  or banish all thought?

Unequalled magic!
  Our Lady leaves no wounds or scars
  and few memories of her visits
  when she enslaves
  the servants of all religions.

Unequalled power!
  Our Lady’s seduction is so irresistible
  that none can pull away from her tender caresses
  keep open their eyes when she bends down to kiss
  or drive her away before she has gained satisfaction.
Belgrade, 1999*

Why do you hate us
And rain down your bombs
From aircraft we cannot see or hear?
Most bombs are smart, you boast,
as if they don’t kill us like those dropped on Coventry
with shrapnel and air blasts ripping souls from bodies.

Why do you hate us
And rain down your bombs
And claim we are enemies of freedom?
Serbs are the butchers of the Balkans, you lie,
forgetting that we served as your allies in two world wars
and suffered genocide from peoples you now favour.

Why do you hate us
And rain down your bombs
Without trying to get peace through dialogue?
We never listen anyway, you claim,
even though your “deals” were one-sided and cruel
and backed up with a bully’s threat of violence.

Why do you hate us
And rain down your bombs
Which destroy bridges, buildings, homes and people?
The world needs leadership, you insist,
ignoring the irony
that we have suffered these horrors before,
inflicted then by Nazi devils,
who also claimed the moral high ground.

* For Lazar, Vesna, Dušan and Miloš Dražeta
The Black Forest

The roof-top of the forest
robs day of intruding light.
Strangers get increasingly stressed
when Indian inkiness comes with night.

Poking fires they huddle round
and whisper, talk though seldom yell.
They startle at every unknown sound
as if they came direct from hell.

The noise of creatures adds more fear,
worse because they can't be seen,
even when they're seemingly near,
with only blackness in between.

When morning rays finally filter through
courage returns within men's chests,
warming, along with steaming brew,
removing the chill of dew-damp vests.

Some place chainsaws upon their knees,
saw-teeth of which they file and hone
so they can do with greater ease
what trees' old age always did alone.

When an ancient giant crashes and dies,
his legs hewn at the heel,
do forest spirits utter anguished cries
that woodsmen never hear or feel?

Oh grieving spirits! Dry your tears.
Your realm will shrink but stay alive.
The gods must know about your fears,
and ensure some loved ones do survive.

Humans aren't aware of your fright.
They can’t help what they need.
Torment them all you want at night
but don’t break your peaceful creed.

Moan and creak and dry branches break,
deny them sleep as you do.
Yet remember as they fret awake
that they’re the gods’ creation too.

**Parting**

Ah, mystery, leave me not yet!
Give me an embrace that I’ll never forget.

Let me breathe deep the scent of your hair.
Make my cheek moist with your glistening tear.

Let my fingertips trace gentle paths on your cheek
And over your closed eyes, wet lashes I seek.

Let me hold you near in manner sublime
As my lips on yours I place one last time.

Let me whisper with wrenched emotion.
“God I love you!” I’ll swear with devotion.

Oh mystery, though I see you will leave
It won’t be for ever, so I will not long grieve.
The Massey Auditorium

Tatty gilt lecture room
doubles as a drama club’s theatre.
Screen whirrs down,
hangs like a man-of-war’s mainsail.

It’s the can’t-miss target of projected sight,
not a whiteboard that one should ever write on.

Someone did.

For God-knows it’s carried the pox
of a permanent felt-tip pen,
not a whiteboard marker.

Who did it?

Did the class laugh
when the lecturer realised
and tried to rub off the grand truths
intended for a whiteboard?

Or did the class not let on
that they’d seen his face flush?
Did they disclose respect, or embarrassment,
and afterwards joke among themselves:
“Academics! Hopeless, eh?”

Does that lecturer still redden
each time he uses that theatre
and sees the marks
that cleaning fluids haven’t removed
despite elbow efforts
that have only left smudges?
Artwork

Gleefully you score pictures
on my white bones
with a sharp nail
and wipe Indian ink
into the minute
scratches.
I watch your scrimshaw emerge
with disinterest
until I see your artwork capture the
moment when an upturned hull
slips beneath the waves
to begin its long descent.
I recognise the ship
as that of which I had proudly
proclaimed myself captain.
Drama

Beneath pale flesh
and short dark curls

The ultimate?

Slit

With flesh on flesh
and moans

A release

Slit

Throat pulled back
Knife crosses

SLIT

Poet’s note: I wrote this poem in disgusted response to a popular television police drama which depicted a woman’s violation and execution with, in my view, wanton explicitness, glamour and drama. As a dad to beautiful daughters, I find any sexual sadism – indeed, even any “commonplace” sexism – inexplicable and repugnant.
Strasbourg Cathedral

Watched by seven hundred towering red-brick years and a father or brother unseen by tourist eyes, she sits on a camp stool and plays. Dignity rides on the fragrant notes that her accordion releases like the aroma from a happy oven. Polished too-big boots, perfect pleats and radiant complexion also tell a tale.

Alone, among strangers who camera chatter at the intricate portals and shadow-making spires, she plays Lorelei’s seductions in a gypsy scarf. This siren aged seven wants to unite no boats and rocks; but coins and a box. What is sitting on the mat with hand reaching for a teacher’s attention when the greatest classroom has been hers from birth? What is borrowing from a library when all books lie open before her?
Birds of the Battlefield

Bullets speak differently
when they meet someone new.
They scream “thwack!”
when they strike bone.
They shout “pthumpff!”
when they slap into thick muscle.
They squeal “pffit!”
when they pass through emptier flesh.
Best of all, they hiss “pzinnggg!” to themselves
when they find
no-one to talk with.

What do they say

when they introduce

a new friend

to

death?
Scars

You create unseen walls
believing that absolutely no-one
will be able to break in,
cause you hurt
or thieve some of your treasure:
your self-important independence

Maybe you really created walls
to confine yourself
and prevent unplanned
contact with the realities
and risks of rejection or heartache

Yet you added to your defences
coils of barbed wire –
short fuse,
vicious tongue
and sarcasm –
which stab and hurt
all who seek intimacy,
even that of simple friendship

If you ever regret seeing
the bleeding fingertips
of those who reached
to touch and reassure you
will it be too late to dab them
gently, soothingly
with the cotton-wool of true affection?

Will they instead pull back
with an "ouch!"
and lament that they failed to see
your personality's rusting barbs
and swear never to make that mistake twice,
and leave you, strongly fortified, safe but alone?
Welsh Maiden

I know you, Jenny.
Your beauty betrays you.
What other woman has hair of
fine-spun gold thread
and long-lashed eyes of sapphire perfection?

Visible through white silk, your breasts and hips
lure me towards golden-freckled alabaster arms.

I’ve known your name all my life.
Now I meet you, smiling shyly as you bathe.

You’ll not get me, water spirit.

They say you wait
in wind-wild streams and lonely pools
for weaker souls than I
to surrender to your enchantment.
You beckon lovers in
to greet your body; to love you.

They say you
coil weeds around hopeful lovers’ ankles and pull them
down, white cold, into black depths.
You show their drowning eyes
the hideous crone you really are: Jenny Green Teeth.

But I see no crone, only youthful perfection
radiant in high sun’s glory.

Oh Jenny, your beauty and smile draw me.
Will you take me? Love me? Drown me?
Let us speak in whispers. Touch our fingers. Lips?

I cannot believe what they say. I cannot. I do not.

The water … so cold.
Hands

Albrecht Dürer’s
brush and ink
on tinted blue

Gently touching
long-fingered
“Praying Hands”

Stirring religious
veneration and piety
since he drew them in 1508

My pale
imitation
performed each night

Freckled hands
stubby fingers
chewed fingernails

Stirring divine
forgiveness and love
each time I bow my head.
A Cunning Idea

He crafted a clever voodoo doll
to hurt someone he really loathed.
He gained hair from his intended victim, three strands,
and wove them into his doll’s head
in a small braided circle
which he stitched down with a curse.

He gained some nail clippings
and slid them into his doll’s hands
beneath the fabric
so they wouldn’t fall loose,
and he uttered another curse.

He even got specks of blood,
not an easy task but one of great potency,
and smeared it, black, across the rag-doll’s chest
as he looked heavenward and muttered.

He placed that deadly model in a sacred place
until, well … the time was exactly right.

Then, strange thing,
his loathing began to disappear.
He looked again at his devilish handiwork

and pondered

what pain he would have felt within his own chest
when he stuck that first pin into the doll’s cloth body.
Would he have died,
or merely crumpled in a passing agony?

and wondered

what pain he would have felt within his tired brain
when he pierced his creation’s brow with another sharp pin.
Would it be a migraine, a seizure, a tumour?
and worried

where his wounded soul would have journeyed
when he cast the doll into a bright clear petrol flame.
Would the gods receive him,
or banish him into outer darkness?

**Balkan Wanderers, 1.**

Gorgeous muscled horses,
their great eyes down and necks stretched out,
haul a quiet convoy of multi-hued Romany wagons,
many of them paint-flaking,
some chimney-smoking.

All creak with relaxed movement,
along dirty not dusty car-few roads
winding softly
between
dark pine-forested hills
which permit the lurking dangers
of wolves, spirits and other frights.

Further back great mountain peaks rise,
darker,
half escaping the cloaking powers
of wet clinging mists,
containing mysteries
of which road-bound wanderers
seldom think and never dare to explore.
Beauty Beheld I Your

Sat we on branch an old fallen
Dripped rain from above tree branches spread
And hair faces and soaked our

Held I hand cold your
Deep looked into eyes dark your
Beauty saw I
Beauty great oh saw II!

Kisses wet rain heavy from
But noticed never we
As a union tight became we
With nature nothing but

Noticed I breath warm your
Deep looked into eyes dark your
Love felt I
Love great oh love great felt I
Marvels of Petra

Sun-baked
bird-featured
Bedouin of Petra
charging
  between tight-lipped drags
  on bent cigarette
  held between
  nicotine fingers
eager, gullible tourists
“ten dollar!”
  very fair price, they whisper to each other
to mount and
ride his camels
along stony paths
among ancient
carved rock
palaces, temples, houses
of that golden pink
part-ruined city
then,
upon their return
at journey’s end,
unexpectedly
demanding from those
suddenly shocked
strangers
who had
until that moment
delighted in having done
something local
“ten more dollar!”
  damned cunning bastard, they tell each other aloud
to dismount
his dung-smelling brutes.
Today

I saw a man die with fear in his eyes
and wish I hadn’t seen it.
He knew he’d been inadequate
and wished he hadn’t been it.

I saw him searching around for love,
exhaling long-drawn sighs.
None of those present could show it to him.
All wished he’d shut his eyes.

I saw the lamp in those eyes grow dim.
We hadn’t long at all
before the light went out altogether
and he’d have to answer the devil’s call.

Then he turned and looked at me.
His eyes had surprising contrition.
He tried to stretch out his withered hand,
from which I withdrew – I’m just his physician.

I saw his family’s look of contempt
that he’d wanted a last human touch.
Appalled that they hated him so intensely
I reached back to accept his bony clutch.

His family saw him enter eternity
holding the hand of a white-coated stranger.
They shook their heads as they left the room,
muttering something about the funeral arranger.

My second wife picked me up from work
and she and her kid replayed their day.
Irritated, I couldn’t help feeling some sadness.
Not everyone’s life turns out the right way.
Poison

She often slips poison into our mailbox. Simple white envelopes fail to disguise their oozing menace. Do the senders put no names above their Private Bag addresses because they think we’re witless? Their recurring failures – designed to leave us feeling immune? – prove compelling and we eventually succumb to the pressures of ignorance. Despite trying not to inhale or allow the contagion to spill on our self-respect we always end up paying a price.
Dream of this Age

Westward I saw you silhouetting a red sun.
Mighty oak, near old as the earth below you,
King of surrounding trees, guardian of mysteries,
Your branches and leaves wild winds blow through.

Powerful oak, I'm pulled to your presence.
Walking to reach you through tangles of growth,
Fingers and forearms scratch on dry brambles.
Though wiping off blood, to quit now I'm loath.

I finally place hands with dry blood on your trunk
And feel ancient skin textured like a grandfather's chin.
Autumn's mud-stuck leaves on the soles of my boots
Remind me that harsh winter will shortly begin.

Ice winds and snow would take life from me
If I remained your companion, exposed without heat.
Yet you will stand against nature's strong warriors
Who'll rage without malice, and won't gain your defeat.

And in spring you'll hide any soreness or wounds
With a great burst of beauty, branches, and green.
You'll become stronger and reach even higher,
Knowing your tenacity the gods have seen.

You have witnessed the passing of forty generations
Of those who respected your vast strength and size.
Long before them lived others who knew
The oak as healer, guide, and source of things wise.

Cut off from them by a tragic gap of time
I nonetheless know that, aside from your might,
Your roots reach as deep into the heart of the earth
As your branches rise up into the world of sunlight.

Astute observer of kingdoms below and above
And drawing in secrets and knowledge from them,
You, beloved oak, friend of earth and air spirits,
Possess power and energy impossible to stem.

I squeeze my humanity into a hollow in your roots,
Feeling you close around, like a wondrous womb.
Ah, great master oak, I could rest inside you forever,
But you’re here to offer life, not serve as a man’s tomb.

I climb into your branches and smile at old nests,
At their number, and at the birds’ variety.
Oh great sustainer, they sing their merry thanks.
I also utter mine, with unfeigned piety.

Pulling myself higher as sun god readies to sleep
I sit where your strongest limbs widely spread
And reflect on druids and other tree-friends,
Who departed long ago to the whispering world of the dead.

They used to revere the oak and other sacred trees,
Gather mistletoe, fungi, bark, leaf and bud,
Use them for the health of the people,
And to ward off anger, violence, fire and flood.

Like those wise ones, I think of earth’s sacred objects:
Forests, groves, rivers, bubbling springs and great stones.
Like them, I feel thankful for the gods’ close attention
To us in completeness: needs, souls, natures, flesh, bones.

Oh creator above all, I make a sincere request:
Let me ascend to the top of my friend this great tree
So that I can kiss with my lips that sacred loftiest twig.
I want only to give, and to take nothing for me.

Along with a kiss may I shed a drop of my blood?
A sacrifice, neither fatal nor asked for, but offered freely
In thanks for the abundance of peace in my life,
And for all true knowledge that comes only from thee.

A humble sparrow’s, oh creator, is the body I now want
So that I can gently alight on that thin projecting sprig,  
Rub my tiny-feathered face on that object of true power,  
And dab a droplet of blood onto that fragile twig.

Oh, oh, words cannot convey what I feel taking place.  
My human shape’s shrinking, my hands have become claws.  
I’ve developed wings of brown feathers  
And become a frail bird – without any flaws.

Oh Majesty, how it feels to flit in the breeze.  
I cannot bear the pleasure of feeling so light.  
Grant me a few minutes to fly over the forest,  
Then I’ll wing my way back with the quickest flight.

I’m darting madly but gladly through the winds  
With rushing cold air giving my bright eyes a sting.  
Nothing, nothing can rob me of joy  
Except Terror! Terror! for that large swooping thing.

The sky god – bless him – caused the falcon to overshoot.  
Pain in my left wing that screeching bird caused,  
But I managed somehow to survive  
The horror and pain of his razor sharp claws.

I fluttered madly behind and around trees to the ground  
And escaped, bleeding, into a hole in the base of a trunk.  
It was the one in which I’d earlier curled up,  
Only now I palpitated with trauma, as the sun god sunk.

But then the delicate tree spirits came and tended to me.  
It was not luck that had saved me, they lovingly said,  
But the gods had favoured my reverent mission,  
And to another target, a stoat, the falcon they led.

Now, bless our great oak, the spirits encouraged.  
Anoint it with the lifeblood flowing from your wing.  
Smear it sweetly on that loftiest twig of great magic,  
Then return to us here and we’ll restore everything.
The kind tree spirits gave me the boldness to fly
To the top of my oak where I saw the twig swaying.
I alighted in pain, and caressed that stick with my beak,
Wiped blood where I should; against death began praying.

Then in lady moon’s light I fell unknowing to the ground.
A twisted creature I lay cold for ages,
While the sweet tree spirits hovered and worked
Until my body changed, spellbound by ethereal sages.

Tears splashed on my cheek and soft sobs I heard
As the all-powerful one breathed life back into my chest,
Which rose and fell like calm sea swells.
Then under silver moon goddess I arose from my rest.

I felt relieved that I lived again, as a man,
But grieved that a true world had again disappeared:
The world of nature’s souls and the gods’ touch,
That the forest spirits had kindly with an outsider shared.

As I walked away from the trees, scratched and bruised,
Thrashing leaves and creaking made me turn for the sign.
“Oh druid-heart, friend, thank you,” I swear I heard,
Whispered by my oak grown larger, in a voice unlike mine.

Watching night gain its power I see a bee on the curtain.
Sweet messenger of the gods, what news do you bring?
I’ll tell you a story in return of the forest’s loving kindness.
Come, omen of good days, I’ll tell the whole blessed thing.
You whisper

You whisper
at night
beneath my hearing,
above my imagination,
outside both dreams and
nightmares.
You frighten me
by telling me
you still love me.
I cannot answer.
I cannot.

My Soul Waits for Her

Tormented loving soul
Unbound deep in my chest
Feeling pain and fatigue
And craving for rest

Reaches out to awaken Its
Only true friend.
Rejected, It returns,
Near eternity to spend
Impatient distress of waiting until
Finally she remembers
And fear becomes still.
Baddest Man on the Planet?

Vincent Van Gogh
Anguished genius of the canvas

The canvas?
Not for painting on, demented, with swirling brushstrokes, but for adorning with opponents’ fallen twisted torsos and flecks of blood red from the palette of their faces

Our Vincent Van Gogh – in black shorts – has inner torments forever associated with that lacerated ear

That famous lacerated ear?
Not the result of a self-inflicted wound of unanswered love, but a bitten piece of flesh spat out with disgust on the canvas next to him who answered punches with elbows and head butts

Our Vincent Van Gogh alone with his thoughts and his demons

Hypnotic with his raw and uncontrolled emotions

Uncontrolled emotions?
Not the flood of pigmented images flowing from mad mind, but the flood of curses flowing from the saddest mind in order to meet the expectations of those who want to see a walking devil

Our Vincent Van Gogh, immortal casualty of his art, afflicted virtuoso of the canvas
The Battle of Love

After our touching fingertips part I know we’ll never be close to each other again Yet I’ll not regret our first kiss years ago or find a salve for my torn heart’s pain
True sweetheart
Find a salve for my torn heart’s pain

I’ll miss brushing your hair from my cheek when you rested your head on my chest and breathing as one without needing to speak In darkness our minds, bodies, spirits found rest
True sweetheart
In darkness our minds, bodies, spirits found rest

I had never loved a woman with eyes of your hue yet your sadness and longing that couldn’t be veiled drew me like a victim of a crone’s spell to you And against you, I discovered, all other women paled
True sweetheart
Against you, I discovered, all other women paled

Your wonderful smile – joy bringing – agleam Happy gentleness of a skippedy calf I adored you, broke rules for you, and let my mind dream But against the tide of reality drown-gulping I swam True sweetheart
Against the tide of reality drown-gulping I swam

I could not with clear conscience make choices other I swear that you’ll be in my thoughts for all time I know you lost patience, chose “security” with another, but though I lost the battle I committed no war crime True sweetheart
Though I lost the battle I committed no war crime
Guilt

I really wonder who you are, lady,
and what you look like
You, who stare so intently at me
    I can’t see your eyes, but I sure can feel them!
and at the others standing equally worried
    (All hiding their own fears?
      No-one wanting to look guilty?)
in a tall-fat-short-thin row on my right and left

What instructions have you received?
I hope they told you to be sure,
to be absolutely, damned POSITIVE
before you point and say “him!”

I know you’re there, lady, attempting to recall
those events, whatever they were
and struggling to bring back to your mind
the face of your attacker, whoever he was

I can’t try to look any less like that bastard
    God I wish I could
I haven’t got a clue who he is,
or whatever it was (and where and why) he did to you

And although I’m sorry, yes I am,
that whatever happened was really bad
    I know you wouldn’t be here otherwise
I gotta confess that my thoughts
are only for me!
    I’m scared, lady! Really scared!

I can’t even see where you are behind that
one-way deaf-mute glass window.
Am I seeing shadows? Movements?
Oh shit, I’m looking guilty again!
Must look away, but where? Up? At my feet?
At the glass? Is that confident? Confrontational?
I can go? What? No. 5? That's me, right?
Ah thank you, thank you God, ol’ mate!
Ah ha! We six are leaving, but two are staying.
Evil bastard, whichever you are.
I'm sure it’s you, No. 6, 'cause you sure do look guilty.

Vessels

Best to sip exquisite wine from beautiful vessels

Drinking a luxurious, velvety red
from a thick-glass, practical family tumbler
doesn't change the taste,
just the experience

Best to listen to Elvis Costello
without ever seeing an album cover

Best to read Robert Graves
without ever seeing his photo

But best to read Hemingway
while studying his!
Highland Eden

Sandpaper rough winds strip life
from treeless hills of thistle and irritated soil
with locust efficiency,
leaving only resilient grasses, some surprisingly green,
to show that dead soil still lives.

Abrasion dries, etches lines of prematurity,
and breaks blood cells in cheeks and noses
which develop a ruddy grain
on the squinting faces of those who shepherd sheep
or watch shaggy cattle
which manage to find adequate life to chew
across the wild grasses divided, rarely, by rectangles
framed by piled stone walls.

Dawn’s light groans to swim through
the haze of dripping mists
which hug the valleys and obscure neighbours’ views.
The shifting greyness:
earth mother’s petulance and wind-hatred?
An inevitable consequence of her failure to keep trees alive
where no more than grass, thistles and brambles
scratch and catch?

Yet hearts do beat, not on the slopes or heights,
but in the damp gullies
where tiny streams grow from silent gaps
between mossy rocks
before whispering, then burbling,
then babbling with excitement
as they wash over slimed rocks in swift rushes of joy
while the mother goddess clusters living things,
seen and unseen, in and alongside
those flowing arteries of life
where the sky’s foul breath can’t reach.

Revel in your freedom, you who sip the crystalline blood
that flows from springs deep inside the mother.
How bewitching is your ethereal activity:
boisterous and energetic
unseen and unheard except by a very few who sit
with eyes closed and ears blocked
until you give them delights of glimpsed manifestation.

Others think that the songs they hear
are the chill water’s sweet caress of rocks
and saturated tree roots
Whereas your chatter,
although from sanctified incorporeality,
is something so jubilant that it would sweep
hatred from hearts and malice from minds,
But, alas, sweet spirits and nymphs,
you must perform dragonfly dances
and sing bird songs to an audience of your own kinds,
as well as to a few straying, happy poets

Self-reflection

Boy, did folk misunderstand me
and my destiny and
inherited legacy!

I always knew Dad was right:
Doin’ anythin’s sure better
than doing nothin’.

And, ya see, it doesn’t matter
after all if I don’t know
who the world leaders are.
My generals do.
Twisted Tales

The Brothers Grimm must sleep poorly
knowing the violence Walt Disney and his
doodling disciples have done and keep doing
to wondrous tales
once told for their lessons and morality
to children, though not babes,
back in the age of forest and field
by peasants and artisans.

Why commit such a vicious crime, Walt,
by leaving out all the blood?
Why kill the meaning of the stories
by taking out the deaths?

Why gloss over infanticide?
Shouldn’t children know that the tale of
Hansel and Gretel reflects a bygone reality:
that when families couldn’t keep everyone fed
they couldn’t keep everyone!

Oh, but it’s entertainment.
You think that? Really?
Isn’t the raw stuff of your family films
priceless cultural property
stolen from the Germans, French and others?

We live in more enlightened times.
Really? So taking Maori or Native American
or Aboriginal folk tales, stripping them of all morality
(or putting in your own),
sanitising them and robbing them of all didactic value
would be ok?

Entertainment? Enlightened times? Hah!
Tell that to Maori, Native Americans and others.
Their answers will be swift, deftly delivered and painful,
especially to what you think of most: your profits.
Liberty

Free Speech
is by no means free.

It comes with a price tag – an outrageous designer label.

A person must pay dearly,
maybe a fortune,

if he or she wants to
    write
    say
    think
something different from the majority’s views

or, if a gutsy person is prepared to suffer the utmost loss,

something different from a minority’s views.

Even being intellectually curious
about some taboo topic or other,

benignly, may prove too expensive.

Critics,

never admitting they are

(they say they’re the opposite),

claim free speech must be guarded
in case someone abuses it

when what they really want is to
lock it away in case someone uses it.
Forgiveness?

If I were a llama I'd spit at you,  
and watch you futilely try to wash off the icky stink.

If I were an elephant I’d kneel on you, but not too heavily,  
slowly forcing out breath and cracking a few ribs.

If I were a magpie I’d swoop down and peck your head,  
again and again and again as you run.

If I were a tarantula I’d give you the creeps,  
hairy-walking across your bare arm in bed then disappearing beneath it.

If I were a mosquito I’d itchy-bite the back of your neck,  
than buzz around, just out of swatting distance.

If I were a monkey I’d spring down onto you,  
screaming to deafen your ears that I’d also pull.

If I were a shark I’d tear just one leg off,  
then circle as you struggle to reach the shore.

If I were a komodo dragon I’d nip you,  
and infect you with my dripping septic saliva.

But I’m not.

I’m a man.

And I choose,

well, …
Napoleon’s Retreat from Moscow, 1812

We trudge, Great Emperor, in sodden peeling boots,  
while in a sealed carriage you ride

    We trudge, in ice-ragged uniforms exposed,  
    while warm blanket-wrapped you hide

We trudge, with few thoughts, and frozen feelings,  
while you plan your next grand acts

    We trudge, knowing we’ve got nothing, and lost,  
    while you scheme deception about the facts

We trudge, countless falling mutely every mile,  
while you complain about our pace

    We trudge, and helplessly suffer attacks,  
    while you idiotically order: “give chase!”

I trudge, little emperor, to my rigid death approaching,  
while you drink cups of steaming tea

    I trudge, waiting and wanting to fall,  
    while you dwell on fame’s immortality

I drop, upon this road of frozen mud and slush,  
and see with unclosed eyes my final frosted breath

    I arise – triumph! – and walk spiritedly,  
    through an honour guard to mark  
    my righteous soldier’s death
Anu, Danu, Donau, Danube

Life, I stand on your bank’s edge, frightened of a slip that might bring a struggle I could not win.
You flow by with no effort. I envy you.
You swirl as if some magic occurs within your darkest green – the colour of the elm’s fullness during twilight.
You flow forever, past. I have little to offer but three silver coins and my hope that you will accept them with my anguished prayers.
Let them sink through your swiftness to your stillness.
Let them join others’ gifts to clothe your bed in a radiant coverlet you have earned.

Thunderstorm

I sit with Sylvia Plath open.

Thunder tears my ideas with the rip sound of newspaper.
It rains a cold shower lit only by Hollywood B-grade lightning flashes.

Old spouting overflows. Waters spill; a forgotten bath with taps left on.

Winds tug at washing that’s pegged tight. They tangle soaked sheets around the line with noisy bluster.

I sit with Sylvia Plath open. Listening to her voice?
The Centre of Our Universe

Pondering the nature of the godhead or the size of the universe challenges most minds, but pondering most minds challenges them even more.

Ah, read it again.

Perhaps an explanation:

It’s impossibly hard for any human, and especially the very bright (the egocentric hardest of all), to imagine with clarity that is, truly visualise that all other individuals all six billion hear their own voices inside their heads — not yours — and hear them as vividly as you do inside yours.

Think about it.

Better still, close your eyes and think of your closest loved one’s inner voice.

Are you not right now hearing that inner voice within that person’s mind by imagining it with your own inner voice?

Tough to get your head around, huh?
Your Supplicant

Mistress Sleep,
Dear Goddess!
Hear my prayer:

Last night when you began to
embrace me
I barely felt your touch

I was darkness-drawing a poem
that I planned to write after breakfast.

It contained (if you’ll forgive me for saying so)
a fine idea; maybe even a little originality.

Our Lady, forgive me again.
I don’t want to sound accusatory,
but you seem not to have returned that poem
when you gave me back my thoughts this morning.

I have tidied my mind’s clutter
and searched it several times,
thinously,
but the poem’s nowhere.

Might I ask, therefore, for your kindness?
Please return to me the poem,
or at least the idea that lay at its heart.

I don’t mind waiting until you come tonight, Mistress.
Return it to me as I reflect in darkness upon my day
or, better yet, place it in one of the vivid dreams
with which you have lately rewarded me.
Young Missy

Eleven climbs from her top bunk in a gap between dreams

Bunks red during day

Without colour, like everything, at night

Walks sleepy-stepping to the toilet with hands outstretched

Turns no lights on

Tinkles

Returns to bed

Bangs nothing

Climbs up and in.

What a skilful manoeuvre!

Eleven’s father gave her a torch he no longer needed

small, red, with two AA-batteries visible through the plastic tube

Eleven walks sleepy-stepping to the toilet

One hand outstretched projecting unneeded light

Squinting

Banging

What a waste of natural talent!
Balkan Wanderers, 2.

A local council placed them
far from neighbours,
but, without subtlety, near the bad-breath smile
of a labour-hungry plastics factory.
It gave them land
invisible to all
who don’t search or stray.
No-one does.

Their only road forgets it once wore gravel.
Now it lets a half-flattened line of grass
divide earth tyre-trails
that wind through rust-protrusions
way beyond the railway yards.

The beautiful chaos of a community –
shanties, wagons, caravans,
trucks, horses, pigs,
more horses,
and pencil-sharp unschooled children –
laughs.
Romanies belong to all lands
and none.

Blackened by smoke
from endless cigarettes,
their lungs with every breath
inhale a different source of cancer:
their exclusion from the world of “gadzé,”
the outsiders who never taste
the sweetness
of real freedom
but often spit on them bilious ignorance.
Faith

God have mercy on this monotheist who believes in other gods!
He throws himself prostrate before You and Them!

Daughter of the Rom

Neck smooth
Jaw strong
Lips mmm, soft to kiss?
Nose strong and long
Lashes long and dark
Brows dark and thick
Tresses thick and wild

Wild?
Oh, her eyes! Her eyes!
wild black shining
black deep
black mysterious
black frightening
black loving
black beautiful!
Lifeblood

Whenever we get little cuts we always suckorlick the blood

Whenever we bleed more werushtostemtheflow

but no longer with our lips

Whenever someone bleeds publicly in a crash or an act of violence we even scrub or hose away all traces of life

Mustn’t we drink more than a few drops?

Mustn’t we even see more than a few drops?
Cumbrian Fisherman

Tidal mudflats glisten
with cockle bumps and holes.
They look firm enough for careful footsteps
but will swallow to the shin, knees, thighs,
then wait
for returning sea
to take the glued intruder.

Ah, Cumbrian fisherman,
you know how to defy the mud.
You, with your impossibly flimsy sled,
over which you lean,
belly and chest resting, weight dissipated,
so you can propel yourself
with your quick-moving weightless gumbooted feet
that won’t stick.

You gather cockles as your forebears always did,
raking the wet brown paint
for the hidden gems
that soon fill the flax basket on your sled
as you vanquish mud and tide;

easily
enjoyably

with grinning reward.
Marriage

I have loved you for eighteen years
And have never heard you sing.

I've heard you hum, and through the bathroom door
I've caught notes, low and sweet.

You have loved me for the same eighteen years
And have never seen me dance.

You haven’t seen me even sway to a melody,
Let alone hold you tight to music
or take you up on a dance floor.

Yet I’ve seen you dance, and you’ve heard me sing.

What magic is this thing called marriage?
Parenthood

That,
I instructed my
grossed-out little daughters,
making them peer from closer
than they wanted to be
at a dry-decaying
squashed tabby
in the gutter
near our home,
is Death.

Death!

That,
I explained,
between turned-away breaths,
which they copied
while also pinching their noses
and, for some reason,
squinting,
is what happens
to living things hit by cars.

That,
I added,
is quite different to merely
drifting asleep
and never waking up.

They grimaced
at the smell of decay,
and they saliva-swallowed
at the cat's
unnaturally distorted shape:
flattened here, missing there.

They hated the spilled guts
that smelled bad
and looked worse,
but most of all they hated
the bulging eyes
and the strangely red
protruding tongue.

My daughters have never played on the street,
nor once – not even once –
chased a ball that rolled out onto it,
and now they ride their bikes super-safely.

That,
I tell my friends with young children,
who screw up their faces
as if I’d committed an act of brutality,
was one of the most valuable five minutes
I’ve ever spent with my kids.
East Harris

Ice-scoured, flat, ignored land
of rocks and waterlogged hollows
extending as far as imaginations.

Winds rule unopposed, howling without pause.
Did mighty earth mother surrender this melancholy land?
With feigned sadness?

The harsh masters permit a few people
– hard as the ground – to live
in their ever-wet wilderness.

Don’t the winds like the clatter of hoofs on hard stones
that only they would hear?
There’s no grazing-beast food.

Dead stones lie so tightly together
that only the strongest weeds,
grasses and bogland plants
can fight their way through overlooked grey gaps
here and there
to reach up
into the despair
of this treeless land.

They don’t escape punishment for living.
Winds eventually sense their presence
and slay them.
Their corpses reincarnate,
after an eternity,
as life-enabling peat
for the few humans
who love or hate this hard land.
Your Cruelty Scorned

Stretched wide atop thermals
and circling in great sweeps
you watch my demise with one eye
unblinking at any time
and wait for that one moment.
You spiral down when it comes.

It hasn't! You must wait. Feather-flap up again
and circle and circle. Watch.

You, a vulture called dove, shall not triumph.
I don’t want your sharp beak tearing my flesh
or your talons digging deep to give you balance and
leverage on my corpse. I don’t want to smell
your reeking breath. I shall not have to.
Age is on my side.
Crucifixion

My ear itched – deep inside.

My gold crucifix necklace
lay on my desk
where my proudly “pre-teen”
daughter had left it.

A good kid. She likes catholic school
and wanted to wear the crucifix.

I let her.

My teeth gritted when she said after school
that she couldn’t find it.

She’d taken it off for gym
And stuffed it
into her bag.

It had gone.

You go check right through that bag, I said far too angrily.
You go find it!

She did. And cried.

It soon shone on my desk,
Christ-side down,
chain bunched.

I hugged her tight and told her I loved her.
She went to get her doll
with “real” collagen lips.

My ear itched.

Thank God my daughter couldn’t see me.
I stuck the end of the crucifix – with Christ’s feet –
into my ear
and twisted it around
trying to kill the itch.

Even Christ’s feet couldn’t stop my ear itching.

My daughter returned.

She saw.

“Oh Pop,” she said, shocked as if
she’d witnessed sin.

Maybe she had.
Unwanted Perfection

Sky without clouds
and life
in all directions
left a wanderer,
    awed by crumbling pyramids,
    isolated Bedouin tents
    and corrugated desert sands,
detesting that dry hot blue.
It pressed upon his mind.

After eight days he noticed something.
A promise of relief?
Fifty miles away?
Sitting low on the horizon,
shadowy,
threatening rain.
At least coolness.

A dirty mirage? Two hours later his bus
entered the cloud – Cairo’s foul smog –
above which stretched
that same blue.
Neo-Pagans

Neo-Pagans throng
Stonehenge and lesser circles.
Each solstice. Midsummer mainly. White-robed mobs
looking like cousins in Alabama.
Druids don’t wear eye-slit white steeples and don’t cuss
Jews and Blacks. Only Christianity,
capitalism, consumerism, free trade.

Pieces forced
or forcing
into a freshly painted Celtic jigsaw.
Proclaiming an old age. Embracing the New.
Beliefs chosen like supermarket lollies,
taking what tastes good. A lolly mixture.

Vegetarians – mainly – unwilling to acknowledge,
let alone swallow, the blood and flesh
culture of their ancients. Remaining deaf
to moans from peat-bogs.

Performing their
Celtic rituals. Decorated often with
symbols of post-Celtic medieval Wicca,
at pre-Celtic sites, including
that greatest of all circles. Its stones
entered Salisbury earth a thousand years
before any Celts arrived and the first Druids
touched British oaks.
Our three-foot green-silver Christmas tree
came from any department store.
Eyes at home widened
during “oh wow”-ing construction of its wire
trunk and boughs
and tinsel
pine needles.
Excited competitors squabbled
as they adorned it with more tinsel. And more.
Necklaces. Pearls of shining purple.
They hung lolly-chains
and candy canes.

Our sweet teeth overpowered our willpower.
The smiling guilty.
We ate. Devouring our tree’s beauty.
Replacing it each day.
We spiralled it with on-off-on-off lights.
Can we turn them off
altogether
during The Simpsons?
they asked.
I weighed up their point:
that nothing
should
distract the mind
from what’s
important.
The Black Danube

Since April 1999 our ears have missed Strauss's Blue Danube. They didn't like hearing it in the White House, and rewrote it as The black Danube. It flows slick, thick, with colour spectrums in the oil that poured from shattered refineries at Pancevo and Novi Sad. Mercury – the element, not the god (The only god involved in this was a very happy Mars) – will poison Strauss's love for a thousand years, long after it regains its colour.

Oh Strauss. They rewrote your river deliberately to hurt those who lived with your music each day: Serbs. The spoiling by bombs now hurts all peoples who live with it each day as it flows eastward into the Black Sea.

The White House didn’t like Milosevic's music. Neither did most Serbs. That gangster composed criminal symphonies. He conducted them himself from a tyrant’s podium in Dedinje. But in silencing him flames and great spills brought tears of oil to those who mourn Strauss's silence and still wait to waltz.
The Battle

He
sat at his desk trying to write words
baring beauty.
His mind roamed, far, in another of his forests? Eyes
changing mysteries to
words. Many unwritten and some on paper.

She
took a phone call and argued with her boss. “Thirty cents
more an hour? That's an insult. I'm worth more than that. I've
worked hard for two years. Thirty cents? Thirty cents!”

He couldn’t hear the telephone’s raised voice.
He knew it was justifying.
He heard his wife’s, justifying.

His poem vanished in a dissolving aspirin
of disconnected images,
for thirty cents more,
and he returned from absence with the jerk of domesticity.

“Tell her that today’s your last day there,” he said.
“If you don’t feel valued, resign!”
He left them to mutual annoyed justifications. No anger.
Theirs or his; yet. It was building.

He sat in his lounge chair near his kids. A door muffled
round two, and three. Who was winning?
They watched anything
on TV and didn’t know.

Round four, and five. Then silence. A knockout?

Whose?
Thus Fell Zarathustra!

What if the West’s hermit of muddy clarity, Zarathustra, left his sacred cave in the mountain to take his wisdom down to the village of fools who carried lanterns during daytime then tripped over the s-gliding body of his beloved snake, frightening his dear eagle into frenetic flight, and crashed down, bleeding, head over heads, until his neck snapped on a tree root?

Who would then have informed the village fools (us, Nietzsche chided) that God was dead and they (no, we) had killed him?

Who would have told them, and vile Nazis (who sought to fly like Zarathustra’s eagle but slithered on their bellies like his cold-blooded snake), that this was the age of the Übermenschen?

A pity he didn’t trip.
Gaia

Your breathed life
is cold this morning.
I see your children,
there ... there ... no, there!

Those who outlive me move least
and frighten me.
They caress and woo me into
supplication.

I kneel on blue Levi knees
that sink into the pine needles
you shower me with.
This baptism washes
city sin from my conscience.

The spirit brushes dirt from my face,
pulls at my untucked shirt,
and asks me,
too often, Mother,
for what You told it to forget.
Is my prayer for its death really so wrong?
Kaikoura

Eye and mouth-open excitement
and a high-five-ish “Yesss!!”

Caught!

He flip-flapping flopped
on the salt-dried wharf.
Oh, the sight of frantic gasping!

Couldn’t even look him in the eye.
Drowning in air
no-one had tasted.

Fumbling,
unhooked his lip
which hadn’t stained my barb.

I thought it would,
and “ouched” twice.
Drops of red sneaked
from my thumb.

Tried to return him
but that spiny back fin
and flip-flapping
made him high voltage.

With him and me near the ends of our wits,
I managed to squeeze hold.
He plopped with no splash
in water so murky I couldn’t even see
if he swam.

Damn!
Willows by the Bridge

Joy-breathing kids pull your hair
and swing like Tarzan
or climb, though not as far as Rapunzel’s prince.
Young ones notice and like you
more than any others.
Is this why each primary school
makes room for your sisters?
Some end up alone and “out of bounds”
but still children risk all to share their company.

O willows by the river,
your dreadlocks create a soft shadow
of shining frog-green tranquillity
for dreamers, lovers and readers.
Would mighty Caesar succumb
to your beauty as he did to Cleopatra’s?
Would he write that he came,
he saw and was conquered?

O willows by the river,
you have truly conquered at least one heart:
that of a poet who dreams, loves and read.
He jealously asks, How many others?
Dad took us swimming at the pool in Takaka. He could swim. So could my brother. So could my sister. So could the man who hopped to the pool’s edge on his only leg. I couldn’t. But I watched that man’s stump. A thigh, a scar. No knee. His plasticy thing stood on the concrete near his wife. Wearing a sock and a black shoe. It balanced well. So did its owner, who teetered at the edge waiting for kids in the way to move so he could dive. His wink shattered my long stare. Mum did that elbow in the side thing that mums do when their kids embarrass them. She did it again. And, I think, again. Maybe his wink hadn’t worked after all. His dive did!

And boy, could he swim! Like Johnny Weismuller (Dad was a fan of the “original” Tarzan), but didn’t the king of the jungle have two legs? He swam and swam, and I watched and watched. His stump made no splash as it moved up and down next to his kicking leg. I couldn’t wait to see how Johnny, king of the jungle, would get out of the pool. Would he hop up the steps in the deep end? Or pull himself up anywhere along the edge with his mighty arms, muscled from vine-swinging? Would his wife bring his leg? Dripping wet and in swimming togs only, would he put on a dry leg with a sock and shoe? I never saw. Mum sent me off to get ice-blocks. She knew what she was doing. When I returned Tarzan and Jane were gone.
City

City breathes in, out
each January, November.
Minds come, go home,
giving energy, stealing it.
Winds blow, rain annoys
all year. Even in the
neither-hot-nor-cold summer, winter.

Trees compete for dominance, and win.
Leaves in fall are this city’s gold
but even Highbury’s celebrities
don’t see value. Blind as moles
they battle against themselves and
dig deeper holes to crawl into. Our main
media attraction; them and court cases.

Old people, young. The Plaza their beehive.
Tuesday five-dollar nights create queues.
Movies remove them
from home for two hours,
then let them go. Only The Warehouse
has such power. And bars, every second step.

Teenagers swing and drink in the Gardens on
Friday, Saturday evenings. On kids’ things.
Their tale of boredom falls on trees
and dark sawdust and bark paths.
Who else listens?
The Intruder on Grey Street

Secured to an iron perch
by same-colour
painted bolts and welding,
– looking like a washing machine,
I heard children say – you tell us
that freedom is not absolute.
Sanctioned paparazzi, your flashbulb
intrudes, but we can't
lash out with Sean Penn's anger
and smash you in the face
(Christ cleansing the temple).
You impose
from the safety of loftiness.
Whose conscience whispered?
The city’s?
Whose mind decided?
The mayor’s?
When? Why were we not asked?
Boy Racers

Pallid fighter aces
in arrogant beanies
and baggy jeans
fly faster than their tattoos
through irreplaceable youth
and around their square.
A white cross quivers, high,
without Christ’s sagging body
in heavy air that echoes snarls
of savage gear changes.

Suburban eyes see only
melanoma spots
on an old man’s ears.
Danger and noise
in lowered seats and
fat exhausts conceal the joy
and triumph of power
with few limits. Teenage girls
with piercings notice. Admiring,
they masquerade. Cool and lethal
they drink and join.

Thumping bass beats inflict
stress fractures on welding,
eardrums and upholstery.
Without mercy they torment
others idling at lights.

Heroes of their mirrors,
they zigzag through Fitzherbert’s
lanes and traffic
like slalom skiers,
breaking hard for the camera,
then not.
They swerve left well before the university to snake up to a car park where true life is taught.
The View from Anzac Park

Who cares about the golden orange panorama of night-time street lights that separate lines and squares of ink black where houses with curtained windows are? Ask the moths. They ignore houses to love street lights. No-one at Anzac Park sees any lights for more than ten minutes – except, maybe, a glimmer of agreement reflecting from lovers’ eyes.

Cursed by heavy fogs that dampen only the inside of car windows, this sacred site of flat asphalt and infinite view pulsates to more racing heartbeats than ever found on a basketball court. But dead seriousness pervades Pork Chop Hill like the spirit of a UCOL exam room. This is a solemn business.

Elbows become constrained by door handles and window winders, and knees by gear sticks and other knees.

Discomfort surrenders momentarily to delirium for many, disappointment for some and the start of life-time regrets for others.

Discomfort returns a night later.
Cathedral of the Holy Spirit

The Mother of God
sings lullabies to no-one but
everyone as birds and car fumes
slowly corrupt the glory of her paint.
Gazing down on a dull stretch of Broadway
away from the commotion of Downtown, She
presides over masses
with unblinking focus
and whispers of delicious reassurance.

Sundays bring a smile. A throng
equal to that of a hazy pub the night before
walk through doors she can’t bend to see.
Songs float up, mixed with the smells
of perfume, after-shave and carbon dioxide.

She savours life and raises a delicate eyebrow.
Above her a spire stretches to the height
of Jack’s beanstalk. White for forty kilometres
it beacons and beckons. A lighthouse
for voyagers seeking a point of reference,
it guides them – home.
Morris Street

Pizza and
Tui beer boxes
add warm-smelling colour
to Morris Street’s peeling verandas.
Spring-spilling couches laze.
Cars held together by faded stickers collapse
everywhere, dead and dying,
on grass that grows around their rust.
Mud also grows,
spreading from tyre tracks
as quickly as it can
before summer turns it
into arid desert.
Narrowed by parking, often crooked,
the street has shrunk to a single lane
flanked by crumpled, decaying letter boxes
broken off their poles.
The street burps with alcohol and
fish’n’chip breath
and babbles
with never-ending rugby idolatry.
Old residents, living like dissidents,
emerge, stretch and relax in summers.
The young wander as nomads
to other hunting grounds,
returning,
with pizza and beer,
when semester starts.
Massey Bridge

Scarfies and boys
accelerate with adrenal pleasure.
All others claim normality.
They touch breaks and slow,
distrusting the narrow lanes
squeezed on by a council
that gulped at the cost of a brother bridge.
Wincing claustrophobia
confounds efforts to steer perfectly straight.
Drivers make a vibrantly conscious
left-right-left-right series
of tiny steering corrections
that keep them from cars alongside,
all suffering the same flu shivers
and trucking close enough
for hairy, wind-blown spiders to step
from one car’s side mirror to another’s.
Spiders and drivers seldom weep for
lost lovers, but now and then they do –
Evening Standard pages blotting their tears –
for those with cut-down seats and cigar exhausts.
The Heart of the Place

Hail, Te Peeti Te Awe Awe.
What has become of your legacy?

You have stood guard
over duck ponds for a century

since your great heart ceased
and Italians cast you in marble

as cold as winter sleet and placed you
lamppost high above a new domain:

seventeen pretty acres of manicured European pomp
that now reeks with dread of night violence and

public toilets that few without a quest dare visit.
Alphabet flowers and Lewis Carroll lawns

give work to gardeners and pleasure to those
who buy postcards at Bennets. Who else?

A few children taking their mothers for walks
throw bread at The Square’s residents.

Retail workers venture in as far as the food caravans
and the brave or hurried cut across.

Great Rangitane prince, when did we forget,
or cease to learn

that Te Marae O Hine, the Daughter of Peace,
came as a gift, intended as a meeting place

vibrant with humanity? Prescience abounding,
you wanted Maori and Pakeha together. You birthed a city.

Your unblinking gaze is seldom mirrored and your name
now means little to most. Yet some, prince,
see your vision and share and smile. They know
you watch over ducks – and far more.

Love

I breathe in perfect darkness without a clue,
but I feel your throat
with my thumb and fingers
and notice you swallow.
Your heart beats, and I copy.

I hear nothing in the black,
and your soft lips meet mine and I know
your eyes are closed. Gently.
I smell your shampoo and guess the fragrance.

Long lashes blink unseen in the vacuum
of that gift. You cannot know you possess
it until you have given it away.
Yearning I wake.
Terrace End Cemetery

Green gates open
as a silent, yawning mouth
to a world of old cracked concrete
and weedy shingle paths
and a council sign that brightly proclaims
– with rusting indelicacy –
that our forebears’ sacred site of sleep
is part of the city’s clomping Heritage Trail.

Headstones once as white as the bones they name
grow intolerant of their grey-green lichen life
and the stains of weather-washed lettering paint.
Humiliated by grubbiness,
many stones have chosen to end it all.
Their broken remains lie as a testament to their shame.

Mary’s gorgeous legs of marble
stand next to her separated torso
and a pretty head that rolled a pace away.
Baby Christ never woke within her cradling arms.
He smiles asleep.
O Mother, blessed be, you kept him safe.

In street-side lawns
evergreen trees glorify the immortality of souls.
Yet inside the cemetery’s low-slung mossy boundary
all trees weep.
Their skeletal limbs and decomposed leaves
sigh “we are sorry”.
Sparrows pecking worms hear their whispers and ask
who it was that planted deciduous trees in a graveyard.

An eight-sided chapel, too small for human use,
stands glum and locked with a giant’s padlock.
Spiders’ webs, birds’ nests
and fresh white paint hold together
this café for lonely spectres. It’s far cosier than the two or
three rotting concrete crypts
with doors of paint-peeling steel and scratched graffiti
that look like bank vaults
or solitary confinement cells.

Baghdad Downpour

My house is a hole
I hold a photograph
and cry for you
How can I live
alone?
My house is a hole
I climb in to search
and find fragments
I hold your hand
which seeps
Ellan Vannin Veg Veen, 839 AD

I was straying on the beach as warships glided in but no-one took notice of a no-one like me; a knot-haired ragged girl with a dirty face, a wild daughter of winds that rage free.

The strangers waded through feet-freezing shallows, bent, stretched their backs and laughed with great bellows.

Those large hairy men with swords, axes and spears threw nothing worse than cruel eyes my way as I slipped out of sight, then raced home to warn my gentle people of the brutes in the bay.

Sprinting, heart pounding, feet tripping I fell, terrified of them who by ships came from hell.

I shouted with strong curse-filled cries to make the village heed my frightened warning but my thirteen-year-old voice made no noise in the market hubbub of that bright winter morning.

Bleeding sore-footed I hopped in torn shoes to my family who’d listen to a scared daughter’s news.

Father jumped up from repairing his nets and, studying my expression, believed. He pulled me to tell the old ones and headman of the death threat that he grimly perceived.

Heart beating swiftly I talked tongue-tripping of the giants who strode from the sea, evil dripping.

Our headman had us all flee to the stronghold that served green-mossed as our sanctuary; ancient beyond knowledge and often repaired, doors barred, it would offer at least some safety.
Praying we all cowered inside the stone walls awaiting the attackers’ frightening horn calls.

Soon we saw them pass by in the distance. They took little notice of wealth-less fisher-folk, who hid safe in a thick-walled squat tower. They mocked us, baring arses, as a humiliating joke.

After two days of silence we dared to go out to no sign of them who’d have killed us no doubt.

Yet father lamented several days later, while standing forlorn with tears beside me, that the next over village, far richer, had suffered, all men cut down without a shadow of mercy.

And our safe, grieving village will never forget what they owe to a girl who outran a death threat.

* This poem is based on a purportedly true story told to me three decades ago by one of my uncles, whose heart still yearns for his homeland, the wondrous Isle of Man ("Ellan Vannin Veg Veen"). I have used a Manx verse structure to express its simple magic.
Winning First

Can you swing temptation
like a priest’s gold incense burner
with wafts of pungent purity?

Can you stitch the martyr’s hole I tore
in my grey shirt above my heart
with cotton of the same hue?

Can you flick a penny from your thumb
so that it casts sunbeams in my eyes
before landing head-up in triumph?

Will you lie down on train tracks
and rest with eyes shut
while I drop pebbles from a bridge?

Will you hold your breath in the bath
while you wash off shampoo
and think of tomorrow?

Algiers

Heaven here
and happiness

Faces like coffee
Hearts of chocolate

I remember and hum

Sleeping on pillows
not walking through fire

You remember and sing