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**Singing through: A collection of poems**

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**DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

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Date: 15 December 2002

## Index

Mostly water	1
The heart of things	2
Inwardness	3
Love matter	4
The clearing	5
Detached	6
Dressing-room blues	7
Traces	8
A world of words	9
Lover's quarrel	10
Desire	11
3 a.m.	12
Exile	13
Clean break	14
Song for Whitman	15
Miracle	16
Hunger	17
Narcissus	18
Alchemy	19
Lone voice	20
Summer afternoons	21
The doorway	22
Out of the labyrinth	23
No compass	24
Afterwards	25
Separate	26
The instrument	27
A world between	28
Dusk room	29

## **MOSTLY WATER**

“We’re mostly water, not solid at all.”

That’s what the travelling man said to me

Lifting his full glass absent-mindedly.

“If you want to stay true to what you are,

Keep changing. Fixed opinions are the devil’s food.”

I turned to answer him, but he had gone,

Shifting shapes without a pause.

Stumbling outside into the pouring rain

I felt my bones dissolve, yet felt at home.

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## THE HEART OF THINGS

There are many kinds of travellers you can meet,  
And most of them just changed their scenery  
And not their minds.

As for me, I conjure a man of eighty years  
Holding me fast with a voice like a river,  
Talking of foreign places.

"I haven't done much of what you might call travel,"  
He says between pauses like eddies in his talk.  
"The furthest I have travelled was on heart roads  
Towards those I tried to love,  
Or into the heart of a song that pulled me in  
As songs will do sometimes.

And the best view I ever had:  
Well, that must have been sitting on my front steps,  
Scanning the mind of my companion  
Between stories, when the talk grew thin,  
And time slowed down."

## INWARDNESS

I meet these people, mostly late at night  
When they're a little run down.  
My blindness catches them off guard.  
Being young, it's the girls I remember most:  
"You see me as I really am," they say,  
"You see the inside of things, of people."  
I know better than to enlighten them:  
After all, I need my illusions too.

When I am old, I suppose, and growing fat,  
Old men will seek me out and say:  
"When I was young I could look in the mirror  
And it was me I saw there. Now when I look  
I'm seeing someone else. How lucky you are  
To miss having to face that."

I imagine a presence that is so old  
Its body's ravaged by time, ready to drop.  
Its voice is young, though, much younger than I am,  
Younger than anything you've ever seen,  
And full of easy laughter.  
"Have mercy on imperfection," he keeps saying,  
"Have mercy."

## LOVE MATTER

Beautiful beyond words, these clear, blue notes,  
These wild, blue notes that hang in the air  
Like a cathedral floating in the sky,  
Beyond the body's reach.

Hey, music men, do you know how you made them,  
These notes so pure and wild?  
Listen, and I will tell you:  
With your own bodies, muscle, blood and bone,  
With your chests swelled out and your feet planted firm  
And the song like a tree reaching up between them.

It's flesh and blood holds up that edifice,  
Straining against the pull of gravity.

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## THE CLEARING

"You cannot force the sound to come,"  
That's what the singing teacher told me that time,  
While she kept her hand between my ribs  
And we waited for something to be born.

"You can only be ready, only be a passage  
For the sound that comes through of itself.  
Imagine that you are the clearing  
Where song is born."

I leaned into myself and listened closely,  
And didn't seem to know the voice I heard.  
It came out of the depths so easily,  
And took the air, a free thing, fully fledged.

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## DETACHED

I don't have much to say today.  
It's true, some days I wake up  
With a head full of witty ideas,  
But clearly not today.

Today I sit with a full glass beside me,  
A book unopened on my knee  
And music without words.

Tomorrow the dog can take me for a walk,  
I'll do the dishes, shave, write a poem perhaps.  
Today I'm letting it all slip by me.  
If you have anything to say to me,  
Wait till tomorrow, and by then  
Maybe I'll be myself. Maybe I'll answer.

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## DRESSING-ROOM BLUES

When the show is finally over,  
When the audience has filed out,  
You're suddenly naked in some dressing room  
Counting how many miles you are from home.

It's not enough then just to say  
You chose this road because it was so lonely,  
Or found this voice because it found you first.  
No, it's not much use saying these things now  
In a lonely dressing-room at midnight  
With nothing but a voice to hold on to.  
But you must continue saying them anyway  
And believe them too, until you've found the strength  
To go back onto the dark road  
Of what you call your life.

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## TRACES

There are still traces of you on my desk:  
Shells, feathers and a sheaf of corn.  
Nothing else but the time of year  
To remind me of our lying here.

We made our lives up as we went:  
That's how it seemed to us then,  
Selecting any outcome at a whim,  
So rich in stories that we banished time.

Now that I'm used to open-endedness  
These fragile objects haunt me  
In the way that relics have,  
Commemorating losses,  
Errors of love.

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## A WORLD OF WORDS

You build a world of words to live in.  
You are young and strong in loving, so  
Any words will do to begin with.  
Till one day you find yourself  
On different sides of an ocean,  
And you hear that faint, cross-continental crackle  
When you speak, and the echo of your voice  
Drifting back to you across the sea.

Then you will feel the weight of those words,  
Until your hand grows heavy with it,  
You'll feel those miles of cable under sea  
And know the hardness of finding words  
Strong and true enough to live in.

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## LOVER'S QUARREL

These lover's quarrels, going in circles  
Into the small hours of the night  
Have become a sad routine for them.  
They are so tired, they would like to be still,  
But the words keep chattering on relentlessly.

There is a hiding-place behind her words,  
Retreat or prison, he doesn't know.  
She sends him signals that he cannot follow  
In a foreign language he doesn't understand.

And his own words, where do they come from?  
He senses a high, bare place, but cannot name it,  
Can only say that there he stands alone  
Leaning into infinities between them.

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## DESIRE

There was a fire on Papegaaiberg  
The first night we seduced each other.  
I did not see it, but believe  
It was a beautiful, fierce thing,  
Fit emblem for what lay in store for us.

And so we hunted each other for a season,  
And the world was simplified to a bright flame,  
Fuel for a winter that seemed years away.

Now that the fire is out the world seems too big:  
I'm at a loss in it.  
Find the scorch marks where we were, tell me  
If you see something turning gently green there.

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### 3 A.M.

I start awake, and you're asleep beside me  
Aware of the familiar feel of sheets,  
To the sound of your voice, heard once upon a time,  
saying: "Be mine, take slow root in me,  
In my inner landscapes that no-one has seen."

Downstairs, I know, last night's old dinner things  
Are piled up in the sink with sodden tea bags.  
And around them cold light slowly gathers,  
And silence.

I'd like to wake you, would like to respond  
To an old invitation, but  
No words come. Instead I listen to your breathing,  
Measure the space between us on the bed.

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## EXILE

They sit together after a long absence,  
Amazed. There is a jadedness,  
A haunted sound in each other's voices,  
A falling off, dwindling from fire to ash.

Each of them catches his own image  
In the other's awkwardness.  
They shake hands as they part:  
The mute kinship of those  
Who have accepted exile from themselves.

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## **CLEAN BREAK**

We say goodbye, and think it is for good:  
From now on we'll avoid each other's eyes  
By unspoken agreement,  
Say this clean break was for the best.

But sometimes we still meet in sleep,  
Or a chance mention of the other's name  
Startles us into a strange, old hurt  
At things ill done, words better left unsaid,  
And we know there are no clean breaks,  
Just the same old longing, messy as before.

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## SONG FOR WHITMAN

You became the singer of infinities —  
Prairies, oceans and the stars above us —  
Seducing us onto the open road  
That beckons in your poems.

But you have a secret, and I think I know it:  
I know why your lines are so long,  
I suspect why your voice is so urgent and loud.  
You wanted to throw your arms around the world  
Sitting stock-still in a narrow room,  
Longing to breathe free air.

I travel inward from necessity,  
Must find your open road inside my own mind,  
But it's still recognizable as yours,  
And on it I encounter you, Walt Whitman,  
As you stop and wait for me.

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## MIRACLE

I touch an old man's shoulder in the street,  
Just bare bone with no meat on it.  
He's just recovered from an obscure illness.  
He is a music man like me  
In a summer city full of tourists.

"A miracle," his girl friend assures us.  
And then: "You blind?" she asks, and I nod.  
She says: "Never stop praying for a miracle."

Now that old man is dead, his music  
Replaced by a monotonous drum box.  
The only proof I have that he existed  
Is the memory of that brittle bone:  
It seemed my hand could reach right through it.  
And one more thing: I recollect  
Him playing "Mona Lisa" sweet and slow,  
A fierce wind blowing me off balance  
As we sang together.

## HUNGER

Denver is homeless, has time on his hands.  
When he finds me, lost, on a street corner,  
He says: "We're here to help each other."  
He takes me home then, and I give him lunch.

We stand outside my front gate as we talk:  
I am too scared to ask him in today.  
He chews contentedly, he takes his time,  
And mine, I think, looking at my Braille watch.

Back inside, with the door shut behind me,  
I am suddenly hungry too beyond all reason,  
And nothing in my house will satisfy it:  
"We're here to help each other," he had said.  
But there are walls between us all the time,  
Even when they are invisible they're there,  
We carry them along with us always.  
"Now there's a problem for you," I think he's saying.  
"Eat your way out of that one, see if you can."

## **NARCISSUS**

We think we're looking at another's face,  
But it is our own image that we see  
And worship. So we fall into disgrace,  
Repeating the same patterns endlessly.

Then we rise up, always a little shaken,  
But we absolve ourselves and do not stay.  
Unseen from the directions we have taken  
Beautiful strangers stretch, yawn, move away.

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## ALCHEMY

"How do you show a blind man photographs?"

You laughed, but tried to show me anyway.

These photographs were torn and torn again

Deliberately, out of ... some emotion

I could not fathom, get my head around.

We were sitting in the car that was your real home,

Chaotic universe of books and tools and playing cards.

You'd found them on a rubbish-dump

And spent the night restoring them

To a love story with a violent end.

One by one you read them to me,

Making it up for all I knew, but bringing

Something back to life at least, ennobled.

I called it alchemy, and loved you for it.

Now, seeing better, I must smile

Remembering my own young man's incomprehension

At so much violence, those many broken edges

I tried to smooth away, and could not.

## LONE VOICE

They are covering that song of yours  
In all the late-night bars this year.  
They make it sound so smooth, sophisticated,  
Like a million other songs you've heard.

I remember your own voice at sixteen  
That would not submit to any training,  
That sang as if it was the first voice  
To howl at loss.

Reclaim those songs of yours, my brother,  
Let's hear once more that sorrowing, wild note  
That never has been taught by any master,  
But lives on free air and on solitude.

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## SUMMER AFTERNOONS

Last summer you rushed home from work each day

To lie down next to me.

We felt so sure of love, we could afford

To let the hours pass absent-mindedly.

Of course we were doomed, maybe we even suspected it.

But back then we had the strength to laugh away

The loud, insistent knocking at the door,

The ticking of the clock on the table.

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## THE DOORWAY

After the quarrel he just stood there  
As she got up and smashed her glass,  
Flung it from her against the wall.  
He wanted to laugh but he was almost breaking himself,  
He wanted to go and he wanted to stay.

It seemed a door inside him had been unhinged,  
And through the hole it made a strong wind blew,  
Slamming him like a fist, and yet  
He knew he could breathe more freely this way.

So he just stood there, breathless and alert,  
Snarling in the doorway.

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## OUT OF THE LABYRINTH

The book fell from your hand in mid-sentence,  
And there were no more words between us.  
They seemed then like a shadowy labyrinth  
In which we had been lost.  
Now we had found our way into the sun.

New desire is always like that at first:  
Since then we have had to find a way back in,  
Into words like “perhaps” and “nevertheless”,  
But what free air that was blowing on our skin,  
Lying back in each other’s arms  
With not a word between us.

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## NO COMPASS

When I was a boy I loved vigorous verses,  
The confident love poems of the young.  
Then women's bodies were maps with place names  
Rolled lightly off the tongue,  
Suggesting what they hid.

Now at night as we explore each other's  
Bodies after years of practice  
I confess ignorance as I am flooded  
By newness, released into the unknown,  
Travelling without a compass, travelling blind.

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## AFTERWARDS

After the storm subsides we lie awake,  
Content to be still in each other's arms.  
Slowly the world grows solid once again,  
The bed, the table, our own clumsy bodies.

Outside the night is huge and full  
Of things I cannot put a name to,  
And inside we are, certainly no wiser,  
But certain that we've stood alone together  
I that no-man's land where knowledge fails us,  
And we fall back on pure gesture, pure sound.

You turn towards me on the bed  
And challenge: "Write a poem about where we've been,"  
And we smile, knowing that it can't be done,  
And will be done for all that.

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## SEPARATE

I don't know much about the sea,  
And the secrets of rivers and woods are dark to me.  
But I know your salt taste on my tongue,  
Your hair in different kinds of weather.

I am no climber of mountains,  
I prefer my landscapes full of people.  
But I think I've glimpsed the hard and holy places  
Where you have stood alone inside yourself  
Leaning into doubts that had no floor.

My arms go round you easily,  
And yet so much of you I cannot reach.  
You come and go on the tides of yourself,  
Towards me and back, how I cannot say.

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## THE INSTRUMENT

I came to sing to you where you lay  
With a voice that had studied hard to grow.  
But your hands and mouth came down to play  
A strange, wild tune I did not know.

I listened to the sounds of my own voice —  
My own, and yet another's. For the words  
Were strange and hard. And yet I was the place  
In which they let themselves be heard.

Now I remember fluent hands on strings,  
But cannot be sure what the music meant.  
Is it mine, this voice that climbs and sings,  
Or is it your instrument?

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## A WORLD BETWEEN

Each day we face each other across tables  
Cluttered with books and crockery,  
Not present to each other or ourselves.  
I lean across to you as if unsure  
Whether my hand can reach so great a distance,  
Is capable of the least lucky gesture.

Yet sometimes as I listen to the dusk  
Your voice finds me, suddenly intimate,  
restoring me to a younger self,  
One that was free to choose you and be chosen.

Around us the world is full of half-known objects  
Our words have entered into and transformed.  
Listen, they answer in a double voice.

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## DUSK ROOM

In this room it is always dusk:  
The single window is small and high.  
All around us as we move about  
Clothes, music, books lie scattered.

Come, though; sit down. Here's more than meets the eye.  
Every square inch you touch remembers  
Lives that have passed through it on their way.  
You too will shed something of yourself here —  
A new idea, a filament of skin.

Come, friend, beloved, whoever you are,  
(In this room it is dusk and nothing's certain)  
Shed and renew yourself before you go.

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