

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

Turning Compost



James A. Harrison

TURNING COMPOST

a collection of 40 poems by

James A. Harrison

Author's student number: HRRJAM001

Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Arts in Creative Writing.

Department of English, Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
2001

Declaration by author: 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.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized letter 'J' followed by a period and a small flourish.

Date:

14/2/2007

Abstract

Turning Compost is a collection of forty poems, two of which, *Seven Kakhaiku* and *Tres Troubled Triolets*, are multiple poems intended to be read as units. The poems have been ordered so that there is a flow of connected or contrasting ideas from poem to poem, therefore it is recommended that they be read in the order presented. The themes covered by the poems are varied, but principal amongst them are memory, nature, dreams and symbols, family and friends, and the search for meaning; they appear in roughly that order. Death, and its challenges to meaning, is a theme which recurs throughout the collection, something which is reflected in the collection's title which is borrowed from one of the poems. Included is one poem, *Pig People*, which was written specifically for children.

The poems are written in a variety of forms, evincing the poet's conscious rejection of stylistic consistency as a goal in developing his voice. An introduction provides a personal context in which the author views the collection. Poetry as autobiography of thought and experience, is the thread which, for the author, links all the poems into a single narrative.

Artistic influences include the work of Judson Jerome, Robert Frost, Tatamkulu Afrika, Gus Ferguson, Spike Milligan, Frank Zappa and Benjamin Britten, and the supervision of Professor Geoff Haresnape in the preparation of the collection. Philosophical influences include Christianity, Eastern religions, and the work of Charles Darwin and his successors.

Contents

| | page |
|--|------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1 In a Dream Without Knowing | 2 |
| 2 Primary Education | 3 |
| 3 Sainted Road | 4 |
| 4 Fear of Darkness | 6 |
| 5 The Transport Museum | 7 |
| 6 I Swam Out | 8 |
| 7 Attempted Haiku | 9 |
| 8 Seven Kakhaiku | 10 |
| 9 Turning Compost in Spring | 12 |
| 10 Bokmakierie | 13 |
| 11 A Green Funeral | 14 |
| 12 Dare I Believe? | 15 |
| 13 Virus | 16 |
| 14 Revelation | 17 |
| 15 Drought | 18 |
| 16 Stepping Outside | 19 |
| 17 Deepsea | 20 |
| 18 Death of a Tree | 21 |
| 19 Snipe | 22 |
| 20 Dry Stone Wall | 23 |
| 21 Pearl Unstrung | 24 |
| 22 Beached | 25 |
| 23 Mental Hygiene | 26 |
| 24 Unexpected Gladness | 27 |
| 25 A Birth | 28 |
| 26 Father and Child | 29 |
| 27 A Walk in the Woods | 30 |
| 28 An Outing With the Children | 31 |
| 29 Pig People | 32 |
| 30 The Comfort and the Terror | 34 |
| 31 Communication | 35 |
| 32 Unpoetic | 36 |
| 33 Tres Troubled Triolets | 37 |
| 34 Death's Demise | 38 |
| 35 The Flaneur | 39 |
| 36 Giant | 40 |
| 37 In Afternoon's Sad Light | 41 |
| 38 Still the Horizon Conceals the Absolute | 42 |
| 39 Nocturne | 43 |
| 40 T. Monk | 44 |

Cover illustration: computer graphic by the author.

Introduction

My career as a poet began in high school, but in my early twenties it entered a long and deep dormancy under the influence of an incapacitating lack of confidence. Vitality flickered briefly ten years later with a single poem written out of a sense of duty to a school publication I was editing as a teacher. Five years later I consciously decided to resume life as a writer and in one evening wrote three poems on the trot – an exhilarating deliverance from creative coma. With only minor hiatuses since then, I have written continuously for the past thirteen years and have now accumulated more than a hundred finished poems.

Feeling the need to hone my critical faculties, I decided to do the course in Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town in 2000. Happily this had the desired effect of helping me to see the flaws – and some strengths – in my writing, inspiring me to revisit many poems and rework them into more complete and refined pieces. The year was unusually productive in the writing of new poems and in reading: amongst others, I found the writings of the American poet, Judson Jerome, especially useful (*The Poet and the Poem* (1974); *The Poet's Handbook* (1980)).

At more or less the same time as deciding to do the degree, I also decided to self-publish a series of small collections. The purpose was to find an alternative to the frustratingly passive dependency on journals for publication of one's work, as well as to focus my resolve to finalize the poems and make them readily available in finished form. At the time of writing, I have completed and published six of these collections, and the seventh and last will follow shortly. This private enterprise dovetailed constructively with work on the degree and provided the added advantage of Professor Geoff Haresnape's critical opinion prior to the publication of most of the collections.

This collection serves two functions: on the one hand it is a dissertation to meet the requirements of the MA in Creative Writing; on the other hand it is a compilation of most of my best work to date, and thus brings to a close a phase of my career as a poet. At this juncture I feel obliged to ask: What have I learned?

There are many answers to that question. Writing is as much a dialogue with myself as it is a communication with others. Every poem is a process of discovery of what I think and feel. One answer must therefore be that I have learnt more about myself. Another answer comes from trying to find an audience for my poems, which has taught me something about the forces of taste, fashion, personality and economics which determine the success of an artist. This has brought new insights into, and, in some cases, added respect for, those poets who do succeed.

I have learned that there is, despite opinions to the contrary, a secure place for beauty and spirituality in poetry, and all the arts for that matter, because I have felt myself respond most strongly to these elements, and have witnessed a similar response in others. It has also become clear that conveying those elements truly and with originality depends on a kind of grace – I have no other word for it – which comes from beyond skill.

But the most important thing I have learned is that there is joy in creation, and it is a joy which cannot be found elsewhere. It is this lesson, more than anything else, which will help me to continue from this point, and to keep on writing.

James A. Harrison
Cape Town, January 2001

In a Dream Without Knowing

The curtains breathe in my window,
clouds explode in slow motion –
my memories billow
through the walls.

Suspended over territories, strangely familiar
yet changed, I see landmarks
etched stark and clear
but in new colours.

Far featureless stretches separate outposts of recollection,
like a country road in headlights – only broken lines
measuring out months and years
of forgotten travel.

In isolated encampments along that road live people
whom I knew. Their expressions never change
while doing the same things,
over and over:

A calculating teacher beats me with a cane;
policemen enter my bedroom at night,
but I can smile
and not care.

Past lovers are there for the summoning –
they never refuse me, but
they move with certainty,
like robots.

I live there too – strangely changed, yet familiar.
I wish to introduce myself
to myself, talk and ask
many questions.

They are all a captive population living the past –
my own cohort of fading ghosts
wielding their power in a dream
without knowing.

And if I could travel along their myriad parallel roads,
where would I find me? What would I
be doing, and what would
my countenance be?

Primary Education

Three six year olds, but a few weeks in school,
on the classroom piano happily thundered.
Entered God Almighty, the Principal, quoting a rule:
Who had the silence so wantonly sundered?
He interrogated us with great shaking jowls
till with moral courage, of which I am still proud,
at attention I stepped forward (with loosening bowels)
and confessed, "I did, Sir!", a little too loud.
He held me back while the others he shooed.
He pushed on my head – fear made my ears hum –
down between his knees – it seemed somehow rude –
and thus with a horny hand, God beat my bum,
saying: "I'll teach you to be cheeky!" as he made me good.
It took many years of education before I understood.

Sainted Road

It's a detour I often take,
down St Catherine Road and a little hill.
At the bottom I
look to the left
at a modest, even boring, house,
as I pass.
The pull is irrational
and puzzling.

A small ghost lives there.
He comforts a teddy bear in a swing
after gouging out its button eyes.
(It's guilty acts that he rehearses most.)
With his moffie cousin
he plays rude games
and examines orifices.
He tries to shove down the plughole
a small turd
that sneaked out in the bath.
He feels the warm release of peeing in bed,
followed by clammy cold,
and his mother's exasperation.
He threatens his best friend
with a spade,
if he dare go home.
Tadpoles scatter
from his pond-prodding stick.

He finds girls fascinating and strange.
Erica tries to teach him ballet steps,
and Anne shows him how she eats snails:
fresh from the garden, shelled and raw.
"You can examine me anywhere"
is his arch seduction attempt
on Leslie, the blonde doll nextdoor nurse.

He feels his father's anger
at experimental holes drilled in a wall.
He feels his father's fright
at a huge and special catherine wheel
exploding with unplanned drama on Guy Fawkes night.
Through constricted bronchi,
in a night hell of steam and fumes and panicked parents,
he gasps and wheezes for breath, and his ribs ache
at the slapstick magic of Donald, Pluto and Goofy,
silent but for a chattering eight millimetre projector
and his own helpless hilarity.

Nostalgia's conundrum and why I drive
this way
become less mysterious as I review
the ghostly child's short, nine-year tenure
as a living boy –
short, nine,
but mine.

“moffie” = an Afrikaans slang term for a homosexual male, often used in a gentle, humorous manner.

University of Cape Town

Fear of Darkness

I was ten, it was ten pm;
I softly turned on my big old radio:
“the mad killer stalked the fen...”
Father entered and demanded to know
why I had disobeyed his rule.
Excuses didn't help at all;
he grabbed the radio – face gone cruel –
and smashed it quiet against the wall.

It was a stress-trimmed fuse
that ignited his temper that singular night
and caused him to abuse
his son, who still recalls the fright.

Now, though dread and confusion have long gone,
I find I fear children who are loved by no one.

The Transport Museum

Silent, empty, without a whistle scream,
bolted to rails beyond the platform ending,
the old train stood in the museum station.
No jolt and sway of steel to chant of steam,
no rolling stock around the corner bending;
absent was that grand exhilaration.

So familiar, yet so distant and remote,
journeys in a previous life they seem:
circular door handles, green upholstery leather,
etched springbok heads in window glass afloat.
When did they change to electricity from steam?
Was it before I started school, or after?

From habit, I made an automatic mental note
to ask my father – I knew he would remember.
But in our garden his ashes had been scattered
with all his experiences and the memories they wrote.
He died in June and now it was September –
too late to realize how such things mattered.

Steam billowed like a curtain, smoke coughed thick and black.
Fast the engine's urgent breath, the wheels' emphatic clack.
For a moment down a finite line it flew;
I saw an end, my grandparents' parents saw it begin.
Things look old that so recently were new,
and age like rust now grows upon my skin.

Eternal life is a bygone worn belief.
I not yet forty with those wheels which cannot turn,
our shared experience tied helpless to the rails,
for inexorable obscurity feel some selfish grief;
also with all past times some connection yearn –
and with their silent inventions' forgotten tales.

I Swam Out

I swam out with two boys who lived by the sea –
strong surfer boys who knew the waters.
I was their teacher and they my pupils, so surely
I could hold my own? At thirty, surely
I could ignore childhood's rule: "Never, never
beyond your depth." But the dark green water,
huge on every side and huge below, felt me,
my fear and weakness, and with disdain smacked
my face and took my breath. Bobbing me up
and down – playful and cruel – the sea showed
its intention to take me into its deep green belly.

My panicked orbs cried out to the older boy,
and before I could splutter distress, his body acted
with its own wisdom as he grabbed and pulled me surely
to a barnacled rock where I scrabbled, gasping,
out. My body went limp and pale in imitation of
the waterlogged corpse it was meant to be.
Emotions washed over me: terror, and yes, gratitude,
but how like a young man to feel himself drowning
in embarrassment.

Attempted Haiku

Words repeated
become absurd.
Life pondered
does the same.

University of Cape Town

Seven Kakhaiku

I propose the “kakhaiku” as an alternative to the haiku. A kakhaiku is a three-line poem which does not adhere to the traditional 5/7/5 syllable structure. To reflect South Africa’s cultural liberation, I propose this easy-going, African form: three lines with not more than a dozen syllables per line. Retention of “haiku” in the epithet pays respect to the noble origins of the form, while the redolently South African “kak” appropriately reflects the South African irreverence for formality and rigid conformism.

Emergence

From the bare ground, leafless,
the lily,
like a pink periscope.

Waves

Rolling as you read,
a reminder of constancy
and the constancy of change.

Hiker’s Theorem

The probability of greetings
between strangers
increases with altitude.

Not soccer

The beautiful game
is white on green,
with a drop of red.

Falcon in a gale

Perfect stillness without tether.
Rushing motion
with the tilt of a feather.

Dead dog

After the lethal injection
I wanted to change my mind,
but death was sure.

Construction site

As captivated as in childhood's kitchen,
I conclude that building
is baking for boys.

Turning Compost in Spring

Skins of oranges eaten in winter
have blended into the rich mix –
aromatic as dark Christmas pudding –
but plastic stickers, garish, imperishable,
arrogantly declare: “Outspan”.

Outspan = a well-known brand name in South African citrus fruit.

Bokmakierie

The tide of mist withdrew.
A swathe of tussocks rolled out to the horizon,
down a wide corridor parting the low hills –
God's bricks arranged in freedom and pattern.
Each plant and stone belonging,
every creature unquestioning,
lived the Word, the Genesis poetry,
wild in its wilderness.

Bokmakierie on a rock, black and gold and green,
spied me, eyed me.
He sang – his song
a challenge, and a warning. Then silence...
perfect silence...
before his echo sang from the opposite kranz.

Surveying with arrogance, I stumbled
in my ignorance. My blood on a stone awakened
some ancient archetype that would have me live on that plain,
among those hills, with the rocks and plants and animals.
But I knew that I would drive to my little house in the big city
and tend my garden.

Bokmakierie (bok-ma-kirri) = a species of shrike endemic to South Africa and well-known for its striking colouration and call.

A Green Funeral

In the veld in a place where the vultures would see,
he stood naked and killed the cancer with a single shot.

The headlines were sensational, censorious the words,
but Gaia received him without comment and asked no fee.

Too deep for the roots of trees, most lie boxed and rot,
while he is grown in the grass and flown in the birds.

Dare I Believe?

Dare I believe this beach,
at 45 degrees on a mountain top,
dry and hard above a valley, close to clouds?

In horizontal, low-lying days,
water wrote wrinkles of advance and retreat,
advance and final retreat, in a wet and yielding face,
before burial and hidden metamorphosis. Earth's slow alchemy
made stone of sand, before it shrugged a new horizon into the sky.

Weather carelessly exposes the same face, fossilized
high on this mountain, its hardened ripples
to wind and rain, crumbling them once again
to grains of sand, washing them
into the lake below.

This cycle is a tectonic shift
below my thoughts. The moments slur
as they collapse into shoreless oceans of change.

Virus

Oh foul vapour!
Oh evil spirit!
Oh divine retribution!
Your charades are history;
What are you really?
Can you be a single molecule,
A mere tail-biting worm of atoms?
Your size is powers to the minus;
Words are helpless
Against your ungraspable smallness.

You skilled decoder,
You stealthy stalker,
You magic bullet,
You inside spy,
You double agent,
You patient sleeper,
You subtle saboteur,
You silent assassin,
You ultimate parasite –
Surely you live!

It seems not.
No brain, no heart,
No blood, no breath,
No wish, no goal,
Neither live nor dead.
Where lies your stunted soul?
You are, morbid mutant,
Sinister simpleton, you are
Sinew, soul and seed,
Three in one.

Oh dread undead zombie, speak!
Oh ghost in the machine,
Show us a sign!
You hold a message.
You are Life's Rosetta Stone.
You are God's cryptic clue.
But is your code
For our complex minds too clear,
Or is the simple truth
Just too bleak to bear?

Revelation

The conscious mind hangs dreaming
in a breathless night. History grows,
like weeds.

Through the torn fabric of the sky, it observes poison clouds
storming over moving frontiers
of ash-reaping fires.

The land is unreplenished by fruitless multiplication.
Multitudes menace as lack of charity and strange weather
wither loaves and fishes to shifting sand.

It hears cries and curses rise from the cities. Sterile skill
has the upper hand: creation's sinister twin
fashioning new means to unnatural ends.

Dreamwished to a quartz-silent wilderness of plants and stones,
a place to hide in the open,
it hears the Earth breathing.

It scans the sleeping strata, records of the epochs of innocence,
and the great fugue of life which preceded our desperation.
But the surceases too are clear.

Staring into fertile space, begging the crooked-letter question,
it receives only this revelation: A great sullen stone
flying through the black to a precise rendezvous –
there to make an end, and begin things anew.

Drought

The earth cracks in lizard heat.
Tremolo air vibrates above a metallic irony
of water, of shimmering water.

Antelope stand dead still.
Skin collapses between bones as they stand caged
in shadow, in the broken shadow of thorns.

Bones grimace in white silence.
Their eye sockets stare; the stare is fixed
at the sun, at the raging sun.

Water gushes from a tap.
I suck and splash and slake my thirst.
I will not hear Nature's full chorus reduced
to flies, to the dissonant buzzing of flies.

Stepping Outside

Stepping outside I find a scene of nuance and drama.
Low clouds are scudding north
while high, high clouds glide slowly to the south.
The low are sumptuous, flat-bottomed meringues.
The high are taut lamina – membranes of light.
Through the moteless, matt black of the sky,
a full moon casts a brilliant light over all,
her radiance scumbled by filmy vapours,
and gothic silhouettes erupting before her face.

I stand on the lawn and look, as I often do,
at beauty beyond recounting,
as it shifts and flows, becoming a new creation,
and another and another –
ceaseless, effortless virtuosity –
with applause swelling from leaves and breeze.

This had not been announced, nor advertised,
the people of the city are oblivious,
so they huddle in the flicker of the campfire tube,
or dance – tribal stop-action – to a strobe,
or read by a slavish torch of yellow tungsten,
then sleep with curtains closed.

Eventually I too turn away and go indoors,
but with a clinging guilt
for leaving such a spectacle before its end,
for not accepting all its gifts,
knowing that some scant capacity is filled
and can hold no more.

Deepsea

The tether severed by a squall,
his bathyscaph drops from the silver ceiling
and recedes from the light, sinking
into unresolvable darkness.

He sits in his little nut, hearing the shell creak
as miles of water press in on all sides,
trying to fill his little space,
dissolve his little air.

For an hour he sinks, listening
to the wax click in his ears as he swallows, watching
the geometric patterns on his retinas, knowing
that rescue is impossible.

A heavy landing on the edge of an unseen chasm.
He lies back, inhaling and exhaling
the thinning oxygen, the thickening carbon dioxide.
He stares up at the window above his head, invisible in the dark.
An unticked time passes.
Tinnitus plumbs the depths of silence.

Like an hallucination the window is suddenly full of light.
An immense boneless creature hovers over him,
flashing and pulsing signals of unknown relevance.
It stops as suddenly, but the glow replays in his eyes
as he loses consciousness.

A deafening hail of sound, machine-gun like but screaming,
catapults him into wakefulness.
A cone of ivory punctures a luminous, soup-plate eye,
huge suckers break smooth skin.
In a chaos of turbulence, luminescence and noise,
his capsule tumbles downhill to depths that will bring swift implosion.
His last thoughts crouch in the blowhole of the whale,
the giant squid still embracing her great head
as she rushes upward
to sunlight and air.

Death of a Tree

*And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.*

from the Sick Rose by William Blake

New growth has long dwindled for unseen reason.
Deep in the heartwood the agent has been lying.
Since my childhood, fruits have come in season,
But now I know that the loved tree is dying.

Dust spilling from cracks and holes are clues to cause.
With a tool I follow frass-filled passages under the bark –
Above the dark imagoes mate and cling with chitinous claws –
I find the squirming pustule, head hard, heavy-jawed and dark.

The invisible worms' dark secret love is revealed,
As to limbs most infested I apply the saw.
It's the worms' deep tunnels that can't be healed,
Says the tree with its wounds, bleeding and raw.

I rail against the beetles, waving antennae from upper twigs,
While the dying tree proffers, sweet and swelling, clusters of figs.

Snipe

The bright illusions of day have slid away with the sun.
Its concealing glare dissolved at dusk, leaving a dark liquor,
A night soft and benign – a deep shade without edges.
The stars and the planets and a half moon serenely occupy the sky.
Tall hills sculpt the darkness, their crests phosphorescent in lunar light.
The world floats in its station.

The architecture of earth and sky create a great hall of night, filled
with still, cold air. As observer I wander callow into this auditorium,
like a toddler tottering in the aisle of a church. In this occult arena,
I am witness to ritual too urgent and solemn to acknowledge my presence.
With each syllable ringing against an anvil of silence,
the birds and frogs and insects hold their discourse.

Onto this stage comes a presence as potent as the very breath
of mystery, a descending rushing whirring from the air, its source
invisible against the dark. I stand transfixed, as if a phantom
had flown through me, robbed my breath and frozen my wits.
The repeated thrumming confirms my senses but pushes me
to the edge of panic – What *is* that sound?

Then I recall accounts of nocturnal displays, the ghostly “drumming”
of the Ethiopian Snipe, of his nuptial flights over midnight marshes.
Ah, the comfort of learning, the satisfaction of naming, the relief
in slotting this pigeon into its hole. In another age I might have fled
with malign spirits at my heels, shunned the marsh for always
and terrified my acquaintances with fearful stories. But

the trick of nomenclature is not enough, thank God.
Questions flood the mind, the sharp horizon of knowledge
recedes with approach. Still the toddler in the aisle, I sway
slack-jawed in the dark, straining for a glimpse, still thrilled
by the snipe’s own mysteries,
and still fearful of my ignorance.

Dry Stone Wall

My eyes follow the strata, regular yet unrepentive,
 around the unmeasured bend of the circle
and the rough-trodden interior,
 then retrace their path over this mid-Karoo mandala.
Inside, dung is scattered like chocolate chips
 in the baked, hoof-patterned sand.

Selection and placement are tacit in this hand-made geology,
 evident in orderliness, but without pretence of permanence.
This wall cannot crack because cracks are the design –
 permitting spaces, interstices, a lattice of stone and air
with accommodation for visitors.

The wall, its stones, the spaces between them, the stones above
 and the stones below, the brokenness of the stone
and its melded rightness in a landscape of stone and sand and sky,
 awake in me a nostalgia for things never experienced.
I want to be a lizard basking on sunlit ledges.

 I want to be a mouse in a stone-walled, grass-lined, chamber,
sleeping to the baaing and farting of sheep.

 I want to creep out from a crevice as a scorpion in the moonlight,
and wave my tail at the moths.

This dry stone wall is safety and freedom.
I would not speak ill of such a wall.

Karoo = a vast semi-desert region of South Africa.

Pearl Unstrung

One
pearl unstrung
in oyster dark lights no
patterned repetitions in a
moving curve of change holding all
befores and afters to a chord continuous –
though known to only one of each –
moving freely on a spinal thong but
chafing dissatisfied breaks the line,
falls a downcast dropping hail of pearls
plunging to tetherless oblivion in trodden
gravel and spinless stillness, free
of fulcrum, pilot, pivot
or place to
shine.

Beached

Far along the sowing, blowing shore,
sand stinging, waves chilling naked legs,
the beach extends bleak and blank –
the bleached parting of land and liquid.

Sand and water, a shifting edge at ankles;
he cannot resolve to plunge or turn away –
walking the lip of a continent,
wading the brink of an ocean.

Blurring white sand, foaming white noise,
the coast a boundary ebbing, a border flowing
between secrets and solutions,
between beliefs and oblivion.

The restless, alien blue world beckons,
like the depths below a balcony,
the mystery hungers for surrender,
its power swells in command.

To swim out and return, or give over
to waves and water? He wonders
if whales feel a reciprocal
before they gasp on the beach,
before they drown in sand.

Mental Hygiene

What better instrument to record secret thought –
the hopes and aspirations of the morning,
the desires and fears of the evening –
than the toothbrush:
a small, semi-surgical device thrust into the head,
below the seat of consciousness.

How simple to transmit the essential discontents
to the central processing unit and there
to convert them into their reciprocals –
desire to satisfaction,
fear to confidence,
hope to resignation,
aspiration to contentment –
and beam them back, laser-like,
through every fibre-optic bristle
into the cumulus putty of the brain.

I watch the gleaming instrument rise, totem-like,
from its translucent red casing. I apply
the paste – the new, improved, high-conductivity formula.
I submit to the cleansing action.
Redemption is guaranteed.

Unexpected Gladness

for Marius and Dan

You came to tell me that Dan was dead.
We sat in silence as I watched you try,
But your whole body felt it,
And with my desk between us, I watched you cry.

I had met your best friend and liked him too.
I too could have loved him as a friend, I believe,
But however we felt it,
He was gone and we were left to grieve.

Then my sympathy and sorrow were alloyed –
Unexpected gladness threatened to offend.
But I must own that I felt it:
A sharp joy to see a man weep for a friend.

A Birth

Her waters broke during the party
and off to the hospital she was,
while I entertained our guests.
By the time I arrived they had her
in a white-tiled room, hooked
to various machines, a drip,
and a needle in her back.
She was in shock and shaking, miserable
at the way things were going.

It didn't get better.
I did my pathetic little bit,
helping her to remember her breathing,
taking care not to look down
at where things were happening.
The monitor told us that the baby was distressed,
and then it was an episiotomy, forceps, and such.
At last he lay on the outside of her belly.
I stared at him
while they stared at her ravaged vagina.
He lay very still.
"Is he breathing?" I asked.
Panic and a minute of slapping his bottom,
sucking out his airway,
blowing in his face.
He breathed.

While they stitched her up,
I stared at him.
The thing I feared,
the invader in my wife's belly,
the spectral parasite of the scans,
lay before me,
his own entity, in full colour:
dull yellow, waxy white, blue and bloody.
And then, wide-eyed, he looked at me
and our eyes met. Focussed, aware, shocking.

It was then that nine months of denial ended,
and in an instant, easily,
the father was born.

Father and Child

Soft to my touch and arum mild –
let common grief wash by –
come, be still, soft child.

Far from day's probing light,
we are quite apart – a node in time –
in the velvet belly of the night.

As against my chest you doze,
on my neck your mantra breath
whispers peace, sighs repose.

The parent's arms make a nest;
this I understand:
the secure child takes its rest.

But an infant on the arm
into the father's breast
pours a soothing balm.

When cares my weary spirit chafe,
how does a baby make
a grown man feel so safe?

A Walk in the Woods

The light was bright on the path and the leaves.
We talked of this and that and the other,
while the children and I walked in the woods.

Then the trees grew closer, stockade-like
as the path narrowed and the light dimmed –
we entered a gloom and a dank stillness.

Deeper in, we began to inhale a foulness
that hung stagnant in the air. As we walked
it thickened menacingly around us.

What's that smell Daddy?
It's something dead.
What is it?
I don't know.

Talk stopped as we trod through the miasma,
casting our eyes about but seeing nothing
except undergrowth and shadows.

Farther on it faded, and when the path broke
into the light, it was gone. We discussed, at length,
what it could have been, but were glad

to leave it behind, anonymous in the dark –
leave it shouting its silent protest
as it disassembled into soil.

An Outing With the Children

The wind off the sea, off the beach,
chases sand up the side of the hill
and over a neck between two peaks.
A great expanse of white, higher than any dune by far –
like an alpine ski-run, but with fynbos on either side –
beckons with promise of sensuous adventure.

I flopped down at the foot,
already tired from the short walk to get there.
My boy and girl, eleven and seven, and erupting with energy,
immediately began their ascent, making miniature avalanches
with every all-fours step.

I lay back on the sand. Their happy shrieks
sounded thin, diluted in the volume of air and space.
Their forms diminished
as they scrambled, slip-sliding, slowly up the slope,
like two ants on the inside
of an antlion's sandy trap.

Eventually, after many minutes,
they neared the summit. First his stronger,
then her smaller, hair-streaming frame stood upright,
silhouetted against the dying-day pale blue sky –
barely recognizable little shapes
in a wide portal between the rocky peaks.
With the white depths below, and the blue depths above,
they cavorted triumphantly on the horizon, wild in the open,
kicking puffs of sand into the wind, into a space
altogether too big for them.

Suddenly I was no longer at ease.
Still visible, they were at least ten minutes out
of my reach. I remembered baboons
and leopards in these hills.
Then my children started to run
away from me, over the crest, and the sand seemed
to swallow them from the feet up.
The white mountain stood empty against the blue,
and the rocks were silent.

Alone, I jumped to my feet,
shouting with the strength of panic:
"COME BACK!"

Pig People

a warning to children

The dreaded Pig People don't live in a sty,
they live in houses, just like you or I.
Some are fat but some are thin or slim,
and you cannot recognize PPs by the colour of their skin.
Some are rich and others are poor,
you may even have some right next door!
Its not by their clothes or the way that they shave –
Pig People are known by the way they behave.

Pig People cheat and Pig People lie.
Pig People laugh when other people cry.
Pig People cry when they can't have their way –
that's because they're selfish – what more can I say?
Pig People litter without a thought,
but just hear them squeal if ever they get caught!
Pig People don't wash hands when they've been to the loo,
but smile, shake hands, and pass their germs to you.

Oinkel goinkel
gronk gronk,
snorkle snurkle
fronk fronk.

The pigs that are safe are living on the farm;
it's the pigs in their cars that can do you serious harm.
They love to drive too fast, and rarely stop at lights;
the last thing on their minds is other people's rights.
As you know, farm pigs really love to feed;
Pig People, on the other hand, are really into greed.
Watch them gobble, hear them grunt,
see them grab the all that is all that they want.
Now watch out or these piggies will also come for you,
because whatever you've got, they want that too!

Groffle gorble
glerp glerp,
slorple slurkle
snurk snurk.

Yes, these Piggy Persons surely are a curse,
but be warned, some PPs are truly even worse!
The mean bullies that are pests at your school,
they're really People Piglets, trying to be cool.
And the big bullies who use knives to frighten and guns to rob,
they're the very worst kind of Pig Person slob.
These PPs do only one thing that is perhaps not a vice:
they make farm pigs seem really rather nice!

Grontle blorkle
sklorf sklorf,
glerbel glorkel
plorp plorp.

What to do about Pig People?
What to do about the Pigs?
Don't you want to rant and rave
about the horrid ways that they behave?
I'm afraid that there's not much that you can do
except avoid PPs and their stinky piggy poo.
But also check your trotters, and even check your snout,
most especially when Pig People are about,
to make very sure that you,
to make absolutely certain that under no circumstances have you,
become a Pig Person too!

(Now make up some disgusting piggy noises of your own!)

The Comfort and the Terror

The news is sadness and horror –
I wish it were a Hollywood slasher,
not the parade of current events,
not the matrix of my suburban haven.
I go to bed early and fall asleep
dreaming angry dreams.

I wake suddenly beneath a grey ceiling
that descends like a piston.
I stumble down the passage seeing savage men,
their knives and guns glinting in the night's wayward lights.
I fall back into bed
with painkillers and antacids in my belly.

My wife's body is a small fire against the cold.
Gentle stirrings from the children's room
confirm their peaceful sleep.
I make comforting plans for a walk
in the countryside – green and empty –
with the family and the dog.

But that noise outside,
was it a cat, or was it an intruder
on his way to Granny's cottage?
Was that a rat in the roof,
or someone willing to kill my children
for a household appliance?

| | |
|--------------------------|------------|
| In the dark I lie still, | listening |
| to my heart, | my breath. |
| I lie with my bosom | unzipped |
| by the comfort and | the terror |
| of my family. | |

Communication

“I love you.”

“Please don’t ever leave.”

“Keep me warm tonight and always.”

“I’m so glad you share my bed, here with me.”

“You are the comfort, solace and complement of my life.”

All this is most eloquently expressed, all at once, by nudging your spouse between the shoulder blades with your forehead, while uttering a few soft grunts, with closed lips.

Unpoetic

My love for you is not meant for poetry.
Emotion so manifest and primary,
in words, however lapidary,
falsifies the simplicity of my love.

Our romance is not meant for poetry.
Its mutual mending, our unconscious blending,
builds of us a new symmetry, its intricacy
beyond expression of our romance.

You are not meant for poetry.
You are the blessed given, natural elements of the world;
metaphors are mere commentary.
May I never need to write poetry about what you are.

Tres Troubled Triolets

Examination

The students study for the test –
Their backs are bowed, their heads are bent –
So that we may find out who is best.
The students study for the test
That will separate the failures from the rest,
So that some may play, and drive, and pay the rent.
The students study for the test –
Their backs are bowed, their heads are bent.

Lottery

Hot to heaven millions of wishes rise like steam,
And like the rain disappointments fall again.
Six balls are baubles to hold all dreams –
Hot from heaven through the rising steam,
They fall heedless of charity or noble scheme.
The jackpot swells with hopes vehement and vain;
Again to heaven millions of wishes rise like steam;
Once again our little disappointments fall like rain.

Rush Hour

Multitudes sit alone, each in his shiny car –
An assembly wearing a mask of gloom.
Our cleverness has indeed brought us far,
To multitudes who sit alone, each in a shiny car,
Willing to mar their days with hours on tar:
For two hours per day they brood and fume,
These multitudes who sit alone in a shitty car –
An assembly wearing a mask of gloom.

Death's Demise

Yes, Death's days are numbered –
they searched and found the cause,
then fixed it while you slumbered.

Aberrant old age is freed of natural laws,
and holy biochemistry hones its hocus-pocus
on the question: Do human memory stores

occupy a finite or boundless locus?
Will celebration of a thousand years
mean one's first century loses focus?

Parents and children are fated to be peers –
wrinkle-free wisdom carries no ID –
ingénue and the jaded cry each other's tears.

Poets had suspected it was our very brevity,
the shortness of the string from birth through prime
to decline, which revealed our fragile beauty,

that to chase meaning on the tail of furtive time
is better than endless life become endless coma,
that dark gives light the will to shine.

Now church museums burn incense for aroma
because the Lord has no reason to abide
and spirit is but the leitmotif of the soma.

Apart from state-assisted suicide,
there is murder as a form of farewell fun;
but with vigour one must provoke a homicide,

because sloth is sin number one.
The immortal sleep or sip a sherry
and make no haste to get things done.

On the Stix, Art boards an idle ferry –
Death, Faith and Love have not won,
And the end has come for Poetry.

The Flaneur

The *flaneur* strolls and observes. He watches people work and asks: Could I do that? Perusing the bookshop; so many things someone thought important. Let one book wave a semaphore page and declare the answer. He envies the sales assistant: she sells the closed, unruffled books.

A strong bookshop coffee, caffeine rush, browsing on. Thoughts wandering over possibilities, as if he were hopping a keyboard of options. Overhead a monitor displays each step, consequence, step. He steps back and forth, watching, editing a life on the carpet squares. The saleslady laughs to see his hesitant dance.

More *flanerie* in the park. He watches the lovers, families, groups of friends. He considers belonging, caring. He sees his options in a seed tray, compartmentalized, each seed named and sprinkled with enthusiasm. Germination and growth at the speed of thought – a time-lapse unfurling of leaves and blossoms – then a dry radiation of caution and self-scrutiny, and a withering, more rapid still.

A rat amongst litter. The *flaneur* watches and envies the rodent its choiceless life. No accounting for potential there. He debates the 'right thing'. Intuition mocks: "All your alternatives are equal; real choices wait beyond your understanding." The *flaneur* returns his attention to detail, wandering on, designing his life in the abstract. The rat would laugh, if it weren't so busy.

Giant

His fingertips drag
through the tops of the trees.
Birds fly around his head.
When low clouds come
he must stoop
to see where he's going,
and to keep his hair dry.

He takes care not to
step on cows and people,
but sometimes he can't help it.
People don't like him
because he eats a lot and leaves us little.
When people shout up at him,
it's like the distant yapping of dogs
in his crumpled ears.

He has a family to feed
and a long way to go to the ocean.
The going isn't easy.
Sometimes he looks up
and shouts to God for help.
His prayers sound like songs
sung by thunder.
To God they sound like the rustle
of one more leaf in the forest.

In Afternoon's Sad Light

In afternoon's sad light
the axe falls –
then I hear it
chop.
I see it rise
and I see it fall –
then I hear it
chop.
Does the axeman smell resin on the air?
He is too distant for me to know.
I sense the heft and shock of haft on hand,
only because I too have put axe to wood.

The axeman's shapely woman
pedals by on a bicycle.
I imagine licking the salty sweat from her nape,
because of her shape.
Slanting light glints on turning wheels;
the spokes blur in my slow eyes.
The axe rises and falls –
then I hear the
chop.
I fear the axeman and his axe,
but I know nothing of the future
of his axe
or her neck.

Rise,
fall,
(delay)
chop.
Sound is a tortoise to light's hare.
I stand in the dying light,
senses pressed to perception's narrow apertures,
feeling no more sapient
than my brother apes,
wondering if wisdom is possible.

Still the Horizon Conceals the Absolute

The mind flares and gutters; the mind is a soft organ imprisoned in bone;
the mind is the short candle of our enlightenment –
insight flickers in the cave of ignorance.
Reality melts, mysteries congeal.

Add the layers, the rings of space and matter, the onioned dimensions of the universe,
till the I, the one trivial centre, is obliterated
under incomprehensible orders of magnitude.
Still the horizon conceals the absolute.

Peer into the corpuscle, past the folded chains, beaded spirals and legged molecules,
to the chaotic fragments disintegrating and coalescing,
swirling in emptiness that is solid to the touch.
Still the horizon conceals the absolute.

What shall we preserve for the red giant of the future?
What shall we create for Shiva at the hub of the next collapse?
What shall we tell our children of this lonely nodule and of its opaline skin of fragile life –
a grain in a galaxy which is an eddy in a cosmos which appears to know a purpose,
but is oblivious to our special circumstances?

Still on this tail side of the coin, my dog and I move in the probability of rain,
with miraculous blades of lengthening grass beneath our feet,
treading this middle earth, midpoint of mind and matter,
this medium dimension, this fulcrum of meaning –
our home, our place of striving.

Nocturne

In that hiatus after late, before early,
when dark feels more kind than day,
his inward eye sees more clearly,
his tired spirit inclines to pray.
Then a dew of mystery descends to bless,
blending with meaning in the mortar of darkness.

Moonlight on beliefs and convictions
reveals all as pallid, wan addictions.
Mourning solutions he thought were final,
stripped naked in a world still primal,
with restless moondogs he is left to howl,
to interrogate the dark with the vowel owl.

He aches for certainty, he feels the burn,
but in this night school his soul may learn
to link with the near and distant past,
that laws and dogmas cannot last,
that all truths held fast must fail,
that hoarded knowledge is transient, frail.

But intuition like a bat in flight
follows paths unmarked to sight.
Books of dreams written when weary,
come as answers to unknown query.
Out of time and out of locality
they collapse the scaffold of reality.

Whether from sleep or watching the dawn,
the graduate enters the day to life reborn.
His dark-adjusted eyes must shrink for day,
but with his spirit better to the game, and the play.

T. Monk

after watching the documentary, *Straight, No Chaser*

Tune the words,
tune them beautiful,
beat them out,
bang them down
with certainty,
with love and certainty.
Paint the tune,
sing the picture
of inspiration, truth and beauty.
Don't be afraid,
reject the laziness of peace,
face the confusion.
Take the step
and trip the step,
skip the step
and dance the message.
Swing and spin
and dance it out.
Sweat out music,
sing the words,
be a poet.
Cheat the big D.