

The Likeness is Applied  
to the Canvas



Michael Bedford

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A compilation of thirty-six individual poems not previously included in a collection, and a series of thirteen poems written loosely around the creation of art.



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## Our Fabulous Dead

If you listened to the dead, they would rant all day.  
The skull as conch - hear the note it plays.  
Lips pregnant with paradise can seldom abstain  
from dissecting their prey; reprising as elegy  
every credible lie and unseasoned truth they contain.

A withered husk as tutor? As if sod and clay  
had blanched their frame, charged mute jaws  
to shout that confirmation, shrill exhortation,  
from dust. Unfetter them, unbind the shroud - see how they  
always agree on every interpretation or classification,

they will never disagree - merely keep their own counsel.  
Let bearers shoulder that weight, as death should.  
Throw them in the air. If they fall correctly, you may  
pick them up, bend as yew or elm to shape a bow  
then fire your arrow dipped in their blood.

## Derby

Sunday. The bare-arsed cheek of it.  
Stranded at some barren siding.  
The dead travel faster than British Rail.  
Speaker coughs an idle lying

yarn about this and that. Outside,  
a disused beck. Two boys sit fishing  
with a net. Which reminds me,  
they say if you take two tadpoles,

wrap them in cloth, keep each wet,  
they grow into frogs with three legs.  
There's a reason for it, apparently.  
Everything's connected, cause - effect.

*We will be forty minutes late into Derby.*  
Guy for the airport starts to sweat.  
Croissant buttered with a plastic knife.  
The mystery deepens. No coffee yet.

## A Walk Along the Edge of Water Coming In

Footprints  
sink into the beach,

imprints  
hostage to the sea.

Sand  
impacted tightly

briefly dries  
then soaked again, as each cast

gently imbibes  
the tide then sets it free.

Rain  
falling steadily

punctures a fluid skin.  
Ocean

eager to return,  
hardly noticing.

## Brief History of Desire

In the depths  
taste is an afterthought,  
a late delivery of sense  
you can live without.  
It is in the mystery  
    of these things  
we lose ourselves.  
Wine of a moment,  
bare room,  
loss of space  
between lips and hips.  
It is in the day  
    of the event  
we catch our breath. Cull sanity  
from rubble.  
Lead the guilty body home.

## Memory

When we are born, loves us. Stumbles  
to our core; kicks against a blank page;  
shapes dreams with stick of shadows past.  
Falls improbably when we speak  
of childhood days. Indistinct. Timeless.  
Some grow that grasping frame  
as a global test, its hammer pounds their steel  
harsh against the anvil: pummelling,  
crushing, shaping. The hollow thud  
fills the night air with restless waking.  
Others in fear seek refuge  
in a lonely track which only looks ahead.  
But refreshed, fed on scraps of paper,  
calls our name. Never when you want,  
always when you don't. Dressed in  
autumn years this half-forgotten rascal  
comes home to roost. Raps knuckles  
with the golden rule.

The old fox rails and shakes the villain's hand.

## Car Park

Sod them all. They told us not to play here  
but on this estate, where you can scrape enough mortar  
from walls with a stick to make your own sand pit, where  
do we play? Decent football pitches harder

to find near us than pirate treasure. Not bloody Eton.  
Besides, it's the boundary line between us and the gang  
we play from Cobb Avenue. Time in the war where on  
Christmas day they stopped shooting and sang

carols and stuff - took their jackets off for goals.  
Well, no-man's land's also our ideal location, so they  
can stick the notice up the council's arsehole.  
Me, I'm wondering who salted cash away

from cement they didn't order. We only stop playing  
for broken bottles. Glass underfoot. Like on the telly  
when they cancel games for snow or flooding.  
With us, a dickhead with too much cider in his belly.

## Welcome Change

Welcome change from company I normally keep:  
keyboard, screen, and yours truly. Sound of people -  
their stories, reminiscences, troughs, and peaks -  
cast adrift into the ether. I am both willing and able

(on occasion) to hear other's thoughts out loud.  
I heard a report that conversation,  
(a vehicle for exchange of body language and sound)  
can be a rich source of information.

Hence, if one becomes a good listener  
it might actually be of use. Well, who knew?  
Not that I need the help of any such banter.  
My thoughts in perfect working order. Another view

is hardly needed. I just thought this might serve  
to illustrate how much better off you could be  
to hear my voice repeatedly. Really, you deserve  
it. No need for thanks. You'd do the same for me.

## America, America

I poured America from the bottle.  
The taste no less than a feast of guidebooks,  
each place shouting its name, waving its own  
dirt road like a flag calling the hungry,  
dispossessed, to lie in their wine-blessed cloth,  
leech the good soil, to harvest fat green grapes  
and squeeze that single run of nectar dry.  
To go there one day! Dig each foot deep, deep  
into the vine-clad clay and boundless land.  
Follow old trails and the smell of ripe fear  
ridden in a one-horse town as night falls.  
I would wipe my feet on the dust bowl mat,

drink from glasses shattered by my drunk host.  
Travel broadens the mind. I know that now.



## Vigil

His frozen wits  
occasionally wresting free  
when he pulls her arm or shouts for tea or his son.  
Mostly he is quiet.

She plays her part  
in good faith. Cropping legs  
of trousers as he shrinks,  
dabbing piss stains to the left of the zip.

When a neighbour calls  
there is talk  
of how lightning can leap from televisions  
and how weather is affected by planes.

Sometimes when he yells at night  
thinks to smother him with a pillow  
but knows he is still strong  
and may hit her as he used to.

## Rant

The price of tickets rises exponentially  
with need, or shortness between booking  
and journey. It is the offset of supply  
and demand writ large, chips falling

where they may. All of life a struggle.  
This is one more facet, one more aspect  
of that battle if you needed any such example.  
The tale of when you connect

two places on a map, or send a person  
to a destination, scene is set  
for others to not only provide transportation  
but to squeeze revenue and profit

to maximum effect. Same all over,  
companies must be fed. But where has service gone?  
Pride in what you are part of - or might offer?  
Efforts now confined to marketing slogans.

What about *Often promises but seldom delivers?*

That should be on all the posters.  
Tales of signals, snow, and flooded rivers,  
crawling on a stretch of track no faster

than a bicycle, because (and this is good)  
the *wrong leaves* fell beneath the wheels.  
God invented railways so people would  
know how eternity looks and feels.

## Fell Walker

Road fading  
in the wake of legs  
outstripping all distance laid before them.  
Tension  
coiled between dull eyes  
and pistons of feet  
playing itself out,  
throwing an arrogance of flesh  
hard against the bodiless might of hills.

Ankles puff and rattle  
insulated from the trail  
as muscles plunge deep into service.  
Unpacking the spine of the world  
in strips  
sliced from earth's rippled skin.  
Wringing last drops  
from brass lungs which hang  
clanging,  
bells pulverising their own mountings.

Stops.  
Scans the spoils of his stride,  
dimension of journey planted.  
Suddenly jerks  
shuddering with steam  
rested fibre  
lurching to fresh exertion,  
slat of body  
tensed and set once more.

## Rail Station

Monument to an enlightened hand  
whose vision, plan,  
of steel-tipped track and locomotion  
once spread with missionary zeal.  
Casing, bolt, wheel,  
testament to that devotion,  
precision of their dream.

Cathedral to a faith  
built beyond mere need.  
Iron and stone as canon and creed.  
Now, reduced to blemished grandeur  
platforms strewn in disrepair.  
Anachronism, oddity,  
in today's less extravagant times.  
Passion, fervour, somehow lost  
sacrificed to a lesser god  
  of efficiency  
and us, left all the poorer.

Cliché, sin, and recurrent curse,  
to know the price of a thing  
but not its worth.

## Blackpool

Bundled in the scorching sun  
long days spin  
webs of sand and buckets,  
ice cream vans and salt sea.

Deck chair wars  
fought silently on strategic beaches,  
armies of red stripe  
slyly outflank  
blue stripe, twenty pence dearer.  
Tide wipes the slate clean  
at end of play.

Wriggling seaweed  
grasps giggling toes  
jumping in the splash and spray,  
with plans of fresh tomorrow's  
and fish 'n' chips again.

Confused crabs scan  
bulging bags and floppy hats.  
Mutter silent crab oaths  
in rock pools  
awash with wide eyes  
and pink fingers.

Little hands shape castles,  
fortress from a spade,  
as older hands  
(no wiser)  
let a summer slip away.

## Shipping Water

Nowhere left to hide for the cheapskate  
who wouldn't pay the going rate. Ceiling is a river.  
To go for the insanely low quote probably a mistake.  
Mad Italian roofer, no scaffolding, balancing on a ladder,

more circus act than trade. The bedroom has just drowned.  
Then, newly fitted kitchen, pride and joy, discovered flooded.  
Trap is checked, bends are traced, but breach not found.  
Who would not use the good plumber? What bonehead

called the local cowboys in to make a tiny saving?  
Screwed forever. And cursed. Words are said. Insults fly.  
Comments such as *Cheap bastard* and *Miser* begin the reckoning.  
*Those whom the gods wish to destroy...*

well, they send bad weather. Poured all week.  
Where is Noah when you need him? It gets better.  
Eight guests for dinner and suspect the leak  
is the shoddy bit of pipe to the dishwasher.

## Grave Digging

It is precise work,  
sweat  
drifting from corporeal brow.  
Cold steel  
puritanically aligned  
upon a dark and bawdy soil.

A secular passion  
from this Poseidon of the tuber  
whose indecorous hands  
belie  
a sense of artistry,  
an accuracy of pleasure.

Who, in search of perfection  
burrows crude clod and loam  
to his terrestrial will,  
shapes domain for depth, size, and contour,  
flattens hewn dirt  
with a spirit of adventure.

Scans  
with an unerring eye  
the indecent clay and lascivious dust.  
Exhumes lessons from the day.  
Curses, and moves on  
to cut the seductive ground once more.

## Succulent

Your alien green style  
infatuates the eye.  
Balloon leaves,  
structures, as if primed to fly

or fall harmlessly  
at a wind's idle whim.  
Yet I know  
the worlds water imprisoned within,

held hostage  
against life's harsher times.  
How the delicate, frail,  
can outsmart a desert, sun-blasted climes,

which would roast me whole.  
A short, puffed length  
of buffed, lime nonsense  
a fine disguise for subtle strength.



## String

Bits drop off as you grow older.  
I have seen whole people fall apart  
in a strong wind or from a bump in a road.  
Pieces everywhere.  
A muffled *Excuse me*  
as they search desperately for a leg or arm.

The young know this.  
They are held together by strong rope  
and laugh at such flimsy construction.  
They can drink all day  
and not get up at night.  
They are gods to old folk  
who worship them  
and would sleep with them if they could.

No fun having detachable parts.  
The old complain bitterly.  
The young roll their eyes  
in that way they do, perfected in their infancy.  
The old mutter darkly  
draped in rubber bands, Elastoplast, and string.  
Something about *Just you wait: you'll see.*

The young recognise this as the sour grapes it is.

## Beginning Writing with No Thought of the Whole

Too fast from the blocks: a marathon, not sprint.

Off running with no idea where I'm going.

Searching for inspiration ten long days in, barely a dent  
in the commission, plagued by indecision, not knowing

arse or elbow, or which way to go to finish the journey.

Tell me, what sort of idiot sets out

trusting to fate? Needs to overwrite a story

to fit the elements together? They tell me doubt

can be a wonderful thing. Adds spice. The unexpected.

Under time constraints, print runs, sword hanging

and closing in, any gap between hand and head

is a bad thing. I know that now. Safer to string

lines from introduction to conclusion to construct a path

then walk down its length and mark a track

with words as signposts to guide a reader. You do the math.

Better to tack start to end, than stitch all the sections back-to-back.

## Editing

As if all the world could fall due to one wrong letter,  
skewed paragraph, incorrect tagline. No doubt  
over-analysis is an affliction. Drags you in. Work never  
good enough to go. But there is no time to linger. No letting out

of any reins to canter aimlessly or scan the view.  
The respect that language, forever growing, evolving, expects.  
Constant vigilance. Where a phrase can be read in a new  
and unexpected way to re-invent itself. Where solid text

can spread from a misplaced comma or rogue apostrophe.  
Where revision or omission brings a threat to meaning  
which the simplest change can manifest all too easily.  
A challenge fusing disparate parts together, of revising

size, content, and style, to stay within the shackles  
prepared for it. It is an insular occupation.  
Behind the front line. Foot soldier in the battle  
between timeliness, detail, and lure of perfection.

## Sharpening a Blunt Pencil

Flimsy first draft, a commissioned author,  
the need to shape and strengthen structure

to make it support its own weight.  
Truth be told, the manuscript in an awful state.

No end of patching required.  
Still, writer, hired and delivered

has spoken  
so make ready the pen.

Slice the whole apart,  
move, substitute, part

unsupported conclusion from threadbare  
foundation. Down to judgement, really. Knowing where

to go in guns blazing or leave well enough alone.  
Eventually, the bones

made solid. Astonishingly  
by the end, the work grudgingly

converted from confused mess into decent reading.  
Creating anything worthwhile seldom easy or undemanding.

The seemingly effortless final version  
underpinned by talent, experience, and endless revision.

## Disconnected

A bad day,  
not a metaphor  
to hang a verse on.

The machine  
I call my brain  
is broken.

I scribble aimlessly  
in the forlorn  
hope

of dredging out  
some  
poetry.

The well  
so dry  
it is dusty.

## Soliloquy

I think about love a lot.  
What it is and what it is not.  
Is there a bargain to be made?  
For each new love one has to fade?  
Or is it unlimited, simply flows  
however much it expands and grows?  
I have looked at love more than most.  
Perhaps, I have looked too long, too close.  
A collector who pins out every specimen,  
carefully teases out the limb,  
but strips the butterfly of its wing.  
When young and impressionable  
everything so simple.  
Black and white,  
wrong and right.  
Older, we realise life  
wields a more subtle knife.

## Burial Customs

I have not been there since his dust was sown.  
It does not seem to me to be of note  
where the ashes of a life may be thrown  
whether on unknown fields or streets he knew.

Why visit there? What might I hope to see?  
Not the substance of stone or sepulchre  
you could somehow invest with mystery  
and in its mortar place a fragile trust

so you might rest assured *They only dream.*  
But scattered over an unyielding ground  
assuming no identity or scheme.  
Surely, hard to remember there or mourn,

remnant dispersed in anonymity.  
A reminder of what I must become,  
inheritance of life's one certainty.  
Page of my own life unwritten as his.

## Conversation with Ghost Monks at Leyburn

Confined by stone through arched vaults  
and smooth wood  
did you smell the burnt smoke  
and feel the candle's heat?

Were you bound in leather pages and coloured ink  
like the book  
to dance on sheets held in frail white hands  
broken by relentless years?

Did glass that splintered the good light  
illuminate your way  
and astonish in its intensity, the coarse linen  
and prostrate limbs laid on a cold floor?

Tell me now what held you; kept you there.

What stilled your heart through a river of doubt  
and confusion  
as young skin aged to vellum, and eyes strained in dim light  
to fall exhausted in their sacrifice?

Was it voices in song that would not let go,  
the empty room and silence?

Tell me now for I do not know,  
your penance beyond any reason or measure  
but I would walk with you  
and try to understand your way.



## Uncle

For as long as I knew him, he had old men's bones.  
Looking back, he was barely older than me now.  
Whose hide did he wear and why?  
Had his worn out on the graveyard shift

helmet off, picked up shrivelled skin as a coat  
before he realised, too late?  
I broke bread and watched him eat  
mash and sausage and thick gravy,

that empty plate ritual performed each day.  
We went to see pictures. Afternoon matinees  
when I should have been in school.  
Ice cream and Kiora

in a deep, dark heaven watching *She*.  
A shower of eternal youth  
cascading to the back row.  
Me, a boy, looking at him and wondering.

## Judas as a Small Child

Of course, he was a bit of a lad  
even then. Used to pull my sisters hair.  
Throw mud at me and run away  
laughing. I never could catch him.

Always first in races. Ran like the wind.  
Great at games too if I remember. In fact  
that's what sticks in my mind most, his energy.  
Always on the go, and good fun too.

You could rely on him in a jam. We had  
plenty of those. Always thought he knew  
best. Argue with anyone. Got into no end  
of trouble. We used to tease him about it.

He'd get madder and madder, but we'd laugh  
afterwards and be friends again. There was  
no malice in him, you see. He was a good  
mate. Bit headstrong but aren't we all?

## The Marina

Do you recall the last time I said that?  
It stands apart from all the other times  
as we were down by the marina. You know, what  
used to be the beck. Part that climbs

up to the footpath near the old cinema.  
Surely! The place we used to go  
to see those arthouse movies. Don't you remember?  
One with what's his name and Bridget Bardot

that was a shocker. No clearer?  
Corner from where we had  
booked a restaurant to follow. Our very first dinner!  
When you said your dad

would murder me if I didn't get  
you back in half an hour. Surely now?  
What's that, your dad? Old git  
with a limp hitched to the evil cow

who was your mother. Her? She stayed  
with us when she sold her flat  
without telling anybody. A decade  
sharing space with that viper. I almost snapped

and began to drink. No? What about the day  
she stole our cash and ran off with a trucker?  
Anyway, as I said, the one thing they can't take away  
are the memories we made together.

## Winter in Oxfordshire

To set out on a morning such as this!  
We struggle in the snow but push on through.  
Our breath ignites the air and hangs as mist,  
a whitewashed world subsumes the one we knew.

As far as you can see the sheet complete  
apart from where our tracks disturb the fall.  
The ruts and divots sculptured by our feet  
stand proud, the only marks of life at all.

A stillness in this bleak and empty place.  
We stand, as if to move would break its spell.  
Then turn and leave behind that barren space,  
the cutting wind too harsh for us to dwell.

The frozen drifts become our enemy  
until back home and settled for the day.  
At rest, perhaps the only eyes to see  
a landscape which the rain must wash away.

## Preference

Something about a photograph draws me in.

Not today's model - mobile phones, the *selfie*, whose ambition is nothing other than *Look at me*. Those dated back to the beginning. Victorians with their rigid compositions,

heads requiring support, through to the box camera, instamatics, the sixties. Pastoral scenes hold no interest for me. Always people. To capture an image, persona of a person who at that time, treating a camera more warily

than we might do now, revealed more of themselves. Staged or not, fascinating. An education to look back at subject and setting. Often, the placement and form compels the eye to go further still, to search for clues and gaps

in the story. All long since dead and yet speaking to us. A kind of immortality. Paintings too, similar but no less compelling. Pigment lacking the precision of film, but still that core of character,

individuality, captured forever. Artist at liberty to create fresh perspectives - not tied to a moment. Which is best? For me the old cliché pertains, how a painter can enhance a portrait from parts placed deeper than the lens can see.

## Everybody's Story

The hard call  
between living  
and poetry  
often confounds me.

Subsumed in one  
to the detriment of other  
to be pulled back  
sharply.

Life is callous.  
Try not eating  
or living  
for want of money.

But poetry. Poetry  
somehow seeps  
inside  
and again, disrupts me.

## Silks Chosen

A desk clapper. You could let the lid fall  
hear it bang, even lend a weighty slam.  
Attached to seats. We had arrived!  
Protractor, metal compass,

triangle and ruler – always splintered.  
We slid into line. Trotted out  
wood block horses,  
pulled metal reins from oak saddles

champing at the bit. Starter's gate.  
Fences inside the beast.  
Opened the box: books stared back at us.  
Suddenly asked who could spell.....

Silence. An arm went up. Mine.  
That motion began the race.  
Hooves pounding, eyes fixed ahead.  
Could feel myself pulling, over the jump

and down. If I had looked around  
it might have been different. Got it wrong  
but I didn't. On its back forty years.  
All in a moment. As quick as that.

## Meeting Place

The ghost of a breath  
shrouds a window. Remnant of a breath  
tips into drops. Day rises  
as a morning sun, bold with summer, calls.

Soon it will be too late. Tourists will arrive  
unexpected as deserts. Innocent people  
with secret names  
will stand on walls, light fires,

shout about children in loud voices.  
A car will shrug its shoulders,  
cough, splutter,  
stretch over a fragment of road

an arm pulled by invisible strings  
drawn across frosted glass.  
It will travel  
like a snail into the distance.



## The Cricket Season

Summer's long song,  
whack of leather upon bat, tea in the pavilion.

Though I've lived here years, I can scarce recall  
when that red ball  
was not landing in my garden. Village full to overflow  
to watch an innings go  
as life, drift and splutter.

An airless heat. Sun high, lemonade and ice.  
How does the camel's spine crack?  
With age – or bowed by straw's heavy price?  
*Yes, I said in full view. No problem. Have it back.*

That night called some innings run:  
raised finger number one.  
A spade, both sharp and true  
    can cut a grave in the hardest mound;  
    bury a grudge then flatten the ground.  
The Jones woman saw me, so I killed her too.

On a point of principle rest a million sins.  
Eye for an eye,  
curt remark – who would count one more than another?  
Not I,

and no less a sportsman for my furtive stand  
or lack of linen white. Speed, skill,  
    the victor's swift and practiced hand.

Career run, I rest my arm. A team falters none the wiser  
    bereft of legs to chase to the fence.  
Yet often I still dream of slaughter.  
The ball's loop, a silent glance.  
Who would begrudge the fox a hunt, the slug its salt,  
    the drowning man water?

## Grandmother

I was the last and would have wished it so,  
my mother said wish illness on no-one  
but it is hard when your life fades not to throw  
envy to the wind,  
call others to suffer as you have done.

Though the labour long, it was nothing new.  
When they first spoke of twins I had wept.  
Even so, all through  
the days and months I kept  
myself in check, as if then I knew.

The heart is such a fragile thing.  
Children may break its porcelain  
with barely a murmur or passing sigh.  
I felt the fluid start to collect  
when I heard their birthing cry.

Life can be the cleverest thief,  
what it gives with one hand the other takes  
yet I would not have chosen differently.  
I do not fear death so much  
as that they will not remember me.

## A Disappointment, Even to Myself

A cute arse has just glided past me.  
Thoughts on more weighty subjects  
forgotten. Its motion has a beauty  
which could fill a hundred pamphlets.

Distracted, yes. But when treasure such as this  
has wandered by, however crass  
or incorrect it might be, would be remiss  
not to comment. They say all things must pass

but images remain. God bless tight clothing.  
I speculate on its unwrapped state.  
And in good company. Two favourite sayings.  
One from St Augustine, the old probrate,

and I paraphrase, *Lord make me chaste – but not yet.*  
The second more difficult to ascribe.  
Plato, Socrates, Sophocles – the subject  
of debate. Also, modern genetics has clarified

it relates not just to the male member alone  
as was once thought, but to the entire span  
of the unruly and stubborn Y chromosome.  
As the saying goes: *It's like being tied to a madman.*

So there we have it. Man's mind at battle  
with itself. Which even at its finest, will skim  
between deep analysis, attempts to unravel  
life's mysteries, and the set of a *Carry On* film.

## The Skin Bin

Sometimes we die

and are carried in wood boxes  
thrown skywards at a shoulder's insistence.  
Freedom of speech withheld  
as someone beats truth to a pulp with eulogies  
upholding great lies on our behalf.

This is a good thing  
as the crowd are all sad  
and speak inconsolable misery.

Sometimes when dead we become victims  
and police raffle us  
to the living. Those with best grudges win.  
They are dragged struggling into cells  
as we have become a crime.

Sometimes we die incognito  
stacked in locations no-one knows  
so we never get flowers.

When dead a long time  
people may call us fictitious  
denying we ever lived at all.  
One of the most disturbing aspects  
of being dead.

# Art

## The Likeness Is Applied to the Canvas

Invisible string  
between hand and eye  
pulled taut.

Lovingly inspected,  
the gaze consumes each detail  
weighing light and shade

and where the eye boldly wanders  
hand  
obediently, precisely follows

until shape and form appear.  
Then, in layers of pigment  
charcoal clears

and colour flows from fingertips  
who ask  
to confirm tone and hue,

and between the two  
the balance is set,  
agreed,

and portrait,  
once mere cloth  
struggles into view.

## Rembrandt

Saskia is dead, and in her passing  
the fragility of life is laid bare.  
Endured again, the rigour of mourning,  
the disappointments, misfortunes, we share.

No mirror so harsh as that held by death  
in which few dare look; still fewer study.  
With what artist's eye did you scour its depth?  
What reflection seek? What image copy?

Though pain and sorrow may mature the brush,  
add shade and substance to its armoury,  
to trade love, contentment, for genius  
who would fix that price or pay willingly?

## Rembrandt II

Portraits drawn by the hand of a master  
yet pushed beyond any simple likeness.  
Caught somehow, their intellect, character,  
his gift to empathise then fix on canvas.



## Poem

A spark  
when caught

reveals  
the cacophony of thought

the mind conceals.  
Then escaped, running,

spreading as a flame  
all-consuming

until burnt-out,  
combusted,

retreats to leave a skin of charcoal  
frosted

over charred ground  
cleansed, re-set, ready to begin.

Players  
step in,

stories  
clamouring to be heard.

Ears now primed to listen,  
hand in place to record each word.

## Rehearsal

Curtains closed; the work begins.

In moments such as this  
voices grow and entwine  
and as lines tighten, lock,  
the whole advances, stumbling  
into tragedy or comedy.

Scenes repeated, flexed,  
until subtle shifts  
stretch beyond the foolscap skin  
allowing form to emerge.  
Now full grown, strutting.

Later, an audience claps  
and beast fed  
returns to rooms in shabby boarding houses  
and run-down digs to rest, recharge again.

All worlds encompassed  
in an audience, in a theatre, in a street.  
Nothing else exists. Or can exist. No wider stage than this.

Sparks float upwards to heaven,  
tied to smoke - small notes –acts reported and reviewed.

## Music

In music we redeem ourselves  
distinguished from the humdrum,  
    poverty called life.  
Aspire to the tongue of angels.  
Lose ourselves  
    in translation of their rhetoric,  
drama of their speech.

When we land  
we label this ephemeral,  
marvel at its delicate touch.  
Clothe the ghost  
dotting phrases in the prison of a measure  
to capture  
and claim them as our own,  
    blunt pins tethering notes to stave.

## Chaff

A sip of creation  
is all you need. Though a great pool  
waiting, too much leaves vision  
drunk, obsessed with images which fool

an eye into believing  
it encompasses everything – the whole panoply.  
When all the while, it is seeing  
a part - random pictures, offshoots, free

of any meaning, import, stature.  
Only curated, bled with personal testimony,  
does the mix set: the message matter.  
Without that element, art is empty.

## Oil

A pool of colour  
bleeding  
together

on a palette  
presents  
an infinite

complexity  
of choice.  
Thoughtfully,

brush converts  
fluid  
pigments

to foundation  
of a  
vision

in a single stroke.

## Sculptor

Being

transfixed in shaping

stone and plaster.

Passion reflected in every gesture

of a body

constructed to house that extraordinary energy

which explodes and ricochets through the manipulation  
and transformation

of clay.

Excess roughly scraped away

to release the structure

hidden inside that formless mixture

which only those hands could feel  
or craft to reveal.

Stands, finished,

embedded in that image.

## Sculptor, Carved

A slow fuse, this.  
Lit, then sparked erratically.  
Left to circumstance  
to garner opportunity

for unseen need  
to fracture recalcitrant bone.  
What hand  
re-set those arms to hone

that art,  
chiselled a body to be reborn  
against rock? What conceived that passion  
here, now fully formed?

## Chaotic Music

I will make of you what I will.  
Broken runs picked up, set aside.  
Strident dissonance played until  
I have walked your mile, tried

to embrace your whole. No structure? We  
need counterpoint, accord. I will strip noise  
to bare note and build harmony.  
You will be quite changed: the joys

of destroying what we do not understand.  
World over, what does not fit, order introduced.  
Existence must be safe, insulated, planned.  
Mystery tamed, and in that act, reduced.



## Early Hours

Another day has fallen as I speak  
and sleep envelops everything I write.  
There is no light to find the words I seek,  
I cannot see their footprints in the night.

Perhaps come morning I will search again,  
they stay or go with such an easy grace.  
I think I am too slow to play this game,  
I cannot guess their course or match their pace.

As hunters do, I must prepare and wait  
to find a memory which is the best  
to slice apart and use its flesh as bait  
so words can pick the scent and come to nest.

A bloody business this, this poetry.  
The debris of our lives laid out to see.

## Nonsense on the Definition of Art

Not in the editing  
or drafting,

ninety-nine percent  
perspiration, or in whatever a thought might first present,

it is in the emptiness and error,  
looking fully into the mirror

facing a pit of your own making,  
reaching in

as fractious and daunting as that may be  
to carefully

craft from that retrieved thread  
the painting left covered, the unloved sculpture, the poem never read,

and still go back.  
In that act

is the sum of it.  
To recommit

to the task no one else commissions or is there to see.  
Journey

into the mirror - painful, uncomfortable,  
there! There is the art of it, forged in that struggle.

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