

a little black book of poems

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Introduction

Once of the (few) great things about moving is that it ploughs through all of your things turning up things once buried and long forgotten. In the process of my recent move I found again a notebook that I used to write poetry in while I was travelling around by train in late 1995. At the time I was living in Cambridge and regularly going back to Leeds where I had lived and occasionally up to Scotland to see another friend.

Despite not particularly enjoying living in Cambridge I found the landscape magical. It had, looking back, a profound effect on my writing at the time – filling it with a sort of magic realism.

It is strange to revisit these poems – I was a lot more unsettled at that time. It is clear from some of the poems too that deep depressions would occasionally claim me. I am a long way from the person that wrote these poems. It's a lot harder to produce things when you are happy and settled – at that time the words would just pour out of me - now I have to work at it and the (good) ideas are few and far between. I wouldn't go back though – apart from being less happy I was also not a very nice person to know.

I've put together this collection because not only do these poems represent a period in time for me personally, but I think also that some of them stand up well in their own right.

The Poems

The poems are presented here in chronological order. Two poems that appear in the notebook have been omitted here because they now seem contrived or mediocre. Also a fragment written in the same depression that produced *Isolation and Intimate spaces* has been left out. Whilst the ones that remain are not always of a particularly high standard they have been allowed to appear because the images they present have relevance or some turn of phrase struck me as of at the very least archival value.

The first two are heavily dream related: *Bad Dream* was written after a nightmare – that feeling of waking in dread, heavy with sleep, confused and scared. Of course as the clear light of day seeps in you feel foolish and as though you were mistaken – except that now because of this poem I at least remember the nightmare even if I can't remember what it was about.

The second is made of images that appeared in dreams or day dreams. The locations are all around the B&B in Milton in Cambridge where I sometimes used to stay. The red grand piano interestingly comes from many years before – I remember seeing it in Harrods – red, very modern and very expensive. This poem is directly related to the archaeology of dreams poems in my collection “*The Sky has no Memory*”. The idea was that these and other poems and images would make up a museum of dreams. I came to the conclusion though that the idea was hackneyed and abandoned it.

The mushroom scarer is one of my favourite poems. The title comes from misreading the title of a book in Waterstones in Leeds (I can vividly picture the moment to this day). I loved the idea and this poem came to me. As you may be able to tell I was reading a lot of Samuel Beckett at the time and several images can be traced to him.

Man and cat was written to be read aloud. As you might be able to tell from the rhythms it was written on a train. Apart from the slightly hippy-ish ideals it draws on my love of stupid arguments (Monty Python being perhaps the finest purveyors of these) and I also liked the fact that despite the deeper concepts touched upon the real moral is that the narrator couldn't believe the actions of the cat. I don't think this poem is as good as I thought it was at the time – it really could have done with some reworking.

I am not sure about Hymn to Modernism. I wrote quite a lot of poems like this which I have discarded over the years. This one reminds me of some sort of Kraftwerk anthem and with a little work it could well be some sort of eighties song. You never know – that might have been what I was thinking at the time....

The Crystal Twinkles was an attempt at children's poetry. I think that now it's a little contrived and is missing some of the magic I was looking for. It does remind me though of the beautiful morning I wrote it walking 'round the streets of Cambridge under a clear blue sky and with frost on the ground.

Isolation. Hmm – can't imagine I was very happy when I wrote this one. I suspect that like man and cat it was written to be written out loud. I like some of the images but it's a little pretentious for my tastes now.

I don't remember writing Intimate Space either – clearly playing with both the structure of the poem and the intimacy of both sex and violence. I suspect this was written in a similar mood to that of Isolation.

Gap – my poetry notebooks of 95-96 are full of things like this. I thought I'd leave it in for exactly this reason.

I suspect that the elevator in Elevator was some example in a discussion about the nature of your thoughts and being able to tell the difference from what you remember and what you imagine. Of course the imaginary elevator far from being a transitory thought in my head has now existed for years hidden in a notebook and now with this collection will escape into the heads of others to continue its imaginary existence, visiting made up places.

The untitled poem that comes next visits one of my great favourites – English nonsense poetry. The inspiration drawn from Edward Lear, Mervyn Peake and Lewis Carroll (and perhaps more subtly Brian Eno) is clear. It also contains images that I still come back to – the map derived from some unlikely source and treated as gospel, the sailing ship travelling over land and the woman who inspires a misdirected devotion in the narrator (and no I have never had this kind of relationship with anyone – it does happen a lot in my poems though).

Lost is part of a whole series of poems written at the time. They are simple streams of consciousness, sets of images (often moving from one mode to another – for example here man made to natural). The most distilled version was called "Twelve words to replace the English language" which was just that – the twelve words I considered most useful at the time (nouns not glue words).

Crow song is, I think, one of the better poems in this collection. It to me on a train across the fens down to Cambridge – a journey that often provided inspiration. The man in the poem reappeared a couple of years later in a screenplay I wrote with my friend Rick Wright which had the working title “The Ice Cream Van” (It had nothing at all to do with an ice cream van – the working title came from a (very) drunken version of the film that seemed funny at the time). The film failed to get made when we discovered that directors think screenplays a rough guideline whereas writers think that they should be closely stuck to.

Inventory is another stream of consciousness poem – this one inspired by Jan Svanmajker’s work (particularly Alice). I don’t think its up to much and its only really here for completeness.

I thought twice about including Fuckup’s and Joy. I was heavily involved in the rave and dance movement at the time – and this poem reflects the self indulgent psuedo hippy crap that I and a lot of the people around me banged on about at the time. Still given that this collection is meant to be a time frame and not a work of art I decided to include it in the end.

These poems are not anywhere near as good as I thought at the time but they do reflect a younger (and more naïve) me quite well.

Mark Williamson, October 2001

Bad Dream for a New Beginning

I surface momentarily
and then sink back into colour
a dark shape
blocks my way
I struggle and twist
in a glimmer of consciousness
I see the streetlights through the window
turn and trip
headlong into dream
uneasy, unresolved
hands touch my face
searching for comfort
a flash of fire
a shape
a friendly face looms
smiling
caring
eyes open
the image lingers
unconsciousness fighting
sleeps sticky fingers
clouds across my retina
fear in my ear
blood races red
tears streaming slat
breath breathing
arms flailing
catch me
catch me
I need to come home
WAKE UP
WAKE UP
my senses return
adrenalin pulse
disorientation shapes
uneasy
without remembering
scared to go back
unsure of myself
turn the light on for comfort
and then see that everything is stupidly real
and the fear slinks away
pretending
that it never was there

22nd October 1995

Untitled

There's a figure by the gatepost
wrapped in a white cotton sheet
lit orange by the lamplight

footsteps in the crisp autumn air

A submarine's sail fin
pushes through the pavement
explorers under the street

hands in my pocket
smile on my face

Ahead I catch a glimpse of my quarry
furtively pulling the shadows about her
like dark velvet cloaks

cars purring past

the room at the guest house
is empty tonight
the window still open
the cupboards in silence
the furniture is resting
enjoying a
welcome break

moths flittering in my ears

at a grand red piano
a bony fingered pianist
sculpts architectural slabs
of chromatic white sound

I hurry on

the clouds close in
dancing and flirting
throwing up shapes

and then suddenly
she is before me
a girl in the rain
bare feet and a
flowery yellow dress

23rd October 1995

The Mushroom Scarer

he has a big black hat
he has wild staring eyes
he wears a long black coat
its pockets are full of stones

he lives in an old windmill
on a faraway hill
its sails are all broken
and its walls are tumbling down

he's got long yellow hair
he's got a twinkle in his eye
at night when you and I
are fast asleep
he tramps over field and moor land

Scaring the mushrooms

27th October 1995

Man and Cat

met a man
asked his name
couldn't remember
where's he going
showed me a box
in the box?
a cat
cat sings a song:

Joy and Pleasure
are our goals
we are going
to wherever they
can be found
maybe you
can kindly help us along

follow me then friend
I will do what I can

here's a bed
that you can sleep on
whenever you want

here's a tree
lie in its shade
and eat its fruit

and when that's no good
come and visit me

hmm, said the man
that's not quite
what I had in mind

have you a palace
a small one will do
and a treasure chest
of riches
and a hundred slaves

that won't make you happy
yes it will
no it won't
oh yes it will

it won't but if that's
what you want
that you shall have

I found him
these things
and went back home
and lay in my bed
under my tree

sometime later I met him again
still couldn't remember his name
he was skinny as a rake
and raging like a fire
what's up?
slaves were lazy
beat the slaves
slaves ran away
couldn't cook
spent all the money
on take away food
when the money ran out
the palace was broken
so give me another
I know what to do this time

still won't make you happy

yes it will
no it won't
but see for yourself

Once again
I found him these things
and went back home
and lay in my bed
under my tree

a couple of years later
I went round to see him
still don't know his name
he'd learnt to live
with lazy slaves
tesco's was cheaper
and he'd paid the bills

was he happy?
no he wasn't
and it was all my
bloody fault
for giving him
these things

but he'd insisted

even though
I'd said it was
a bad idea

so he hit me
and then I got up
and walked back home
to my bed under my tree
and the cat followed my
and lived with me there
and now its happy

but I still don't know why
it didn't come with me in the
first place

cats usually
have more sense

27th October 1995

Hymn to modernism

Big things and little men
Dirty hands on clean white sheets
Rearrange and Recompose
we're moving into the future

white spaces filled with liquid light
sliced glass fighting
rust encrusted iron

in the distance a drop of
water falls a thousand feet
into a circular pool of water
set in a smooth plastic floor

and the bell chimes
counting: one, two, three

Building buildings
that we can live in
give ourselves a chance
to change our lives

a blade of grass
creeps through a crack
a cleaner sweeps

Rearrange and Recompose
we're moving into the future

5th November 1995

The Crystal Twinkles

In dark corners
in winding tunnels
the crystal twinkles live
with crooked hats and pointed shoes
they creep and wander
beneath your nose

They are collectors
of all that glitters
the flashes of cameras
the sparkles of diamonds
the gleams in eyes
the glows of glow worms
the beams of the moon on the dark dark sea

These wondrous treasures they hide
in precarious piles of velvet lined boxes
and lead crystal bottles with ancient cork stoppers

and what do they do with these treasures?

They make them into shiny soup
and sparkling drinks
and best of all
on cold frosty mornings they
sprinkle them on the ground
and in the webs of spiders
so that they glisten and shine
in the early morning sun.

18th November 1995

Isolation

bare light bulb, metal grills

Isolation

watching camera, static on the intercom

Isolation

cold brick work, flaking paint

Isolation

a cat in an empty corridor

Doorway

empty fields under silver moon

Isolation

cold beach in the thin grey dawn

Isolation

out in the dark
across the cold bleak sea
to city streets crowded with happy people

Isolation

shiny shop windows full of wishes

Isolation

cosy bars, inviting food and cold beer

Isolation

back home
to your empty flat

November 1995

Intimate space

Intimate caress
breath on my lips
closed space
protected

skin on my skin
held tight
warm space
protected

light on my eyes
hand on my belly
watched space
protected

steel around my wrists
hand in my face
enclosed space
protected

28th November 1995

GAP

Elevator

Elevator, Elevator
here in my head
Elevator, Elevator
I love your controls

I can hear your piped music
I can examine my reflection
 in your dark shiny mirrors
you are as real right now
as any I've been in

Constructed from memories and dreams
I've done a good job

this elevator is different
because it goes to places
no lift can imagine

bookshelves and libraries
castles and fields
vast empty hangers
the landscape of my imagination

soon I'll forget you and
your
 tenuous existence
will evaporate from my thoughts

but this morning
 you
can be in my poem

Untitled

Senseless words
scraped from worn out pages
I copied a map from
the cracks in the pavement
and set off to find fortune and adventure
my companions were a bellboy
and a rather old and battered hat

at noon in the desert
we marked out a garden
with our shoes and some string
looking out at the roses
we had boiled oats and tea

As the moon rose from the sand dunes
we continued our journey
most intrepid and brave
we passed the soup bowls and sticks
of those who had gone before is
we ran away from a mongoose
we dined on buttered toast
in the black of night
we sang songs about tulips
by the light of flickering candles
I wrote in my journal
about palm trees and stars
we stole a beautiful galleon
from an arrogant merchant
and sailed it across the endless grassy plains
scattering the gazelle
in our seagull haunted wake
but nothing could prepare us
for that meeting in the sunshine
with the queen of windows and lanterns

She sparkled and flashed
She sang me a song
my heart was lost forever
and I had to return home

Never more will I go adventuring
but instead I write her
love songs and tie them to
balloons released into the
endless night

Lost

empty telephones
broken coffee
sleepy pot plants
luxury flats
a flash of red
a banging door
opportunity lost
missed portraits
stolen books
waiting platform
distant thunder
falling rain

hold me

Crow Song

She was Asian and slim
long black hair, bright painted lips

his unshaven face
his high leather boots

I could see their eyes shining
they had a secret
I wanted to know

One golden misted dawn
I came across them dancing
in a lonely fenland field
next to some
bone stick tree
all around them
chattering
a dishevelled band
of ragamuffin crows

and then as I watched
hidden from sight
he stopped in his tracks
and raised his hands
up to heaven
and cried out my name

fear entered my heart
and I ran like the wind
but the sky closes over
and is always full of crows

Inventory

Paper and sawdust
shoelaces and snails
cast iron cookers
and burnished steel poles
sunsets in boxes
sideboards in ruins
ladders with rungs missing
songs with no words in
don't answer the telephone
hide under the stairs
Catalogue the contents
in worn out leather books
put them in stories
paint pictures of loss
my imaginations cupboards
are groaning
so I'll put these objects here
for your perusal and safekeeping
I'll make an inventory
after all
they might only be junk
but you can
never
tell

Fuckup's and Joy

the light comes up
filled with light grey rain
passing cars, red bricks
slowly life begins to start
listen to the drum beat
systems and patterns
interdependent and interwoven
let your brain follow your
heart
words are important
but only when active
an empty promise is only as
much use as an broken dust bin

I paint my face pretty
an dance in my head

flickering images
and crumble down walls

your motivation will suffer
when you see your mistakes
but don't let that stop you
'cos every fuckup
is a step closer to joy