Who thought birds sang

Brian Lever

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Who thought birds sang
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Introduction

This is the first publication of poetry written by students at the College.

A majority of the poems were produced by members of an elective group who at times wrote on similar topics. Some of the poems in this category have overtones of the 'set piece', although the approaches employed are quite different. Fortunately, this reservation applies to very few of the poems selected for inclusion by the group.

The most encouraging aspect of a collection of this kind is that the poems could arise from a small group of students who had written very little before the beginning of this term (with the notable exceptions of Chuck Coffman and Scott Zehnder). It suggests that many people, given the opportunity to talk and write, could produce work that was a valuable exploration of their world and their responses to it.

It is hoped that future anthologies will include work by a wider range of students, so that such publications become a real and lively focus for the insights offered in the creative output of students at the College.

Richard Rossiter
English Department
Churchlands College.
August 1974.
First Days Again

1

Yes I really enjoy a fashion show
I look out from the center of the corners
or keep within the room
where friending grinning
freckles
have escaped the sun . . . .
I enjoy the smiling cheeks nose and
chin
pebbled fair skin
and shy but open eyes.

2

Yes I really enjoy a fashion show
they pass by outside
clustered in twos
and threes
for protection from invading eyes
— protection of a kind
for moving forms of loose
and bouncing sweaters
and sunglasses
followed by a behind in time
with the rest . . . .
You can’t pick the cheerleaders yet
they’re still-sorting out themselves
watch the eyes eye each other up.

3

Yes I really enjoy a fashion show
but I wonder who foots the bill
high heel shoes
and expensive gear
loose around the top
tight around the rear
it’s undoubtedly vanity
— oh . . . . you say competition . . . .
Painted eyes
cheeks
lips
painted nails and painted on smells.

4

Yes I really enjoy a fashion show . . . .
it’s the cock-teasers I can’t stand.
Poem to a Frigid Woman

Your love was a fire
which went out as
I came in.
Poem to an Ex-Girl

I thought you would
like to know
that when I was near you
the underpants you gave me
never fitted.
Let Me

Let me paddle in your eyes

and walking, wade up to my waist

and, very slowly, drown.

Joanne

restless and annoyed at not knowing why

i was uncomfortable for three days

until i wrote your name in the sand.
'Write a poem on man', said he,  
So there we sat, transfixed  
In a gaping stare.  
Yet silently —  
Tongues lolled out phrases  
Which only two ears could hear,  
Eyes saw images  
That only one mind could imagine,  
He waited.
Keep Off The Grass
by order

The smoke curls
a haze in a dream
Burning his eyes
Making tears roll along the scarp of his nose.

He smokes on
inhaling
exhaling
Waiting for the belonging
the inter-insight
To wash away the now.
Oh flower of light make my life more bright
more bright.

Wake up Monday morning praying to your god
Wake up wishing you were god
And knowing that you can't
And knowing that there is no god —
god-forsaken Monday morning.

Have you ever tried to look at your own mind . . . .
Tried rolling your eyes back into yourself . . . .
I can't . . . . .
I've tried . . . . .
But my eyes just won't do it . . . . . .
Solitary Crapper

Alone
Astride the toilet
I am a solitary crapper.

But
In my street
several other people
may be crapping too.

And
In this city there could be hundreds;
and in this country, thousands;
and on this planet, millions;
all crapping, as I do.

Now
I consider all the living things
of the cosmos crapping in concert with me,

And I think of my dung joining the pile.

Sometimes
I feel like a man in a roomful of mirrors.
The Days Belong to Children

The days belong to children,
green days
of noise and motion.

Confined by what they see,
the children run
in images not of the day,
but of themselves.

The molten cock
cracks
open the day.

Sometime Never

They used to say 'Later'
or 'Not yet'
And 'When you're grown-up'
The first two
O.K.
But the last one
means never.
Usually a girl is given
a make-up kit
on her twelfth birthday.
On my twelfth birthday
I was given a typewriter.

By a girl’s fourteenth birthday
her legs have been moulded
by sheer smooth stockings.
Yet on my fourteenth birthday
my legs were still red and
constricted by thick elastics.

On a girl’s sixteenth birthday
the real woman emerges.
But on my sixteenth birthday
I had not plucked my eyebrows
shaved my legs, or been given
my first kiss.

All these did happen
on my eighteenth birthday
and
I did surprise people.

Woman

Fruit in succulent ripeness
Dance enticingly on the branch
Tease the grasping fingertips
That beg to savour your sweetness.
Face of Age

Your silver hair shines as you work through time.
A face that is lined with uncontrollable age
Smiles and frowns
In accordance with the rhythm of your mind.

Your tiredness overwhelms your love.
You forget too quickly.
Your tolerance shows, but only dimly.

I look at you and expect to drown in sleep,
But glancing up I see you
Laughing.
Chairs

Why the second chair Dad?
Someone else in mind
to share the nights when
cats and fire and T.V.
melt into snoring sleep?
I was there once.
Nothing's changed except
that Mum and the cats
and the fire and T.V.
melted into snoring sleep then.

The Family

Sprawled on chairs, rugs.
Musing together they laugh,
Warmth spreads
Excludes the outside's cold, strangers —
for these few.
Bus Ride

Eyes turned inwards
See, past breath-fogged windows,
Old motors clanking
Through city high streets.
Poached egg, saved for later,
In solid dribble
Down the slope of camphor suit
He nods in wakefulness, then
Falls back on sleep.

Pasty-faced youth
Suave in polka-dot tie —
Companion to acned brow —
Gapes lustfully
At space
Between mini-skirt and thighs.

Lounging back in tattered upholstery —
Sophistication in a school suit —
She fingers unsurely the forbidden pleasure
of a glowing cigarette
draws back and sighs a stream of smoke.

Cafe

Mantis-thin old man
sniffs and grunts
with satisfied nods,
dribbles memories
stained
with raspberry jam.
Waiting Room

A spectacled longhaired schoolboy
flashes a look over each newcomer
and returns to his paperback.
On the third imperious call of 'Mr. Downs'
he jumps at the name.

Forty year old, clutching her handbag to twinset
and plaid skirt showing too much leg.
Eyes the carpet squares with longing intensity
until smiling and selfconscious she
advances to the hands of her doctor.

A cautious grandmother enters
in her ski-hat and mac.
Looks around hopefully with stumpy umbrella
but turns disappointed to whisper
confidences at the nurse.

Worn out housewife
dreams with vacant eyes and gives thin smiles
for her children’s antics,
and their questions of when
their dad will come home.

Trim little blue haired lady –
a sudden noticed presence.
Huddles over 'Rose Kennedy’s Memoirs'
in frozen contemplation of
her own mortality.

'Willa you mova the whita cara please?'
a friendly shiny Italian
requests the disinterested group.
I rush out
past already averted eyes.
From Within The Flat

I sit listening
But I don’t know what for
For someone — for something
I don’t know
Just listening

The noise of the traffic comes from
The darkness out the window
And I just sit listening
The clock on the shelf winds down noisily
And the people in the flat below turn on their T.V.
— I sit listening

The taste of cabbage lines my mouth
And my stomach is heavy
— A take-away pack from the Chinese Restaurant
Across the street I couldn’t really afford
But I hadn’t eaten today
And now I just sit listening

The table is cluttered
— Forks, spoons, coke stained glasses,
  Folded newspaper, scrap paper . . .
A traffic ticket
A motorbike roars by
And I sit listening

Posters hide the walls
— Bare breasted cyclists, fighting swans,
  And unity . . .
A pair of socks air over a no parking sign
Someone swears across the court
And I sit listening

Pressed shirts hang with the curtains
And the iron stands on the horizon
Of the ironing board . . .
Whose turn was it this week
— maybe mine
But I just sit listening

To pages turning in the next room
(I shouldn’t say but)
Shit being flushed away
Lift clicking, banging, clicking
Someone weeping . . .
— Me listening

For what I don’t know
For something — for someone
I don’t know
Just listening
Just listening
Portrait of a Bar

A boring, bellied gentleman,
Middle-aged, middle class,
Stares glumly at his half-drained
Glass of port,
Looking for a way out.

Two large, red-faced, sweaty women,
With wiry, unbrushed fly-away hair,
(Each wearing a floral cotton dress)
Swig at their worked-for Guinness Stout,
And know there's no way out.

A flirtatious girl, young, secure
In a charisma of glassy beauty
And cheap perfume,
Sips a glass of whitest wine
And chips at her flaking, polished nails.
Childhood

One by one
Red bugs plucked from crusty trunk
And plopped like beads
Into a bucket.

Eyes agape in curiosity
Follow the descent
To the end

Why can't lady birds swim?
Maybe . . .

I want to play on the see-saw in the park
Play hide-and-seek in the dark
Watch the car lights go flying by—
'Mr. Policeman, who am I?'

I want to eat ice-cream
Think about my dreams
Play cowboys and itchy-bums—
'Tough luck, hands up chum.'

I want to walk along dripping my ice-cream
Reliving what must have been dreams
Be a boy playing cowboys and itchy-bums—
'Just my luck to be a chum.'

I want to die before I grow too old
Before I find out the world is cold
And stop wondering why or how—
'You know . . . maybe I better die now.'
Assignment

She,
vacantly chewing,
stares at a blank page.

He,
hurriedly jotting
figures across the page
sighs,
      at last.

Students

Computers —
Fed on reports, statistics, opinions —
Eager to show performance
Swallow
Masticate
Regurgitate
For what reward?

Small wonder
Life becomes so narrow bound.
One thousand miles and a service is needed. New oil is added as the old oil is bled and dirt is extracted as connections are strengthened.

Six thousand miles and a filter is fitted. Head parts are timed to a synchronised pattern.

Twelve thousand miles and the model just stops.
the steps

those bloody steps
too narrow to take one at a time,
too wide to take two at a time,
so I alternate between
a Japanese shuffle
and a forward loping movement
up and down the steps
late to lectures
forgetting files
to and from my car
that never starts
or opens
anyway.
River

Wrinkles age the water's taut face
grey-blue like the day.
Boatshed, cruisers no longer keep pace
dry out under sun, content to stay
silent. Ignoring the present —
cars and apartments vying for power;
unmoved by false youth, stays unbent
to exhibit signs of a dour
old man that, left by friends
stares at old times. A life
to the death he defends
while outliving each wife.

Alone but for cries of sea and land bird,
only they have heard.

river tree

river tree, grey-brown with olive spikes
after rain, old brown-paper bark circles
around thin tubular branches
leaning casually on the water-top,
an elbow-limb is sent into the water.
bay view

across
stretched grey-blue
a clang sounds
sea birds screech
over silent cruisers
still in uncertain sunlight

summer sea

wave
sparkling
liquid glass
glittering blue
blinding white flashes
spill upon shore
rise up to
live once
more.
Life Cycle

The fresh purifying rain falls soft
But only stirs from silent, warm
Plum-brown
Depths
The rancid stench of rotting weed
Which floats lifeless as
Grey bloated fish
On the water's fretted face.
Screech or Sing

Clustered village of Japan,
backed in and fastened to
  an almost-too-steep slope
where paned eyes reflect
  brown stippled waters
    that shuffle
under uncertain clouds.

Boats and birds, sea brothers
  float and nod, while
mooching blowfish check shelves
  for their green slime foods
and sea-grass trees send
  messages bustling
across slate waters.

Dull mood, yet reckless air
  fumbles in hollows under
wings of gulls
who screech a none-too-friendly
  greeting, to confound the pens
of untrained poets
who thought birds sang.
Winter

Suspended
In flight against the power of the winter wind
The whitegulls give their frantic calls
And break free.
Quick, grab at the piece of soggy bread
Huddle for a moment against the sea,
And go back to your battle with the wind.
the periwinkle

it pressed to the rocks,
lapping in the water warmth,
the man, walking alone
saw the black shell and
began to prize it.

he lifted an edge and spied
wondrous milky pinks and blues
his gentle sureness won the periwinkle
and it left the rocked security.
Jackal

His elements —
Decay and death
To him are life and living.
He represents hunched scavenging,
A dweller
Of the wild’s slum.

The jackal
Waits for carelessness
A turned back or averted eye
As does the urchin of the streets
Thankful
For another’s waste.
an old elephant

a tough grey hide engraved with life,
now wafery as old manuscripts
— the watering eye dribbles in reflection.

an archaic gentleman blowing hollowly,
trumpeting softly alone,
— just tolerated by the hard young bulls.
Magpie

With richness — of tinfoil and tiny quartz
adorn your honeymoon suite,
step lightly across your beglittered threshold,
ettice your mate with gilded throat and nest.
To Escape

Wild things destined for domestication,
    have you no way to retain your wildness, willpower, worth?
Must you fall powerless to the blows of an unpredictable master,
    must you fall powerless to the pampering of an entire race?
Those canine teeth which rip those unyielding thongs,
use them to rape that bond which keeps you to man.
Wolf

Oh, wolf, ruthless and callous killer,
Have you no sense of right or wrong?
The scent of blood in forest frost
Hangs heavy in your ever wary nostrils.
And yet you, oh exiled beast, do know right.
I have seen you love your cubs —
Watch over them with troubled, haunted eyes
In the face of danger,
Tread carefully through drifts of snow
So as not to leave your prints
For any foe to follow:
Seek shelter, warm, protect your young
From many fears;
Have seen you all but starve in a cruel
And friendless winter.
Combatting elements which try to
Steal away your lean and thankless life.
Tunnel-Vision

Blinkers buckled
Tread the narrow way
Head first
Newness either side on foreign paths
Not tried.
Stumble, travel tiresome tracks
To nowhere.
Programmed destiny.
Faded dreams that now are hard to read
Kaleidoscope on clouded screens,
Confused.
Move, direct your weary head to ease
a burning lip,
And know your loss.
i follow me
one
seed
ahead
of
the
deed
and
one
birth
behind
a
seed
i follow me
one
tock
ahead
of
the
clock
and
one
tick
behind
a
tock
i follow me
one
death
ahead
of
the
breath
and
one
corpse
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