

delivered

DAVE CALDER



otherpublications

delivered
DAVE CALDER

otherpublications

delivered: dave calder. otherpublications liverpool 2002
ISBN 0 946057 98 2

This collection copyright © Dave Calder 2002

The right of Dave Calder to be identified as the author of this book has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Acknowledgements for first publication

Ambit, Poetry Wales, Smoke, Foolscap and Riverrun magazines and anthologies including: Making connections (Stride), The empty hill (Skylark) graffiti (WALL), The Works (Macmillan), All in the family (OUP), perfectly acceptable (WALL)

CONTENTS

[an accident](#)
[ambition](#)
[at the museum](#)
[because](#)
[bluebottle](#)
[boy, television, lemur](#)
[broken](#)
[bus stop](#)
[canal](#)
[changed](#)
[climber](#)
[delivered](#)
[friend](#)
[getting going](#)
[guilt](#)
[the hands](#)
[a handy quote](#)
[home](#)
[in the cellar](#)
[in the last quarter](#)
[invisible](#)
[a journey](#)
[leviathan](#)
[lie](#)
[the limit](#)
[makeover](#)
[moving house](#)
[naked light](#)
[nerve](#)
[a new point](#)
[not lost](#)
[on the 13th day](#)
[out of it](#)
[paska](#)
[a photo](#)
[policy](#)
[the power](#)
[promises](#)
[remember this](#)
[the scars](#)
[silkie](#)
[smoke](#)
[the song](#)
[stubborn](#)
[translation](#)
[a waste](#)
[well ye ken](#)
[the words](#)

An accident

The cars - there was an accident perhaps
or the lights were stuck on red - the cars
were jammed up at the junction. They
growled together, bursts of smoke
flowered at the stalks of their exhausts.
Nothing could move. There was a lot of shouting.
As the day wore on, most were abandoned,
some with their engines left running to nowhere.
Large holes appeared in nearby buildings.
Their tyres sank in the softening road,
their wheels took root. Later
the crashing and rumbling stopped, the occasional
crack of backfire, the screeching, stopped.
The accident was over. There were no sounds of rescue.
And under an asphalt sky, an acidic, leaden rain,
the cars grew bony, like bushes in winter,
branch-like, in a world without trees.

Ambition

He builds the house inside his head, stone by stone;
and not just the house, but also
high walls around it and a garden.
A low house, facing south, perhaps with a small balcony.
On a hill above the water. And trees, a stream, of course.

But, as he worked on it, adding a little here and there,
a stove, the bed, a different door,
he realised, rather abashed,
that something important had been overlooked, and,
searching the building, he discovered that it was himself.

At the museum

There's too much in the world: why try to know
it all? This place is a cupboard where they sling
what can be forgotten. No new video
or computer game, nothing interesting:
it's done-with stuff, old things with labels on.
Today's things fill the space inside my head:
who's doing what with who, the latest song,
I've no room left for anything that's dead.
It's stiff and stuffed, not alive like on tv:
birds in glass cages, snail fossils in stones,
don't entertain me - what I want to see
is what the boys are up to with those bones.
I'd like it if they started acting daft,
all you need to know is how to have a laugh.

Because

because i was born
i am free. if i do not allow it
no thing can bind me.

because i love i
put my voice with the living:
hope is the heart of the heart.

because i will die
as all will, i will not struggle
when fate grips my ankle

The bluebottle pantoum

The bluebottle is buzzing round the bathroom
as angry and irritated as I am
listening to its crazy one-note tune.
The window's open. Go on, scam!

As angry and as irritated as I am,
I'm trying to be helpful - look here, fly,
the window's open. Go on, scam!
Stop droning on and use your eyes.

I'm trying to be helpful - look here, fly
a little to the left, then up. And please
stop droning on and use your eyes.
Do I have to beg you on my knees?

A little left, then up and out. Please.
I'm getting close to a murder most foul.
Do I have to beg you? On my knees
my hands are clenched upon a heavy towel.

I'm getting close to a murder most foul
listening to its crazy one-note tune.
My hands are clenched upon a heavy towel.
The bluebottle is buzzing round the bathroom.

Boy television lemur

The boy is watching the television.
A lemur stares out at him. wide-eyed.

The boy sits on the sofa surrounded by blue carpet,
the lemur is on an island in the Indian ocean

The boy is eating crisps. Cold rain rattles the windows.
The lemur's island is hot, with many hungry people.

The boy has been making something. There are scraps of paper
and a pair of scissors. The hungry people

are chopping down trees on the lemur's island. Soon
there will not be enough trees or lemurs. But there will still

be lots of hungry people. And now the island and lemurs vanish
and there are advertisements for food and furniture.

Broken

That vase with the flowers: she dropped it
in the kitchen. We heard the surprisingly
small crash and then that word also
slipped, or leapt from her lips, and broke
her rule, smashed on our ears. As we turned
she was standing stiff, shocked at the mess
made by the word splattered around her room.
At first she could not lift her eyes but when she did
they met ours burning helplessly
and then the tears burst

fragments
of glass, of water,
of memory, of heart

Bus stop

They got off the bus. The dust
spumed under thick tyres, fell back.
Cool, breaking day. The road

stretching from there to there, from
dust to dust, hunched trees, scorched bushes,
small cane huts by the gritty beds of gutted streams.

And here? A square paved with dry leaves and dust,
a street of shuttered houses, a corner
where a bus stops twice a day. Somewhere to stay?

A small wind stirs, that must have strayed in from the sea
that is somewhere over there, beyond sear fields
of scrub and yellow dust, on an already hazed horizon.

Their throats are dry and ache for coffee,
but more than coffee, for a release
from the land's tension, for the sea that now

aches in their noses, swells and ebbs
with each wave of hunger. Beside the mud wall
and the dusty flowers they put their bags.

One smokes a cigarette. They wait for the bus.

Canal

All day he sat at the side of the canal,
like a closed dockyard, his rod
motionless above the dirty water.
All day, and nothing came. He pretended to ignore
the cyclists, the shouting children;
his eyes watched only the water.
He thought - the fish are so large, so well-fed
they ignore my bait. He thought - the fish
are so few, so tiny, they can't swallow the hook.

As evening came, he imagined a fish as large as himself
connected by the line, a thread, but balanced; nothing moved.
He imagined it gape-mouthed, impassive,
its slack mouth and fixed eyes the mirror of his own.
Curious, wanting to confirm his vision, he leant
forward - and with a deft flick
the fish hooked him and he was pulled
in a smooth curve to the suffocating water.

Changed

For months he taught us, stiff-faced.
His old tweed jacket closely buttoned up,
his gestures careful and deliberate.

We didn't understand what he was teaching us.
It was as if a veil, a gauzy bandage, got between
what he was showing us and what we thought we saw.

He had the air of a gardener, fussily protective
of young seedlings, but we couldn't tell
if he was hiding something or we simply couldn't see it.

At first we noticed there were often scraps of leaves
on the floor where he had stood. Later, thin wisps
of thread like spider's web fell from his jacket.

Finally we grew to understand the work. And on that day
he opened his jacket, which to our surprise
seemed lined with patterned fabric of many shimmering hues.

Then he smiled and sighed. And with this movement
the lining rippled and instantly the room was filled
with a flickering storm of swirling butterflies.

Climber

It's in his blood, I suppose, and I'm not fearful,
he shinned a six foot gate at eighteen months,
but the child is getting daft and reckless just the same
Watch out now, I say, you're far too tired, you'll fall.
However good they are, tired climbers make mistakes.
Remember Paul, Ceci's dad,
who played with you when you were small? yes,
with the beard - he was a good climber, brave
and fit - he made the tennis balls sizzle
when he duelled with Big Dave Symonds -
he went out too tired, and climbed, and fell
and it finished him. Stop now before you hurt yourself.

And he reaches wide to traverse on the table's edge
on tiny fingergrrips, and pauses as he hangs -
'What Paul do, why?' - and then he swings onto the chair
and grins. All the same, these climbers.
Just one last time, he says, one last last time.
What can you do? It's in the blood, I suppose.

Delivered

He held the baby's head in his wide palm;
the bone-ball, the soft shell, fitted in his fingers
as its own mouth held its hand, drawing comfort.
And this he supposed was an achievement,
a victory for life, a shape of hope.
Yet it seemed also that this new one
was his replacement, that he would now
grow old more swiftly. But this one too,
now born, was also moving towards death;
and even as he cradled it
against its first fear of the world
or maybe in a move to reassure himself,
he admitted, despite the congratulating voices,
the unexpected completeness of defeat.

Friend

It was in his pocket. He admitted it.
But when they looked, they could see nothing.
Turn it out - they said. He did. The pocket
hung from his jacket like a floppy ear.
His hands were empty too. There was fluff in his fingernails.

Liar - they said, you don't have one, you made it up.
They laughed like knives; but he didn't mind. What
they couldn't find was safe, they couldn't hurt it.
The others were also pleased; they thought
they understood, had found out, his lie.
When they let him go, he put his hand back in the pocket,
and his fingers first made, then stroked
the unknown shape of his friend.

Getting going

Some use the bottom, shuffle like a snail,
others roll with the comfy ease of seals
or get a pudgy grip on carpet fluff
to drag themselves around.

Some seem like they'll never start,
then suddenly lurch away, as if they'd been waiting
for somewhere worth the effort or maybe
determined to get it right first time;

others want to climb before
they can even stand:

but there they go, each finding their own
particular way, not quite helpless any more,
not satisfied with where they've been put down,
off on the long lifetime journey.

Guilt

At his heels the cliff is crumbling. In front
float faces, bodies; not angry
but struggling, held aloft in the claws of his stupidities
that cackle and squawk and peck at him.
And one it seems is still inside -
under his ribs there is a heavy hollow
caked with blood and feathers.
Startled, his eyes open. He switches the light
on, off. He nestles into the bedding.
It was only a dream after all, he thinks,
after all it was only the past. But why then
do his lips keep moving - shut up, they say, shut up.

The hands

So many things were going wrong. He felt he was losing control, brittle at the edges, ready to snap. And now his hands felt heavy, distant, not part of him at all.

As he stared dully at the window they were restless, touched his jacket, tapped a cigarette, scratched along his nose and stroked his beard.

He had no power to stop them; or perhaps he permitted them, recognising in the movement something of a cat, a baby: but what, he thought, if when he touched her, imagining the gesture to be friendship or affection, it was no more than these hands, now moist and curling round his knees, these hands in their hunger, their constant need for comfort.

A handy quote

I stood inside the Cafe Royal
and marvelled at how man
was made, and talked, and drank.

On painted tiles upon the wall
the words of the great engineer
Addressed the matter in a clear
firm rule to cover all
machines that puff and blow and bleed -

"There is no limit to the speed
if the works can be made to stand."

Home

It was, he supposed, nothing in particular:
someone moving heavily next door, or
the child turning in its cot; perhaps
the wind bumping the roof - coming to nothing -
and the small twitch of unease only a soft
tap on the shoulder - we're still here,
that's all, don't disturb yourself.
When the light burnt out, soon after this,
he remained seated in the dark
with a vague settled sense of pleasure,
curiously reassured, thinking
of nothing in particular.

In the cellar

The father is sawing, slicing the wood with strong smooth strokes. The boy prods a curled shaving with a chisel.

The father is concentrating; his eyes, his shoulders, his arms, are fixed in the wood. The boy is also engrossed, with a sharp corner he has stabbed a jagged split.

The father pauses, lays the saw on its side. What will he say?
- Now you try, hold it this way - ?, or, - does that look straight to you - ?
No. He says - Stop fiddling. You'll spoil the chisel's point.

For what he is teaching is not woodwork, but love of making and patience and care in the work, with the tools. And the boy is learning about his father or perhaps about himself

and he puts the chisel back in its place
and he puts his hands in his pockets
and he tries not to lean on the wall.

In the last quarter

She sat at the table under the small light.
Outside the window the moon rose huge and yellow,
slow, swollen, weighing down the night.

She turned the pages of a book, pages that
were dry and stiff; and the book's spine creaked each time
she moved her hand to hold them flat.

From somewhere a wind began to stir the room -
cups chinked softly on their hooks, in a vase the dusty
flowers brushed together; soon

the shelves, the pots and plates, began to tremble
with the edgy aching sound of something about to break
and under the swaying lamp she could no longer tell

one word from another. She put her head down,
one ear pressed on the book as if to listen, and watched
leaves twist across the floor, drift into mounds

around her feet and up against the wall;
leaves swirling and falling till the room was lost in them
and their rustling whisper like the scurrying of small

animals or the parched voices of the dead. And then
her eyelids fluttered, shut; and the wind also dropped,
sudden, and in the room everything fell silent.

The lamp hung above her, its shadow didn't change.
Her chair stopped creaking, and the leaves
lay deep enough to drown in; like tiny hands or flames

the leaves lay from wall to wall, high
as her waist, as the window. Not a sigh. Beyond the glass
the moon swept, bright and staring, into a frozen sky.

Invisible

On the news it said : the economy's doing alright
once invisible earnings are taken into account -
in the vaults of the city mysteriously appear
mountains of money - the bankers call it their interest.
That's true. It's what they're interested in.

On the street outside people give money
to feed the hungry they see on tv -
it goes in the tin - clink, it vanishes,
zing, it appears again inside the bank.
It's a good trick. Very interesting.
Of very high interest indeed.

Invisible earnings. The pay of the leech.
For the cash is life-blood yet the poor are thin and sucked,
and how plump are the politicians, how muscular the military,
those that the blood-money flows through
before it drains back into the blood-bank.
It's a strange sort of transfusion - they take
more out of the patient than was ever put in.

It's life on the drip. Hire purchase on whole countries.
Like an unpayable mortgage, getting bigger every year,
with the heavy mob in your kitchen, taking their bite,
pestering you to buy gadgets you don't need
with money you can only borrow if you agree
to buy and keep on buying from their catalogue.

Invisible earnings. Almost true, they almost are:
the poor who earned the money are almost invisible;
we see them flickering far-off, objects of pity:
starving, thirsty, fleeing;

Invisible/

their problems reduced to the simple and obvious
so that we can feel satisfied by simple answers;
but the destruction of their countries, the cash-crops,
the mineral spoil, the sliced-up forests, even the wars of hopelessness
support our comforts, our hidden profits keep them poor.
There are no pictures of this, we are not asked to see it:
anything's invisible if you're not looking at it.

A journey

He got on board. Every day the same jostle, the same lack of seats. Every day he stood. It swayed. It bucked as it braked.

He imagined it a ship, on which he bravely gripped the rigging - especially on rainy days when the smell of wet clothes soaked the air - or a submarine, where the crew swayed along the passageway doing their duties, despite the cramped conditions.

And as it lurched and jarred avoiding dangers, as he fought to keep his balance so as not to fall ridiculous in the laps of grim-faced men or onto shopping, as urgent bells rang and the rush of water blurred the glass, it would sometimes stop, unexpected, and everyone would fall silent, staring forward, as if afraid, as if their lives depended on not being heard.

Leviathan

Just how big are we talking? Let me put it this way,
inside it are the wrecks of a hundred Roman galleys
and several supertankers, lost nets that bulge
with bottled messages and the bones of Pharaoh's army,
metal mountains of cannon, anchors and capstans,
gravel from the high Himalayas, sand from the Sahara,
ten thousand fortunes in gold coins and gleaming jewels
glinting and grinding in heaped banks like shingle.
Whatever has washed into water, or rain swept seawards
is crusted as coral on this rumbling belly where whales
glide with ichthyosaurs and gigantic luminous squid:
the slow steady heave of its breath sucks the tides,
to stand on a shore is to watch its lips quiver.

Lie

It fell easily from his lips. He was not paying attention and lost his hold. But at the time he thought nothing of it. Only later, going to bed, he noticed the small hole, slightly charred at its edges, awkward to repair. All night it bothered him. Scrubbed, the mark became paler, almost indistinct, but the hole could not be mended without making it more obvious, and so it persisted in the shape of his clumsiness, through which certainly something of value had been, and would continue to be, lost.

The limit

further than this you may not pass
they draw a circle on the grass

further than this you cannot fly
they draw a circle in the sky

this is a game of governors and priests
to keep us penned in by belief

to cross the line becomes its own reason
adventure spiced with heresy and treason

that ends each time success is proved -
and rulers grab it, and the line is moved.

Make-over

Nothing could be completely perfect, of course,
but as soon as the workmen had finally gone
heaving the last leaking sacks of broken plaster,
smashed lumps of old stained stone,
she had swept and mopped and scrubbed everywhere,
with the intense concentration of a ritual.
From the deep corners her cloths had fetched out
the finest gleams of dust, the most gossamer thread,
frail wings. Her cleaner's powerful suction
captured straw hidden between floorboards,
tiny flakes of green paint or maybe fabric,
the last gritty grains of the old hearth.

Finally, she lifted the doormat from the new tiles
shook it out on the neatly paved garden, looked about,
sniffed the air, and closed the smooth oiled door.
And now she walked back through the house, content.
In the refitted kitchen, vased flowers on the table,
clean wicker baskets on fresh shelves, a soft light
shimmering on the shiny steel surfaces. In the cot
the baby,
something,
softly grunts
oink, oink

Moving house

The chair stood by the window. "Sit down", he said, but it growled and leapt outside. The old table, that he'd sat with, talked to, for so many years, kept bending its legs, awkward and embarrassed. The cupboard, leaning drunkenly against the wall, staggered stiffly forwards, but fell flat on the floor. The bed was coming downstairs: he could hear its mattress flopping like a heavy belly at each step. He looked: it had stripped its clothes off in the hall and was gliding unashamed into the street. For weeks now his books had been vanishing, leaving unexplained gaps in his memory, and now he saw the shelves were empty as were the wardrobe stuck in the bathroom and the kitchen drawers, light sockets, window frames. Everything was leaving. It grew dark, and finally, as the last slow bricks crawled away, he sat in the space where the house had been, on the bare earth, and watched the stars and smelled the small breeze. These were also moving. He slept and in the sleep remembered something or somewhere. And by the morning he had gone.

Naked light

Attracted by the sudden bursts of light
that flared across the shadowy wall
erratic, startling - the more so in
that they came from the north -
he went to the window. Across the street,
on the roof of a house, a skylight was open:
from time to time it swung in a slight breeze
throwing the evening sun along the darkened terrace
like a fair hand open with its gifts
or long tresses of hair tossed back;
and as he looked he was dazzled - all the light
seemed caught within its frame
and it burnt in a shimmering silver
to the depths of his prying eyes.

Nerve

He was stretched on the wrinkled wall of the bed
as if tensed back on the narrowest of ledges,
his fingers crimped into the gritty sheet;
or perhaps he was really struggling to climb the air,
his feet pushed fiercely at nothing as if it gave firm foothold.
The pain came back, the nerve splintering and tearing
as if a barbed wire, threaded thigh to foot, was being tugged
and the leg jerked, kicking crazily to shake it out.
And in the flash of panic that stabbed with the first shock
that was what he heard inside his mind - the shakes -
and dug more deeply backwards to grip the slippery face
and almost laughed to realise he couldn't fall.
For all that, as the nerve cramped and twisted on itself,
he clung on hard as if his life hung on the hold
and never, curiously, thought of rack or torture.
And that was how the widow found him, when she put
her head around the door to ask his health. "It hurts,"
he said, "a lot." He could see the fall had bruised her eyes,
something sharp and shattered glinted in her look
and her voice was dry and weary, with an edge as raw
as if her tongue was tied onto a hook
hung down inside and catching ...
"Well," she said, "at least you're alive", and smiled
with sour humour, and left him hanging, staring at the ceiling,
his mind muttering
like an oath, an incantation or an article of faith:
I know I am alive because it hurts.

A new point

That day, like so many, the same journey
down the hill to buy food, look at the market;
however busy he was in other ways he felt,
for all that it was short and circular,
this walk gave some point to the day.
But this time, returning, with the new wood,
long as himself, resting smoothly in his hand,
balanced, and balancing himself who now with it
extended equally in all four directions,
he felt a new sharpness, as if the shaft directed him,
his stride on the cracked stones became more even,
familiar signs and spoors were more defined:
for all that there were no menacing beasts,
nothing to hunt except this feeling in himself.

Not lost

Hunting for a lost key
in a box of old bits
he found the small bowl.
she turned it in her hands:
it's still beautiful,
she said, even with
the cracks, the glue.

Then sitting on the floor
surrounded by small objects
long thought lost if not wholly forgotten
they talked of how all she had given
had been broken in time,
but neither of them
could remember how.

On the thirteenth day of Christmas my true love phoned me up ...

Well, I suppose I should be grateful, you've obviously gone to a lot of trouble and expense - or maybe off your head. Yes, I did like the birds - the small ones anyway were fun if rather messy, but now the hens have roosted on my bed and the rest are nested on the wardrobe. It's hard to sleep with all that cooing, let alone the cackling of the geese whose eggs are everywhere, but mostly in a broken smelly heap on the sofa. No, why should I mind?, I can't get any peace anywhere - the lounge is full of drummers thumping tom-toms and sprawling lords crashed out from manic leaping. The kitchen is crammed with cows and milkmaids and smells of a million stink-bombs and enough sour milk to last a year. The pipers? I'd forgotten them - they were no trouble, I paid them and they went. But I can't get rid of these young ladies. They won't stop dancing or turn the music down and they're always in the bathroom, squealing as they skid across the flooded floor. No, I don't need a plumber round, it's just the swans - where else can they swim? Poor things, I think they're going mad, like me. When I went to wash my hands one ate the soap, another swallowed the gold rings. And the pear tree died. Too dry. So thanks for nothing, love. Goodbye.

Out of it

1.

At nine she comes back from doing office floors
her hands scoured raw and slap-happy
I can hear her shouting in the hall

but it won't work
not a thousand words
not a thousand slaps
the kids will grow up to be what they are

I lie on my side I look at the wall
it never changes
then I close my eyes
the darkness is familiar
comforting
if I count to a million things will stay the same

nothing to keep but worrying
nothing to make but trouble
nothing to waste but time

2.

I had a trade, still have
though it seems too many others have it too
or it's no longer useful in a world
where money's made from money

retrain, they told me,
something with better prospects -
like what? I thought my trade
would mean a lifetime's work.
But it's their answer to everything -
catchpenny schemes to get you off their backs,
to get their boss off their backs,

that's what they're paid for now - to squeeze us
so we'll feel it's all our fault - and not a word
about the closed-down factories, the companies collapsing
with the government grant stuffed
in the back pockets of directors
going off to start another successful failure -
that's how it goes -
there's always work for tallymen and crooks.

3.

I told the clerk, I told him, don't give me
dignity of work, I don't expect that anymore;
dignity of cash is what I want,
three decent meals a day and no hassle with the lecky,
not much to ask, is it, not much to beg, I told him
once, once I saw a man, an old man
tear down these partitions like a wild animal
maddened by doing tricks, sit and beg, beg pardon,
I told him, can't you see how life's a cage to us,
that the young cubs are sharpening their claws,
understand me? No, he said. He pressed his buzzer.
And that was that. I came home and curled up. I could see
I wasn't going to get anywhere this side of the coffin.

Paska for *Katerina Papamikhail* age 7.

Where's the young goat, Katerina,
you fed with fresh herbs every day?
Its blood-smeared fleece hangs by the roadside,
its head is simmering away.

Do you think of death and suffering
as you chew its coiled insides?
A breeze of flowers and sea-wrack rises,
taps the door and stirs the light.

In the whitewashed fumefilled kirk and
on t.v. in every cafe
packed congregations chant and pray for
new life to rise from the dead.

With a grin you scrape the warm skull,
a little greedy. Up the hill
the village lads lurk with their bangers
to give us all a taste of hell.

Still hungry? Without a word I
give you this tongue that's lying in
my bowl.

Whatever we're fed to eat is holy
an offering that buys us time,
but with the red eggs and good wishes
I'll get by on bread and wine.

A photo

found by the mirror: you with feet up,
pen in mouth, leaning back by the table, years ago:

you could tell by the bowls, the mugs now broken,
the length of your hair

both home and life
have become more cluttered, so much has shifted round
or been replaced, but below the fringe your face,
though it looks at the book balanced on raised knees,
holds laughter, sudden movement, kisses I still hope for.

You on the other hand, would say you were engrossed,
almost set-faced, and hoping I would not disturb
your thoughts. Curiously, this pleases me as much.

Policy

The examiners, he felt, had not been pleased.
They had, he now sensed, wanted simple answers,
a show of guilt, a pious echo of the new directive
couched in their bland and coded style.
But he was awkward, talked too long, told tales,
raised ghosts, poked problems, got well out of line.
They were, as ever, circumspect, polite.

Only, back in the corridor, he felt the long rope tighten
And behind the closed door, behind his back, he sensed
the snick of long knives being sharpened up to twist
his words into others wounds, to nail him down
as guilty, and make the cuts just as they'd planned.

The power

The motorway was almost empty, the road smooth, the car so curiously quiet he could almost forget the rusting metal box, the worn machinery, the necessity of being practical, of looking for leaks, testing the grip of tyres and brakes, and listening for the half-expected sound of something going wrong. All so effortless, he thought, as simple as those young fancies, imagined powers, the world moved simply by wishing it so, flying carpets lifting to our voice machines guided by thought alone; and driving in this dark rimmed by the smoulder of unseen cities, separated by the road from the weight of time and place, he believed again these were possible, if one could only slip, unaware and sideways, into a total faith. Then, without warning, or perhaps not noticing signs, he sneezed so violently that both eyes closed and in that instant of self-absorbed blindness lifted his hands from the wheel. Yet it was alright: when his eyes opened, when the hands gripped again, nothing had happened; the car had held its line. And now he felt not just the hollow pit of fear of what might have been but also a loss, a sense of having betrayed some indefinable trust.

Promises

They promised us that a small part of the wild land would be left, or at least not built upon. The huge hoarding at the site gate bore a picture - an impression, it said, by an artist, perhaps - showing a grassy park, neatly laid out with paths and trees. And indeed they made a gesture towards this, laying a flight of wide concrete steps flanked by healthy saplings, almost like the picture.

Enough to make us believe it. They pushed on with the houses.

No-one minded. The young trees grew stronger, new grass came and was cut:

and if the steps stayed unfinished, the site fence unmoved - well, they were busy, we could see the new houses rising, just like in the picture, just as they'd promised, year by year coming more close to the saplings, the half-built stair. Then the site fence was moved, but on the houses' side. And also at this time the picture vanished.

We noticed, but shrugged our shoulders, after all, the grass was really there, and the stairs, the sapling trees. But something more had changed, we never knew what, perhaps a change of people or ideas, perhaps money had changed hands or minds.

We never saw it, there was no picture of this change. But soon the trees were gone, torn out in three hours, the grass crushed, the steps thick-carpeted with earth - and then, as if the only thing they knew was building and seeing empty land were driven into frenzy, they thrust in sudden shafts of steel and concrete, buried the churned earth in foundations, hard grey floors.

And as the walls rose, so did a new sign announcing a "prestigious new development - shops and offices for sale" -

just words, no drawing, no impression, but we got the picture - no park, no slopes to slide on, just blocks of brick and concrete set each side of a paved path that would lead out up the hill on a handy flight of concrete steps.

Remember this?

The child sits, short hair, short pants,
bare legs stuck out; he holds a cycle lamp.
Beside him are a spinning top, a green railway engine:
both metal, though the picture doesn't show this.
And he sits on a table in a room with bay windows
which are in front of him, as are the photographer
and his parents who have just handed him the lamp
as a diversion, something to coax the desired expression
of pleasure, though the picture doesn't show this either.
And I invent the photographer, not really remember,
see him anxious, slightly oily - perhaps he started
my urge to yell or grimace when "arranged" for "taking".
The room, my parents, are there because I know
they should be there, stock figures on a well-worn stage-set -
their actions, the furniture, seem as much real
as my own creation, exist in several versions.
About this age also I remember a picnic by a river,
in Aberdeenshire, I suppose. I sit on a blanket,
the women wear wide cotton dresses, they watch
the men potter by the water. My palm itches,
pressed to the rough weave.
And yet it may not have happened, not in the way
I bring it to mind. So many picnics by brown stony burns
on damp grass in a light wind; and I probably fell in
or slid, muddying myself, if not this time some other;
and photos show the people, the stone bridges, the blankets,
show them all again and again, jumbled together,
if not this time some other, to be pulled out, put together
to reinvent the past.

For all the snapshots,
the real evidence, the whole sense of having been there
at that time, present, as it's said, is in the mind
where stories shift and slide into each other -
an image here, a voice from there - and when

the details are decided we think the memory true
when all we have settled is our alibi.

The memories, even that most impressive,
of sitting in the front seat of a removal van, are all suspect -
not in the abstract fact of the event, but in their probable taints.
And in the end, only one memory seems pure, unbidden,
without reference - of being in a cot, perhaps a carry-cot
on a dull landing, with stairs, unseen, nearby,
and thin daylight through an open door. That's all -
the feelings of calm curiosity, of intense watching without naming,
may be inventions, as I make it into words the experience
becomes fiction, approximate and malleable
where how we felt is how we feel we should have felt,
and whether entirely true or wholly my invention
I can no longer ask my parents to confirm the stairs.

the scars

More runes of folly and impatience,
marks of carelessness and haste.
My marks. And not much in this world
where people keeping their mouths shut
still get burst in thousands every day.
The ballooning bruises split and stretching,
the retch, the torn twist, surprise of pain -
it's much the stupid same
for social errors as in savage states:
Every foot carries a kick, each hand conceals
a fist, a grip can hold a weapon, can hurt,
can lurk behind the back of anyone,
any society, and scar you for being in
the wrong place, the wrong time, making
the wrong move

don't think I'm ducking out,
I'm looking at it all ways -
I've been split for asking politely,
for demanding, for standing quiet,
for falling down drunk, for thumping,
for being suspect, for being suspicious -
big or small, it's much the stupid same
I've got off lightly in this comedy of terrors.
The scars rise and mend like intricate calligraphy,
records of events with their vital moments
blotted out by the censoring blow.
My footwork doesn't improve -
there are too many corners to dodge out of them all,
too many rigged silences to sit waiting for a bell -
time or myself or my enemies
will catch me against a wall,
and surprised, off guard as usual,
I'll fall

Silkie

In the late afternoon they lay out on the warm rocks while the rising tide sloshed lazily and the hazy sun glazed the smooth mounds of waves and bathed the ferryboat in a soft white light. Time had slowed down and the boy watched the water without wriggling, even the crinkled rock held his dreamy interest. When his father heaved up he stirred slightly, without alarm, to watch the familiar thick back and tail slip smoothly into the sea. He rolled over, satisfied by it all: the day, the sea, the freedom, the soft sun on his grey fur. As if from another world, he could hear his mother calling from the shore, from beside the car parked in the lay-by.

Smoke

They tossed the cigarette-butts carelessly away
mimicing wealth or world-weariness, but they'd eyed
each other closely, measuring each drag, each face,
for signs of weakening. And now they all felt slightly sick
and nervous of showing it they talked too hard, too loud.
They kicked the air, the litter. They jostled,
circling and shoving as they left the alleyway.
They moved round each other like dancers on the same small stage.
When they saw the girls they whistled for attention,
shouted suggestions. But they were still watching each other.

The song

The baby wakes up and sings.
He sings the oldest song of the world
the hunger song
he sings of the starving
he sings of need
and his piercing voice
tears a raw hole,
almost unbearable, that each one who listens
fills with their own sadnesses, their hunger
for all they didn't get
for all they didn't manage to do
for all that went wrong
the disappointment, defeat, fear

and because the song is the oldest song
because it hurts to hear
because it sings with a need so huge that all
the things we hunger for
are tiny, it swallows them
and all we want is to stop the song. Hush, we say,
have this or this, anything, what do you want?

No one sings this song so well, so that when it ends
we feel as if we have comforted ourselves
and been given everything we ever wanted.

Stubborn

I won't do it - he says - you can't make me.
His eyes kept avoiding their voices as they
carved up, closed in, the space around him.
His hands clenched, unclenched. His face
was reddening and damp as from some enormous effort.
And indeed, their voices seemed fainter now
and when they looked at him it was as if
he now stood far off, poised for flight,
at the edge of a raw, precipitous cliff.

Translation

He started early with books, told that to read was to be able to know anything. Slowly he learnt to translate the strokes and shapes into the sound and meaning of his tongue.

Stories whose truth was unimportant, facts so curious they
seemed fiction,
and then books to explain unknown words, books to explain books.
They helped him make and repair, suppose and understand, translate
language to language, thought into action, idea into object.
But this poem,
translating his feelings into words,
how could he check the accuracy of this,
whether it meant what he thought it did?

A waste

So many hours over so many years they taught him
in words and gesture the myths of his tribe,
stitched them around him - no - wove them into his fabric:
he grew into them like a second skin.

Knots to remember dates of battles, of treaties;
the names of rulers in gilt thread; a gappy, straggling
crochet for dark ages; the ever-tightening twisted mesh
of high speed industrial textile.

Yet so many loose threads. And when he pulled one it
unravelling, leaving a scar on certainty, disturbing tiny
biting facts - so much had been unsaid, half-said, disguised:
he itched. This history was now
a hair shirt. What could he do?

The irritation spread, nothing could soothe the swellings.
And now he had to spend
so much more time untangling the false; slowly, painfully,
plucking the hairs out one by one

Well ye ken fine noo

Well, well, what have we here?
A clutch of sweaty politicians,
grasping moneymen, hardhead generals:
and listen, they all say they didn't know.

They were waiting for a report,
it hadn't been proved to their satisfaction,
they had to make profits, cut the costs,
take steps to ensure national security -
the customer, the elector, the corpses
hadn't complained.

And it's hell, they know now, but not their fault:
they had to follow the party line, the market, the orders,
and they didn't know, because they didn't look,
they were too busy looking out for themselves.

Lord, it would be sweet to think of them
at least squirming if not roasting for their faults
but I'll not insist - no amount of grovelling
will repair the damage, make up the waste of lives,
the waste of time - and there's no sign yet
you're bringing back the dead so they can tell them
sorry isn't really enough.

But think about it please,
nothing else that's been tried has made any difference here.

The words

- No - I say - don't bang the window.
It's glass. It breaks -

And outside
rain wearies the street.

- A red car.

Red. Another red car. A blue car.

A big white lorry. Luh-o-rr-y.-

- Et, et - shouts the child, meaning
that urgent flashing of a car pulling to the kerb.

- Yellow. Yeh-ell-oh. -

The woman at the corner walks down,
bends to the car window, gets in.

- White car. Red car, blue car. Blue.-

With their wipers flicking
backwards and forwards against the rain,
the rain that repeats, repeats itself
like the cars, like the woman,
the same thing, slightly changed,
over and over again, as we stand at the window
and name the differences,
even those
we cannot know or comprehend.

Dealers & dancers
Cube
Me, Jane & Kong
Fingerbook of Thumb
Leaf of Mouth
Spaced
The Batik Poems
Continents
Buchan
Snake Song
Passages
Bamboozled
Umbrellas
Theorems of Violence
A Garden for Dracula
Spaceman
The Walls

delivered: dave calder

otherpublications

delivered: dave calder.
otherpublications liverpool 2002
ISBN 0 946057 98 2