

convictions

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# David Evans

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## Convictions

*For Patricia and Crispin*

I began writing poetry in prison in South Africa, shocked into it by the death of a black friend who had exiled himself to America, believing freedom might be found there but instead committing suicide after finding only loneliness, poverty and despair. Prison Visit is one of the early poems, pressed out of me by the anguish of only seeing my wife for half-an-hour twice a year and then through dirty perspex with warders on hand to break up the visit if anything serious was discussed. I continued to write poems, partly because the novels and plays I attempted were easier to confiscate, partly because they came.

I've continued writing poetry intermittently, since my main concern is writing prose. I suppose most of my poems are political, stimulated by the struggle for liberty in South Africa and, lately by the oppression of the working class here. If Poets Must Have Flags is a credo poem, written out of the conviction that a writer's function is to tell the truth first and aim to please only secondarily. I expect that Separate Humanities and Don't Mourn for Stephen Biko fall into the category of deliberately ugly poems. But if politics is important to me I am also moved by the power, the glory, the creativeness, the destructiveness - and the absurdity - of the sexual urge and its pseudo-ideology love. So I'm glad that the editors have included a few "love-poems" (though not my erotica - no-one publishes those). I'm fond of The Middleaged Couple whatever its defects: let us all grow old lustily, even if disreputably; my couple I hope is on the side of life.

I've dedicated these poems to my wife who has endured my waywardness, my volatility, my discontent with the world and my frequent hard drinking, giving more than ever I gave - dedicated them too to my son because I love him with passion and guilt ... because, too, he will inherit the troubled future. This also seems to be the place to thank those South African and Liverpool writers (particularly the Scotland Road and Liverpool 8 writers) who have shown me the meaning of solidarity through good times and bad. Thanks are due too to those members of the women's movement who have criticised chauvinist dements in my earlier work. I am trying to make amends.

## **PRISON VISIT.**

Divided  
in our tanks  
swimmers in stale water heavy air.  
Breath-moisted yellowing dirty  
glass  
distorts  
you  
to a fish.  
Slow flapping  
wide-eyed  
you gape  
open-mouthed goodwill.  
And I -  
I flounder nearer.

Snout  
touches pane  
flattens recoils.  
You twist  
this way  
that  
slight shiver of the gills.

Behind  
you  
lazily  
dim shadows in the deep  
large shark-shapes move.

Words  
like bubbles  
rise  
eddy  
burst.  
Meanings  
like minnows  
scatter  
wriggling through the murk  
and I  
sink.

But  
smash  
the glass  
let in the sun my love.  
I'll dare the dangerous air  
I'll leap with you  
into  
the vivid sea.

## **SONG OF THE BLACK WHO WON'T GO BACK.**

I live among you.  
I exist.  
I belong here  
I insist.  
Try to expel me -  
I'll resist.

## SEPARATE HUMANITIES.

The Kaptein wept when the Park Station bomb  
charred white flesh; wept too  
for the death of young van der Merwe  
fighting for whiteness across the Limpopo.

He cried no tears when brave Mini's neck snapped  
or when Timol broke on the asphalt below  
when the bullets tore open black flesh in Soweto  
when his minions smashed open Steve Biko's head  
and spilled that fine mind in a bloody mессo

He knew, after all, how to separate  
right from wrong  
black from white.

Sunday morning you find him outside the Kerk  
relishing his white God's African sun -  
or inside, eyes screwed tightly shut  
praying the Groot Oubaa's will be done  
in South Africa as it is in heaven.

Separately but of course without sin

Beside him kneels his well-kept wife  
modest and moederlik, eg en reg.  
this morning she embraced the 'picannin'  
pressing lipstickless mouth to its earth-warm chin  
but on Friday nights at the pistol club  
she cries "Vrek jou kaffer" in ecstatic hate  
as she caresses the trigger like a clitoris

She, too, knows how to separate  
guilt and duty  
lust and love.

The Kaptein's fingers drop a note in the collection plate  
clasp the dorninee's hand in a reverent grip  
they'll stroke a young blond head tonight at seven  
and perhaps later an ample and dutiful breast  
but Monday midnight they'll crush the prisoner's testes  
in a brutal parody of an act of love. .

He knows, as I say, how to separate  
right from wrong  
black from white  
love from hate

It's a special branch of his tribal tree

but the horror is  
he too is human

And you who sit at home watching the television  
and go to church and invest through your bank  
and hear our poems and watch our plays

Also know how to separate  
black from white  
action from theory  
life from art



## **IF POETS MUST HAVE FLAGS.**

They  
ask for graceful poetry  
to decorate their tyranny  
poems  
to make the hideous picturesque  
entrails look like streamers  
blood like wine  
death like sleep

They  
ask for wreaths  
to strew murdered mens' graves  
posies of sweet-scented words  
to drench away the stench

They  
want anger to be buried  
in the carved tomb of verse  
the people to have music  
to fugue human cries of pain  
the organ of high mass  
to drown out sounds of massacre

They  
ask the poet to be  
a songbird in a cage  
a eunuch in a choir  
a slave of art  
manacled his anguish  
in tinkling silver chains

We refuse  
We'll go ugly and free  
exhuming the corpses  
releasing the rot  
revealing the holes  
ripped by the shot.  
We'll wrap around our banners  
the guts of the dead  
- if we must have flags  
let them always be red.  
    life from art

## **DON'T MOURN FOR STEPHEN BIKO.**

Don't mourn for Stephen Biko  
of what use is your pity?  
And while you mourn  
fresh tears of blood  
are running down some prison wall  
as a nameless worker slowly dies  
somewhere in some city.

Don't mourn for Stephen Biko  
or others on that honoured list.  
The time for mourning's past  
the time has come when grief must harden  
and sorrow close into a retributive fist.

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL?

Will we remember  
as we talk  
of imprisonment elsewhere  
that woman there  
with her children as keepers?

Will we remember  
in our talk of reform  
those we condemn  
for the felony of age  
or the crime of madness  
and those whose skin  
we treat as prison uniforms?

Will we remember  
in speaking of liberty  
the jails built of belief  
with God as the turnkey  
the lifetime of hard labour  
our own workers must serve?

Will we remember  
those we exiled  
through 'urban renewal'  
new slums for old?

Will we remember  
as we turn the keys  
to lock in those others  
we lock ourselves out  
becoming warder and prisoner  
owner and slave  
inheritors and inmates  
of our own open prison?  
Perhaps Amnesty  
should begin at home?

## **HOLIDAY IN POLPERRO, CORNWALL.**

Upstairs in this friend-lent flat  
our son sleeps on :  
It all waits for him;  
the mackerel, the sculling, the sun, the changing sea,  
the dole-queue and the petrol bomb.

Liverpool burns.

His breathing is even,  
soft as an eddy,  
dreaming of morning.

Below our balcony  
the boats which bounced gently on an early high tide  
groaning like lovers as they rubbed together  
now sink into the mud-bed, waiting  
for the lifting wave.

But no wave comes to lift my spirits.  
Only a long-day's drive away, Liverpool  
burns and burns again.

Here on the quayside a choir of seamen is singing  
the sounds drifting over the mild shore waves:  
there gas curls and swirls and chokes  
and sirens bicker above the beating staves.

This seems a place for children and poets  
remote from the anger of those rejected streets  
but this is a holiday, that our home;

I know a lad who threw a petrol bomb  
and he's not much older than my own.

Soon we must pack up and make our journey  
to a city singed by the fires of truth.  
A long gull screams, our son stirs above.  
Do flames disturb the sweet dreams of youth?

## **PASSION.**

What happened to that passion  
which raged like Kikuyu grass  
wild and indiscreet  
disgracing the city  
with its unEnglish growth?

It's trimmed back, bordered, neat;  
ordered like the best walled-in garden  
its well laid, inoffensive paths  
encouraging once-wayward feet  
along the straight and narrow;  
and no rude surprises -  
nothing crude or foriegn here  
like aloe, wag 'n bietjie bos  
Ntsintsi or Protea,

We won't be cast out from this Eden  
we're tamed, civilized and clothed  
and as for those outcrops and stray roots  
the incidence is closed.

Given time

October to October  
the roughest seasons  
are known to blow over

and even my wild old Durban  
became  
suburban

But wait!

Britain has known  
a wildness too:  
wolves once roamed  
fierce and unclothed;  
wicked nymphs and satyrs  
fabled in the dew

Even now there are brambles, briars, rogue grasses  
thrusting up between the paving stones

And if you take the risk  
you may find ragged robin, lady's smock  
and cuckoo pint  
somewhere beyond the line of conduct:  
subversive all.

The best-controlled Eden  
may precede a happy fall.

## THE MIDDLE-AGED COUPLE AT THE BACK OF THE BUS

Do we parody those teenagers  
in the seat across  
or do they parody us  
the middle-aged couple at the back of the bus?

This hot and hungry mouth-to-mouth  
the travelling hands  
the warm-sweet reek of drink and lust  
must surely scandalise  
or does our heedless voyaging  
vindicate their own  
ticketing us all as tripping fools  
or on some journey of the wise?

Of course this excursion cannot last  
you're expected in a suburb called respectability  
where sanity, security and duty wait;  
husband, children, hi-fi set  
and smooth-styled motor behind the wrought-iron gate.  
I'm going to a street called consequence  
where need, guilt, habit and gratitude reside  
family, mortgage and uncanceled debts  
and cells like terraced-houses side by side.

But now while our city lurches past the steamy windows  
churches and pubs and back-to-backs  
crumbling brick-faces cosmeticked by grime  
you don't seem to care where the route may take us  
against my ear your mouth wet-murmurs,  
"Darling, aren't we having a wonderful time?"

Death, I suppose, is the most faithful lover  
our deathbeds the only certain sleeping place  
and all other loves simply infidelities  
postponements of that last embrace.  
Those wrinkles, these lines, those marks of time  
are mortality inscribing his irresistible claim  
but under my hands your breasts throb with life  
if it isn't mate yet nor is it endgame,

In a public transport we brush private places  
like pickpockets attempting their very first crime  
across the aisle those youngsters are mimicking our paces  
Who cares, love? We are having a wonderful time.

### **AN UNSENT LETTER.**

I thought you wild  
but you were tame  
I thought you fire  
but that flame  
which heated us both  
was my own fire  
by which in the end  
I am consumed.  
But no blame  
some other rage  
may smash your cage  
some other match  
may light your pyre.





## MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

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**DAVID EVANS** was born in Queenstown, South Africa in 1935. From 1963 to 1970 he was banned, jailed for five years, and put under house arrest for political activities. He came to England in 1970 and to Liverpool in 1973 as a lecturer in the Institute of Extension Studies. A founder member of the Federation of Worker Writers, he helped start Scotland Road Writers Workshop and Liverpool 8 Writers Workshop. His poems and short stories have been widely published and his plays including *The Reunion* have been performed on radio, stage and television. He is married with one son and a step-daughter.

WINDOWS

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