



JOHN PAUL KIRKHAM

**LAST TANGO
OF
CLARENCE
CLEMENTINE**

**LAST TANGO
OF
CLARENCE
CLEMENTINE**

JOHN PAUL KIRKHAM

Cover by Jan Kalinski

First published in Great Britain in 2025

Copyright © 2025 John Paul Kirkham

The moral right of the author 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 a
retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any
means, without the prior permission in writing of the author.

www.johnpaulkirkham.co.uk

Selected works
by
John Paul Kirkham

Poetry
In Violet
Zig Zag Road
Afterglow of Zephyrs
Rebel Hearts

Autobiography
I Saw Her Standing There

Biography
Clare of Assisi
Gemma Galgani of Lucca

Introduction

The poetry and prose is once again part prequel, sequel and companion to the four previous volumes of poems and the autobiography *I Saw Her Standing There*.

All of the places and landscapes featured really exist (if you pass through Vienna, search out that *Street of The Beautiful Lantern* and explore the mystique of those Venetian islands.

The characters in *Blob*, *The Girl With Stars in Her Eyes*, and *The Loch Ness Monster Man* are quite real along with the violin player (you will find him) and yes, Frankie really does go to Asda!

Throughout the collection we are taken back to a time before pumpkins became a halloween standard; to those days when you went to the greengrocer to bag the biggest turnip or swede in the wooden crate and tea lights were called night lights in waxed paper cased cylinders and home remedies in the main were

calamine lotion, gentian violet and a hot kaolin clay poultice.

Last Words is a project that I have had on hold for the best part of a decade ... it is both a painful and poignant subject to write into prose and adapt or interpret another's thoughts into something lasting rather than final. The idea was to think about what if everybody in the world had kept a record of the people they knew or loved last words as a memorial. So hopefully among the sadness you will find scattered around other poems reflecting humour as a balance to cause a smile because ultimately poetry is all about passions and emotions.

Also included are a handful of rediscovered songs (originally thought lost or archived and hidden away) that kind of work as re-written poems. These were originally composed and some recorded back in the 1970s and are published all together for the first time along with a homage to a little bit of rock n' roll.

Being a photographer has taught me to seek beauty in bleakness and the book is full of atmospheric poetry about lots of bitter cold raging winds, wild storms, rain and a few more ghosts. There are plenty of evocative snapshots and throughout the unfolding poetic tales there is always a constant and recurring theme encompassing those strange hours as the sun goes down and following a dusk that reveals many types of moon (bitter, pale, spooky, vespertine and waning) all suspended in their crushed and bruised skies.

And as for Clarence Clementine ... well next time you are mooching around your local indoor or outdoor market or that shop full of vintage pieces and curios, I'm sure if you look carefully you might discover your very own troubadour of true life tales and exotic unexpected adventures ... just look for that mesmerising glinting sparkle in their eyes.

John Paul Kirkham is a poet, author and photographer living in the city of Liverpool and has written twenty five books and collaborations including *In Violet* a large collection of poems that was published with award winning poetry plus the recently revised and expanded autobiography *I Saw Her Standing There* and is the official biographer of two Italian saints: Clare of Assisi and Gemma Galgani of Lucca. John Paul has written journal editorial, film and book reviews and has appeared both on television and radio.

And thank you to the following Rock Bands and Artists who kindly collaborated with the book and provided the prologue, intermission sequence and epilogue:

Canned Heat and their lyricist Skip Taylor for *Bright Times are Comin'* from the 1973 album *One More River to Cross*.

Nazareth for *Winter Sunlight* from their 2014 album *Rock and Roll Telephone*.

Kiki Dee and Carmelo Luggeri for *Small Mercies* from their 2022 album *The Long Ride Home*.

www.cannedheatmusic.com

www.nazarethofficial.co.uk

www.kikiandcarmelo.com

The words of these three guest songs deliberately provide antithetical meditations to the books running mystical themes.

Prologue

*Ain't it hard to be troubled
When things are goin' all wrong?
And you sit down and you think about
The dear ones that are gone*

*And you try to put yourself someplace
Someplace you cannot see
You just gotta try and live your life
And take what you receive*

*There are bright times a-comin'
Through the grey sky up above
Then you lift your head up high
And the sun begins to shine*

*So the next time that you're troubled
Try and lend a helpin' hand
Givin' something to some other one
Will make you more a man*

*What you give is what you get returned
You can't ask for any more
You realize you've done your best
Who could ask for more?*

*There are bright times a-comin'
Through that grey sky high up above
Then you lift your head up high
And the sun begins to shine*

*Now, the sun is shinin' early
You know you're finally on your way
And you realize you made it
You got more to give today*

(Canned Heat - Bright Times Are Comin')

Bitter Moon

February comes again
and with it the reminder
those years ago
driving through the night
the deep dark onyx black
hour after hour
focussing on the single red tail light
of a lonely trucker
heading north

Dashing to and from
my dying dad
during that stark grey winter
and on a Sunday
when and where no trains ran

Well past midnight
we need to take a break
and refill with petrol at Pontefract

The ground is higher here
and the sharp icy gusty gale
cuts through the night
making eyes water
I hold the fuel pump with frozen fingers
as the distant pennine lights
blur and sparkle
like tiny gems on those hillsides

Pushing on
and on
through the beautiful bleakness
the vast rolling moors
are just visible
in the pale white moon
highlighted by a patchy snow glow

Then the flurry of flakes
skims off the windscreen
and with a sense of urgency
I force the pedal down harder
to speed ahead
out of those Yorkshire heather clad fells
into the ever nearing
Lancashire plain

The journeys end in sight
I had been driving 12 of the last 24 hours
through the emotional and physical pain
and now home again
drained
revived slightly
just before dawn
by the the moon's bitter wind

Blob

The old craggy man at the bus stop
was waiting for the number 78 bus
his face was like white marble
deep furrow cut creases
from years of loneliness
as the strong bitter west wind
caused us to shuffle and stamp our feet

I asked him where he was off to on such a cold day

"The Blob" he replied

then continued after a vacant thought

"cheapest ale house in town ... go there every day

there's nothing else to do ... is there"

I advised him wryly to take up the piano

or to sing and entertain people on the bus

to lighten the solitude of fellow travellers or commuters

"Nah ... I'll stick to The Blob"

Then a 79 bus arrived ... they are every 7 minutes or so
and would have been a much better bet in this weather
but he declined
and was left still standing in the freezing cold
for his half hourly 78

Old habits die hard

The Blob Shop is a very characterful and traditional pub in Great Charlotte Street, Liverpool. It is named after the drink called "Blob" which is Aussie White (a blend of Australian white wine and grape brandy) then placed in a glass with sugar, lemon and hot water. It's a very popular concoction in the north of England ... so I'm informed!

Cart Horses And Violins

Chasing the carts

dusty still with flour

and grain scatter crushed by the wheels

clacking and rattling

along the dock road cobbles

The local Dingle tenement kids

in holey woollen pass-me-downs

skidding on the embedded tram lines

in their clattering clogs

or just barefoot

catching and clutching the bumpy hessian sack cargo

swiftly cut with a rusty penknife

catching the spill in turned up jumpers

... sugar and spice

or rice

or on a bad day chillies and turmeric

to sting and stain the cheeky faces

And the old man plays his fiddle off the Goree
in a raggy shaggy demob suit
for a penny in his cap

From dock to warehouse
with sea shell blinkers
cart horses hauling the tea
... rubber ... rum and oxides
stocking the flow of food
... fuel and scarcities
harnessed and trotting
through the rain ... storms or calm

Today there's a young guy
with an electric violin
plugged in
to his portable Cube
but his tunes on the Canning Dock lock gate bridge
are too mournful and melancholic
for such an early bright warm sunny spring day
so I passed him buy

to stop and ponder a while
at the *Waiting* Carters Bronze Horse
and see some children
skipping and slipping on the docks well worn cobbles

The stories of Liverpool's dock cart horses are legendary and I am grateful for the personal stories told to me by the late Jack Stamper who was a volunteer at the Museum of Liverpool for many years. You can see the bronze cart horse sculpture by Judy Bolt entitled "Waiting" on Liverpool's Canning Dock.

Haiku No 13

Supply arms and then

Fan the dancing bright wild flames

Where peace has no end

Christmas Song

When that snowman brought that winter snow
to illuminate the bare hard ground
all around
he made us all gaze
towards
the brightly ascending star
to wax and wonder who he and we really are

A reindeer pulled away
the cosmic sleigh
so that us
and a scarlet man may find our ways
in our search for any slightest proof
in compacted tracks
roof to roof

Waking on that Christmas Day
in the silence of no words to say
are you ... you know the way

And now that all are gone or passed away
we await that forever future spring
when endeavours
stretch forever
presents in the present
and we long for a sign
or time
of snow again

Christmas Song - This is a rare lost and found piece. Hand scrawled on a sheet of old school graph paper written in 1972 as a young teenager. I had made some annotated notes for guitar chords and instrumental bridges as this was written just after I bought my first electric guitar. Finally making its published debut here, revealing the importance that pen on paper quietly stored and folded never fades away.

Cormorant

The cormorant stood
on the vertiginous lichen wall of Craig Goch
one eye on us
the other
on something scaly and succulent
beneath the inky blue black depths

The baroque water tower
stands transfixed as a green domed lantern
rising from the curve of mossy arches

The dam stone blocks
act as battlements over the drop below
to the precipitous cascade
and the roar of the white tumbling waters
resonates like a symphony
along the Elan Valley chartreuse yellow banks

And then

still not distracted by autumn sun

the cormorant descends in a deep dive

and disappears into a wild watery submersion

creating a scattering eruptive splash

Dad's Boot

It all started with 123 XLG
that Austin A35
when all cars and vans
back then
were either grey
... green or blue but mostly grey

The bespoke varnished wooden box
made by dad
complete with internal shelves
... slots and drawers
was cushioned in the boot
by thick tartan wooly blankets

Compartments for crisps
... all flavours catered for
back then
well ... cheese an onion mainly
with cans of Tab ... and

Cresta ... *"Its Frothy Man"*

and yes Coke and Pepsi

flasks of hot water

... tea bags and long life milk

most people would find a tea shop

but not our da!

and so it was

butty's wrapped in tin foil

individually labelled

but mainly cheddar and Branston

because the tuna was too soggy

I forgot to mention

the Veritas Highlander picnic stove

for baked beans

and broth

when we could find a drystone wall

in the fells ... dales

or lakes as shelter against the prevailing wind

often at the peril of a tempestuous ram, charging bull or
inquisitive pig
most people would find a proper place to eat
... but not our da!

In his old age
exotic powdery mixes
of sickly sweet instant cappuccino
or mocha in rip open sachets
would appear in the lay-by
overlooking that slate quarry
at Dinorwic or the prom at Llandudno
if we managed to get a parking place

At least when the salt pot
plugged with a spent match stick came out with the
Sarson's
there was a promise of fish and chips
wrapped in the local Gazette or Argus
before the journey home

Dad passed away in 2017
after a life of eleven cars
the last ... that black Honda Accord
still sits in front of the cluttered bungalow's garage
complete with said wooden box
and tartan blankets
... in the boot

Dandelions Around Andy's Grave

The 9th May has come round again
one of those mid spring days
that warms the earth
after last night's rain

Nineteen in 1979
when your body was blasted and shattered
but you were lost in yesterday's news
when Manchester Woolies went up in flames
with another northern rising death toll

That day also affirmed
that Brezhnev and Carter
would sign an agreement limiting nuclear arms
but nothing has really changed
and the toll from bombs lives on
and lives are ripped and torn apart
and still will when tomorrow comes

There is a kind of early evening flame orange gleam
on the red and yellow bricks of the buildings of our city
and in that quietness of unearthly silence

I sense ... then see ...

the dandelions dancing in a whipped up breeze
around Andy's grave

then they dip

and float momentarily

before their ascension towards a bluer heaven

lifting like tiny souls

vanishing into the deep afterglow of the setting sun

Death And The Artist

Philosopher ... designer ... painter ...
even before his fingers became numb
wading through life's many personal shattering crises
he was many things to many people

That promised portrait of Yoko Ono
that was somewhere in his to do
and never to be to be finished box of canvases

When someone dies
painting an honest picture of a life can be clouded
especially of those
with intricate and labyrinthine souls

The mystique is left to a small circle of friends
to unravel the torment
of that early Friday Maidstone morning
as the truly dark hours crept in
leaving created original images
that will forever

maintain a shimmering immortality

as I stare at a suicide text message

and ...

attached ...

a self painted portrait of an old friend waving goodbye

***Jan Kalinski** - Artist (23rd July 1956 - 11th November 2022). At midnight on Remembrance Day 2022 the police knocked on our front door here in Liverpool to inform me of Jan's tragic suicide by hanging in Maidstone, Kent. His last commercial piece of artwork was the cover for my previous book "Rebel Hearts" published in January 2023. Jan left me a legacy of paintings and many design images for possible future books. He suffered from Multiple Sclerosis for the last 30 plus years of his life and despite all the personal, physical and mental issues that this brought, he would not let go of his paint brushes and when creating something new, Jan could be as bright as a firework lighting the darkness of the night sky.*

Descending Display

His life as in death was like a firework
ashes rocket packed
and jettisoned with saltpetre
bursting into the bleeding bruise of a night sky
fine filaments falling to earth
causing the dusk rabbits on the downs
to dance to the descending display

Edible Insects

The bright green spider
lived inside an old straw hat
ready to pounce and trap
an unwary gnat

Little did he know
inside the open whisky barrel vat
was the hungry gourmet
big black bat

And as night fell and creatures stirred
the spider became the bat's desert

Fading All Alone

The sun goes down
the city is dark
a stranger walks
looking for someone
... to love

Sundown over the city
orb of the night
the streets are silent
where a cold wind blows

They sleep during daylight
they love the night
attracted addicted
and high on city lights

They like the hot nights
to feel the sheet glass burning
the skies are aglow
with stars consumed by fire

They like the crescendo

it's almost dawn

and the pale moonlight

is fading all alone

Frankie Goes To ASDA

Car park 2.00 am

Tuesday it's the yellow van

shopping bags

in his hands

heading to the store

to the store ... to the store

Silver trolley £1 coin

to ascending silver stairs

pots ... pans ... lamp stands

1st floor bargains stare

This time of night

with turned down light

blaring music mute

time to push and pull

and fight those wonky wheels

Nobody bothers you
in the charcoal hours of darkness
freedom to take a fill
of bread ... whisky and milk
and that jumbo box of tropical lily Surf
or the odd embarrassing item

Blue tartan jacket over a well washed pink tee shirt
fastened with a wide oversize chain
orange hair fading into platinum roots
clutching his ebony memento mori stick
for tapping around
or waving around the aisles
my mate Frankie in our queue of two

Gelato In Spoleto

Seeking refuge in the cool crypt
of Norcia's Benedictine Basilica
following a lazy afternoon under a blistering blue sky
with it's lemony haloed sun
we hopped onto the local 401 blue bus
to wind our way down and up to Spoleto

In the post siesta hour
the shutters slowly ascended
revealing yellow cellophane filtered windows
protecting clothes from fading
that no-one has bought in years
and the late afternoon whiff
of salami and coffee
was just enough to distract the olfactory senses

The bridge between summer and autumn
allowed the still large sun extra time to hover
before finally descending

and transforming into a vesper light
turning the wide orange terracotta steps
and Piazza into a soft luminous pink glow

Stepping into the still cooler Santa Maria Assunta
the medieval odour of beeswax
from the sanctuary candles
mixed with incense
still lingering from the noon feast day Mass
perfumed the slightly smooth
and damp walls of the Eroli Chapel
with it's astonishingly breathtaking
yet unfinished Madonna and Child
frescoed in Pituricchio's incurvate tall wall

Treading once again into the sultry
but not quite twilight Piazza del Mercato
it was time to take a turn
take a cold treat
in the soon to be late starry heat
with a fairly large cut glass bowl

two scoops
well make it three
of deep velvety chocolate delight
from the Gelateria Primavera

***Note:** The visit to the Basilica in Norcia was before it was destroyed by an earthquake. It is being rebuilt stone by stone from the rubble. The poet Shelley called Spoleto “the most romantic place in the whole of Italy” and he certainly knew beauty when he saw it.*

Ghost Cries Across Culloden

The Holy Week of Eastertide could not foresee
the setting of the clan against clan
when the setting of the sun
pitted sons against sons

The Jacobites last stand for the throne of kings
weary and hungry at dawns first light
as pipers played
caught in canon fire
pelting rain and musket shot
brutal bayonets
striking down two score men a minute
till the toll of one short hour had driven home the kill

Today outside Inverness
I take a break and stroll across an empty Culloden Moor
to the sound of distant car hums
or maybe drums
on the wind and faint cries across the gorse and heather

Blades of dagger sharp grass point skyward
a cluster of ladybirds cling to the tips
like drops of clan blood
in this place of wild haunting nothingness

At the Glenmoriston Townhouse Hotel
I dreamt last night
of the ghosts of a bonnie prince's men highlanders
in moonlit Campbell blue
charging and chanting pipes for their cause
rebel souls seeking revenge
rebel souls laid to rest

Haiku No 14

Sad and sorrowful

Are the sea foam green wild waves

Ebbing in the past

Girl In The Ice Cream Parlour

It was in one of those original 1950's possibly 1960's
Italian gelato coffee parlours
Fusciardi's just off the promenade in Eastbourne
with its steaming and hissing Gaggia

Waiting ... she's a little late

The wet afternoon continued
into the shiny sparkling reflective dusk pavement slabs
the refractive out of focus haloed red ... blue and yellow
bulbs swinging and bobbing like a hammock strung up
between the lamp posts
in the blustery autumnal wind
flying in off the channel and shingle beach

Waiting ... she's very late

Watching the regency blue and cream corporation buses
stop or whizz past in the watery gush
it was time to let go of swilling the caffeinated dregs
around the marble green ceramic cup
and head to the station in Terminus Road

And then a sudden huff and puff
and strong draught
sent the table napkins flapping and almost flying
as the brass framed teak door swung open
it was her college friend Carol from down the coast
sent with a reluctant late message
... resigning a relationship

Her drenched tangled locks
and taking off and shaking off her belted beige raincoat
caused a shower of glistening confetti
and a momentarily recognition
that something lost might become something shared
and we knew then that dividing some warm cinnamon
toast at this late hour

would lead to a dawn condensation on a window pane
with an old town view that I hadn't expected

Goodbye Victoria

The heat of the day
had produced a hallucinatory haze
rising from the great ripply river

Gliding slightly and gracefully
the excessively tall cruise ship
took on the appearance
of a giant wedge of black bottomed cheesecake
with its single raspberry funnel
atop a heavy layered stack of white slab decks
gradually growing into a glistening amber
in the descending yellow glow of the early evening
hovering sun

The vessel mid channel
performed a signature 360 degree turn
whilst perfunctory
it presented as perfect entertainment
to the surprisingly few

who had gathered to gaze
at the unusually low tide departure

Two tugs chugged to guide
and the regular commuter ferry across the Mersey
had to steer clear and detour a zig zag pattern
the Royal Iris hooted and tooted its modest horn
into an antiphonal prolonged booming reply
from that big sister

With engines now turning those roaring revolutions
and red ensign flapping wildly
she thrust forward rapidly
into the shimmering June evening mauve skies
headed for Cork
then
New York
with a bobbing foamy back splash and wash
causing the landing stage jetty to judder and wobble
just as a Chinese child in shorts and sliders
ran to the Pier Head railings

and waves and cries out "*Chai Chen*"

see you again

whilst I whispered into the wind "*Goodbye Victoria*"

Iona

It is Holy Week

and with engineering works and rail strikes
changing stations at Wigan ... Preston then Glasgow
will either be long and tortuous
or possibly stranding and standing around

The three hundred and twelve mile drive unfolds slowly
but quietly
just a few midnight riders
chasing the dawn highway to the highlands

Bleary and weary the quayside at Oban
is welcoming home yesterdays dusk trawlers
and a breakfast of slippery oysters
stunned by a dash of vinegar
maybe wasn't a best choice this morning
but the weather is fair
and the ferries here always seem to sail on time to Mull

There are no gales today
so the short haul to Iona
sways away in a moderate crosswind
"Calm" some passengers proclaim

The priest carrying little ...
steps ashore to tread Columba's path of 1500 years
heading for the Abbey

Now that the Holy Man has arrived
there will be Mass here for the Easter Vigil
and beyond all the candles and prayers
the late last light of sunset descends on the Celtic cross
from the twilight heavens
casting a long shadow
across the ancient earthly tombs

Kestrel

Suddenly at shoulder height
from a clear autumn morning bright blue cloudless sky
towards Leasowe Castle
bobbing then hovering
then following me

If I had stretched out my arm
you could and maybe would have landed on my wrist
before darting and diving into the wild grassy green dips
behind the sea wall
to your prey in waiting

Kissing The Rain

When lovers end and separate
the single faces look up
kissing the rain
to disguise the tears
of permanent parting

Last Tango Of Clarence Clementine

Clarence or “Commie” Clementine
as my nan called him back then
the man who sold tropical and various sweet things
from his sort of and sort after shop on Bury market
the indoor bit

Fresh Peaches ... “*Peskies*” he called them
plus tinned fruit and other stuff
paired with Carnation Condensed Cream
or my favourite Evaporated Milk

Clem was in his late 50s
in those later days of the late 60s
always in a white grocers coat
that didn't quite disguise the chest high flannel trousers
suspended by gold clasped maroon braces
which he used to twang occasionally
when off loading a bargain or two
and a slightly skew - whiff four tone

Harris Tweed flat cap
just kept in place wisps of ginger strands
sticking out from behind his ears like golden sparklers

Nan and “Commie” Clem where good friends
as I was often left for a half hour or so
behind the counter
whilst gran scuttled around snapping up her discounts
... black puddings ... meat and tattie pies

I was always invited to
“Come this way to see something special at back of shop”
which was really a giant half room ... half cupboard
lit by a single yellowy orange bulb
in a dangly metal basket
but there was room for a single tap sink ... mop ...
bleach and a lot of wooden stocked crates exotically
stamped “Fray Bentos”
old Clem ... well he seemed old to me
would sit me on those sturdy boxes
and treat me to his red tales

How he fought for the Republic in the 1930s
in Espania
they lost of course
but won the cause
then sailing off to Montevideo
and jumping ship in Bahia Blanca
living and working in coastal villages and communes
and signing on the books of the Communist Party of
Argentina

Pinned and hidden from too inquisitive eyes
were fabulous full colour posters
of his wild insurgent days
still strikingly bright tone shades never having been
bleached away by exposure to the sun
"Camarada" ... workers in fields of wheat holding
sickles and rifles
"Asturias" ... in bold block ... peasants and fists
would bring a tear to his eyes

His hero was Che Guevara
and that poster he would display up front
everyone thought he was a rock star like Hendrix
good for business though
and his shady South American imports
especially Montecristo cigars in yellow metal tubes that
my dad liked ... a lot!
that I would just sniff intoxicatingly ... that aroma of
sweetness and leather rolled into one ... gorgeous
it was then that I must as his accomplice
become a go-between or dad's "smuggler"

Valentina ... he brought back from Argentina after our
war was over

I called her Aunty Val and her corned beef butty's with
mustard were the best ever with warm bread from the
bakers pitch next door

He always finished his tales with:

"Have I ever showed you this"

and from his thick probably crocodile skin wallet
he would pull out an old slightly creased but not faded
hand tinted photograph
proudly pointing to an azure blue pocket square
as two young people danced and clasped
on the quayside in Buenos Aires
that last tango before bringing her home to Lancashire

Then nan would collect me

as I watched Aunty Val
still cutting a slim figure
with jet black hair

bundled into a long tail with a red ribbon
put those succulent fresh peaches into a brown paper
bag for us tea

followed by Clarence's weekly recited adios:

*"One day lad come the revolution ... the people ... the
workers will shine through"*

whilst surreptitiously slipping his last tango into his
breast pocket

Last Will And A White Dove

The voice of Joyce
after a knock on the front door
called me to call round
for an afternoon tea at three
and a timid plea to witness
the last will and testament of old John
sitting at the vintage and really retro yellow
formica kitchen table
to help put affairs in order
after the bladder cancer diagnosis

Old John was quite resolved and calm
and upbeat about the gloomy short future that lay ahead
as the Lalex fountain pen was put to paper
over a chocolate digestive and strong Assam
with tales of their younger days
in Bethnal Green in the blitz and V1 doodlebugs

Not many weeks after
another knock
the voice of Joyce again
this time telling me that he's gone now
after all these years of having and holding

I went to the funeral
the only neighbour there
on that blisteringly hot July afternoon
laid into the ground plot
nestled adjacent to a row of civilian war graves
a complete street wiped out by them same doodlebugs
sixty years ago or more

I stood quietly and unobtrusively
out of the beating Barkingside sun
taking the shade from the oak leaves
when old John's granddaughter
released from a bamboo box
a single pure white dove
that flew off into a clear western sky

And then I silently slipped away
leaving the family to themselves
not wanting to be a stranger at the wake
knowing then that there would probably be
no more knocks at the front door

Last Words (From Catherine)

Part I

I am sorry not to have been very communicative
but have been decidedly unwell
for about the last three weeks
and found working
and writing on any computer beyond me
but I do feel a little better today though

Let's see ... I had a CT (Cat) scan
and the oncologist said
it showed the cancer has spread again
and he now reckons
there is at best a 10% chance
of it proving amenable to any treatment
but I said I did want to try
so I am back on chemo for now
however ... he said if I get too ill on it
or it doesn't look like it is working
he will take me off it

and that ... I gather will be that

still ...

10% is a lot better than our lottery odds

Part II

I'll be going for another lot of chemo
but hope this time not to be so ill
the Hospice nurses have put me on the waiting list
for their in-patient unit
for a few days of general pampering
and seeing what medication
might alleviate my symptoms

I am told that will be lovely
also ...
at least Spring has sprung
and should turn out very nice
if only the cold wind went away

Hope to contact you again before too long....

Part III

Grim choices ahead ...

I saw the oncologist again yesterday
unfortunately ...

he reckoned my cancer has got even worse
which I rather thought so myself
as I have been pretty miserable these last few weeks

He thinks I am too bad for more chemo
and left the decision to me
but saying I had a small hope
of the chemo doing some good
and a large chance that it would kill me off quicker

I decided that no more chemo is the sensible option
although it took a very big gulp of breath
so all I can be offered now is pain relief and such
and I wait to see how I do over the next few months
although I am not optimistic about how I'll do at all

I'm barely up to typing ... texting ... talking
and barely doing anything as it is
so I'm not sure if I'll be keeping in touch much
... if at all

Sorry for the grim news ...
but thought I should let you know

I had known Catherine for around 15 years (since 1999) and she was about to realise her dream of emigrating and living in New Zealand and then she became unwell but survived five years with ovarian cancer. Catherine was a very private, and resolute person and friend and moved from London to be beside the sea at Frinton on the Essex coast where she would spend her final days.

Life In A Northern Town

Behind the southern bay
in Old Barrow and Hindpool
the old rows and roads
of terrace wedges
blocks of four named after a Vulcan bomber or steel
works I wonder

House frontages finely pebble dashed
with flying pink terracotta freeholds
back down to the empty brackish Cavendish Dock

The old rail branch line path
that splits and bends at Mill Beck
is now a permanent panoramic footpath
but the ships can still be seen in the berths behind the
galvanised railings
as the seagulls circle and squark or stamp and dance on
the grass trying to arouse a juicy worm or beetle

The colour of summer here is still pale
achromatic
like a faded holiday Kodak transparency slide
but the northern town memories
find beauty in the post industrial landscapes
out of that shimmery fallow sky

Miss De' Meaner

Miss De' Meaner

was born in Seamer

and those who'd seen her

thought her a dreamer

She spent her days

in all her ways

finding fossils in caves

and Cayton Bay

Her time flied

decades past by

and with no ties

she became quite wise

Some said she took a steamer

others thought she had a lemur

there were even rumours

she'd flown to Pasadena

Years waiting for her ship to come in
if truth be told it never did
so she retired behind
the Scarborough cliffs

Our tall and thin Miss De' Meaner
upright and elderly the village senior
took to planting trees to make things greener
and the tales she told well some believed her

More Last Words (This Time From Dave)

Hi! Thanks for your message

and keeping in touch

it was good to meet up at The Willow Tree Bistro

curry ... rice and chips ...

they call it split

I had a good run last year

and managed to get to see quite a lot of Tranmere

Rovers footy games

I even watched them away at Guiseley

that was because my cousin lives 10 minutes away

between Leeds and Bradford

and she invited me over

2 - 2 ... but we should have won

Since Easter I've not been so well

in and out of hospital

I'm thankful to the Lord

that I'm home again at the moment

but my condition is a bit worse now
and I'm on kidney dialysis three times a week
still ...

its keeping me going
so that's something to be glad of

Great that you've been able to meet up
with so many old friends ... Evo ... Jim ... Smidge
that old gang of ours
plenty of catching up to do there I dare say
Jim used to be a big Wrexham fan
when they were up in the old and proper Division 2
of English football in the 1980's
I hope he still goes sometimes

England play Iceland tonight
if England go out
it'll be the end of Hodgson I'm afraid
but I think they'll sneak through
after tonight it'll be really getting tough
I hope we don't go out on penalties again

Germany looked good yesterday and also France
getting past either of those won't be easy for anyone

Thanks again for your call
and I hope that you are well
and enjoying life in 'the North' again

I first met Dave back in the early 1970s at school and he was a talented musician. Throughout the 1980s we would meet up from time to time in London when he was a student and I was a photographer. Then as often happens people and friends drift into separate ways. Some thirty years later after I moved back to Liverpool, Dave was still living in the house where he was born and I heard that he had been very unwell for some time. We met up again and the conversation simply continued like there was never a gap of those lost decades. He battled bravely with Myeloma for around five years but in the end it was all too much and he was taken from this world too soon. Tranmere Rovers lost a great supporter and I lost one of the kindest friends I had ever known.

Mother's Mincer

There it stood

Mum's *Spong*

stuck firmly with it's suction cup lever base

silent silver grey die cast

on the pale lime green and cream

pull down kitchen cupboard table

recessed in the scullery at the back of the house

opposite the Belfast sink

but close enough to the wall's serving hatch

complete with sliding door

Used on alternate days

for the in between was usually cheese on toast

or crackers sometimes

then an uneven block

of best brisket or shoulder would appear

fresh from St. John's Market

in a clear polythene bag

still wet sitting in a pool of red watery blood

The rotating handle
with the just the right amount of pressure
laid on the meat
would allow the extruded wormlike fronds of moist
pink and gristle
to drop into the jaws of a black Bakelite bowl

Then it wouldn't take long to fry off
in *Crisp n' Dry* or *Mazola*
or on lazy days to simply boil
with an Oxo cube
then ladle the muddy substance
onto *Mothers Pride* toasted on the Belling grill

We had a spare loo adjacent to that kitchen
but the only access was outside
and in the freezing cold winters with a candle lantern
to convince me of the warmth
but it did prove to be a kind of strange solitary
sanctuary at times with it's white washed walls

Late in the evening creeping in through the back door
any night terrors were enhanced by the eerie patterns
on the wipeable sticky back plastic wall paper
that looked like devilish faces staring back in the pale
blue moonlight

Scarier still ... the strange long shadow and silhouette
of levers from mother's mincer

Haiku No. 15

A parting dark cloud
Sees the moon in a puddle
Shattered by a step

Mr. Minty

Mr Minty gardening guru
took his sojourns in Peru

Travelling to places then unheard
Tierra del Fuego the ends of the earth

His Garden shed was full of spades
with polished shafts Worcester made

He'd deposit sticks behind the shrubs
to build a home for bees and bugs

I learned a lot from Mr Minty
and his landlady lover Mrs McGinty

How to plant bulbs and scatter seeds
remembering to save the prettiest weeds

I often think of all his tips
and never discard an apple pip

His legacy ...

a twisted hazel tree

and border for the cats to pee

or poo

too true!

quite often behind that tall bamboo

Mr. Posh

Mr Posh with his foppish hat
tilted forward slightly
often shops in Lidl

Sitting outside the store on Edge Lane
sheltered from the hot sun ... wind or rain
sits always the same man on his blanket and rucksack

Lidl are good though
they allow him to use the loo
when he needs to desert his post outside the store's
front door

Mr Posh
always does an extra shop
for the fella of no fixed abode

A chicken or veggie samosa
food to go is the best
and a drink ... isotonic or a coffee cold brew

The street person once told Mr Posh
that someone kind
bought him a cheap Tesco mobile
... and a SIM card
and handed him a Trans Pennine Express train ticket
to Scarborough to see visit his mum
... (if he wanted to)

Driving out of the shopping park
on the left
tucked away
adjacent to a sturdy brick electrical sub station
there was a series of black and blue plastic sheets ...
gaffer taped together
between pegs and poles
swaying in the breeze
... a makeshift refugee camp looking shelter
fenced in on three sides
that was his kind of residence

Just the other day ... it was mild for October
Mr Posh finally asked "*what's your name*"
the almost toothless as well as being still homeless
replied "*Francis Anthony*"
and followed by "*thats two saints ... you know*"
as he had taken to wearing a hat
more dapper than Mr Posh
who tipped his in reply as he walked into Lidl

Mr. Swift And The Cliff

I once came across Mr. Swift
who was bequeathed in a will
the face of a cliff

He brought along his beloved beagle
to roam and chase
the shrieking seagulls

Through winter's wild and summer calm's
his daily view
where Pacific charms

Sitting atop that steep cliff face
dangling gangly legs
till the end of his days

Nan's Garden

When Nan were young
in Preston's red brick Victorian mills
the only gardens were sketches on the factory wall
of monochrome cotton fields and slaves
picking ... plucking
packing and stuffing fluffy white balls
into wide wicker baskets

Home in them days were compressed terraces
on Lancashire's steep condensed streets
with a view of cobbles and chimneys belching a black fog
that pulsed and plumed
to the symphony sound
of hammering clattering clogs
from the gas lighter and snuffer's swift feet

Grey galvanised buckets in the rear yard
held propped upside down erect mops
looking like damp soggy palm trees after a heavy storm
sandwiched between jute sacks for growing spuds
planted by eager calloused fingers
searching for sun among the shadows
in that cluttered bleak garth

After that Great War
a move to a better life ... a married life
in Bury's Edwardian semi suburbia
a stained glass vestibule capturing a soft tulip flaxen light
and roses to the front in gravel and paved symmetry

My summer in the sixties
were spent exploring the old rusty workshop round back
in the shady shed of tools and stifling greenhouse
hopping along the sunken path separating two stretched
oblong lawns
bordered by explosive blue hydrangeas ... Nan's
favourites

and even on on a dull day
picking radishes in the rain
or tugging the odd turnip
to replace the tatties in a homemade pie
was a distracted pleasure

The early seventies was a failed coalition
when we all moved to the big house on the seafront
Wellington Road with its sunset name plaque
Nan came with us to New Brighton
and despite its prime and prom location
the only bit of outdoor space
was behind a private privet hedge
but then that's what the benches were for in Marine Park
between our bay windows and the sea with its wild
rolling foamy white horses
on the dusk and dawn tides

I think Nan was always happier in small two ups and
two downs

as long as there was a good chippy on the corner
and few people live to see the worst and best of a whole
century

Nan did

The parlour was her contentment garden at the end
between the rocking chair and endless westerns on TV
on top of the curtained off electric meter shelf
the firm aspidistra
taking the filtered light through the brocaded net curtains

Nan's Garden - completes a quintet of poems and follows "Nan's Cabinet" from
the book of poems *In Violet*, "Nan's Pantry" from the book *Zig Zag Road* "Nan's
Candles" from the book *Rebel Hearts* and "Nan's Wars" from the book of anti
war poems *Afterglow of Zephyrs*.

*Between the prologue and epilogue we reach the halfway point,
a meditative intermission. The cycle of our days is governed by
the sun and moon and the tides of our lives ebb and flow with
these strange biodynamic forces and even when the days are at
their shortest following a deep smokey dark topaz moonscape
sky, there will often follow a clear winter sun*

*Winter Sunlight
Dancing on the sea
By the shoreline
Is where you find us*

*This is our time
When the tide is in retreat*

*Winter Sunlight
Is there to guide us
You and me*

*This could never be the same without you
Secret moments you and I will share
May serenity and love always surround you
Everywhere ...
Oh yes ...
Everywhere*

*Winter Sunlight
Dancing on the sea
By the shore line
Is where you find us*

*This is our time
When the tide is in retreat*

*Winter Sunlight
Is there to guide us
You and me*

This could never be the same without you

(Nazareth - Winter Sunlight)

Noon In The Nave

The candle stands are strangely clean and empty
not a flickering flame in sight
in the lofty space
in the week before advent

The cathedral bell chimed
and a few stood motionless
to the two minute short service of prayers
which is a new addition since my last visit
a result of the current conflict in the Holy Land

With Christmas just a month away
high above the Noon Eucharist
the light sun permeates
through the high glass windows
causing dust motes to swirl
dancing wildly
engulfed in the casting beams

showering

good over evil

love over hatred

and

peace over war

Old Remedies (That Actually Worked)

Mum was a witch
a white one I admit
growing herbs and other strange things
in the garden
or greenhouse between the grapes and tomatoes
or pots in wicker baskets on the kitchen windowsill
and when all else failed
there was always the mysterious
pale teal melamine cabinet
bolted high on the bathroom wall
with a round cream grilled vent
not quite out of reach to the inquisitive

Tall bottles of Calamine Lotion
for itchy and poxy inflammations ... a soothing potion

Large round tablets bright yellow in colour
good for the blood them discs of sulphur

De Witts Kidney Pills in boxes or tins
guaranteed to turn me pee blue or green

Kaolin clay poultice boiled in the can
dolloped on for aches and pains straight from the pan

If that wasn't around then mum's soggy hot sage
compressed by a bandage now that was early new age

Cod liver oil for Vitamin D
plus Vitamin A to help us to see

Gentian Violet applied gently by a dropper
for scratches and cuts a bacteria stopper

Thick and pink the colour of freesias
indigestion ... then reach for Milk of Magnesia

Senna Pods for bowel cleansing
faecal evacuation and intestine emptying

Diarrhoea take Slippery Elm cooked as a globby mucous
oh how I wish instead I had a verruca

I won't go on about inserts in shoes to cure flat feet
but I did become addicted to Brewers Yeast
or nans tippie of gin ... all ills it could treat

Pale Winter Sun

In a bitter wind
the white winter sun
sets slowly across Morecambe Bay
putting Hampsfell into shadow behind Cartmel

A hoar frost at Grange over Sands
settles slowly on winter greens and ornamental trees
and gossamer white feathery crystalline veins
deep freeze to luminesce
the tall war memorial cross of Staintondale limestone
... an eerie static bright moonscape glow
that stark reminder of colder darker days past

Power

You can't fight the storm
or trap the tornado
or halt the hurricane

But

You may
capture the rays of the saffron sun
drawing strength from the white windy sails
and harness the unending rise and fall of waves
from the depths beyond the bays

Prague Spring

Some of us still remember
that Prague Spring
even though it was midwinter

This time
Wenceslas Square really is
marching into spring
with it's simple sadly striking bronze memorial cross
tempered in flames
lying melted into the cobbles
catching the sun's glistening light

The steep steps to Strahov
in the early evening
are a sobering reminder
of Bohemian struggles
and the dusky distant city torch lights today
are merely the passing dim carriages
of trams streaking by

The astronomical clock springs into life
Vanity ... Usury and Greed stand below
the twelve apostles
whilst the bell chimes clang frenetically
hammered by a skeleton offering a timely reminder of
everybody's memento mori

Rage Against The Wind

The man standing under the Forth Bridge
at the precipice edge of doom

He looked like he'd lost his way or maybe his faith
arms waving in ataxic patterns
wild words stolen by an even wilder torrent
carried off to crash among the slabs and stones below

His ruddy red face merged with the cantilever girders
and up above
the east coast train and carriages raced across
that river in spate

The sound of his angriness
and shouts
were drowned
by the screams of the seagulls circling

The Forth tide was rising
with salty and slate grey wide turbulent darting pools
splaying open by the downforce of the gale
in Neptunes fury over the interlopers gesticulations

Who he was howling at ... who knows
himself ... the injustices of life ...
or communing with the souls of lost mariners

Then all of a sudden
he turned to face me
drained and slightly calmer
for telling his tale to the wind

Rousers

That start of summer 1973 when school was finally out
the older boys burnt their blazers
and barathea's
up on the Breck
in defiance of years of learning
embracing the freedom that July brought

The ignited green and yellow terylene ties
dangling at arms length
dripping flames of polyester
scorching and dotting the path up Church Hill

The younger teens
fumbling for their two pence bus fare
just stood and stared
in awe or dissent but mainly jealousy
as they had to return in September
and had to hold onto their burning desires
in a future of claustrophobic classrooms

The steep walk home

dodging the torn and charred emblematic breast pocket

badges

caused us to stop and pause

and to inhale the acrid smell of smouldering cotton

that hung around the airless afternoon summer sky

Rowan Tree

A Rowan Tree

that mountain ash

rising from the yellow match tipped gorse

and rusty copper bracken

clings to the high hillside above the Loch

waiting for a Quarter Day Festival

to fend off the spells of doom

and darkness

The winter western gales

have long gone

but the years have left

a twisted gait to the branches

that puff and point lopsidedly eastwards

providing a strange and safe canopy

for any stray sheep

in shadow of the Rowan Tree

Beltane heralds in tonight
when the skies
can now be longer and brighter
for after the kindle sparks
and starts
the bonfire high rising flames
the mischievous elves
will stay in their dells
and the faerie folk
cushioned by the ballerina white blossom
dance till dawn
around the Rowan Tree

At the midsummer solstice
the moon floats late
in a vespertine sky
the colour of smashed berries
when through this luminous shimmer
I see her ... my new lover for the first time
the seductive Luna Esque

dressed in emerald forest green

reaching into the enchanting tenebrous branches

of the Rowan Tree

Runaway Train - An Ode To Rock n' Roll

One long Cadillac
driven by a blonde in black
the girl I knew
she broke my heart in two
now she's takin a ride
down Sunset Drive
with another guy
so I'm leaving ... and takin a train ... on that

Runaway train
rolling down the track
that runaway train
rolling down the track
takin the train
that never comes back

I heard that she drove him away
to take another downtown date
but come what may
I never looked back
since takin that train ... that

Runaway train
rolling down the track
that runaway train
rolling down the track
takin the train
that never comes back

Many summers came
many winters waned
I heard she traded those wheels
for red stiletto heels
and now she walks the stage
off broadway's lanes
just glad I made my escape ... on that ...

Runaway train

rolling down the track

that runaway train

rolling down the track

takin the train

that never comes back

Saddleworth Fireglow

The strange rocks greet me on Saddleworth Moor
upon Alderman's Hill
the millstone grit
has odd shapes ... cut ... carved
"pots and pans" the locals tell
worn into stone over the holocene

Some say the ancients
collected their dark maroon blood
of the sacrificed
into these mortars
beaten out of the rock
by pestle winds

Mighty giants
once friends fought fiercely
Alphin and Alder for the hand and love of Rimon
the dazzling water nymph
who bathed in the streams

and brooks of the valley below
all are long gone ... long dead ... but not forgotten in
these parts

The breeze has wound itself away
and a sombre September calm
falls and fills the eventide above Uppermill
and that distant sky is playing tricks
a deep fire glow orange globe
is slowly setting
and from it's base as it descends ... it distends
into the scarlet and purple flat horizon
taking the form
... of a detonated atomic plume
hovering ... shimmering ... mesmerising
being sucked slowly down into a far away sea

The whispering silence
and secrets of the moors
is shattered for a few seconds
by the sound of a distant gush and tumbling

and carried up
by a zephyr from the valley below
an enchanted ethereal song
from a maiden sprite
sitting on the soft bank
stirring the cascading water

Sea Dreamer

Wandering around the dock's gently lapping waters
the berths today are generally bare and long abandoned
save for the two tugs ... a bucket dredger
and a bright lime green coaster
unloading a modest cargo on the West Float

The days of the mammoth giants of the oceans are long
gone here
with their smell of oily jute ropes
and the pumping and thudding
of expelled bilge
staining and cascading
the barnacle patterned plimsol lines

Across the river
beyond the lighthouse there is life once more
as the colossal cranes in bright mandarin orange
built in Shanghai choreograph the containers
off the long and leviathan New York Atlantic vessels

I regularly walk
and cling to the sea salted rusty railings
on the Egremont promenade
beyond from which the tide flows into oceans wide
and on a foggy dusk sunset
out of the mist
a Blue Funnel ghost ship
gently transparent passes before my eyes
and through this translucent grey
from its hey day
I picture
the Royal Iris
in sea foam green and laguna yellow
cutting past at full steam towards the Pier Head

Suddenly I release my grasp
on the worn metal balustrade
interrupted by a child
excited by the swift tidal flow
he is rushing ... pointing and waving

at a bulky vivid red ship
and tonight I wonder if his young imagination
might make him a dreamer
... of sailing those seven seas

Sea Dreamer - Completes a trilogy of autobiographical poems following
"I Dreamed of Going to Sea" published in the anthology of poetry *In Violet and*
"Blue Funnel and Dreams of Going to Sea" from the book *Rebel Hearts*.

Shack By The Sea

The sun rises early
now that the clock has bounded ahead
at the end of March

The overnight condensation beads
around the rims of the window
release their tryphobic capsule form
into a delta of tiny descending rivulets
the odour and shivers of winter have finally dispersed

The gas stove top coffee pot dances on the old hob almost
ready to take off
as the front shutter doors swing open onto the small
plank porch
and breathe in that first smell of spring
the scent of the bocage and woody shrubs
just starting to bud
behind the green bank top of the estuary wall

The day ahead will be warm and slightly close
that full sun haloed in hazy pale blue
causes the shacks timbers to expand and creak
as the shadow of the old lighthouse sweeps to the right
across the wild meadow grasses

There is a longing and waiting for the sunset hour
reflecting off the shimmering golden honey sandbanks
and its time to turn back and climb the short slightly
warped ligneous steps
of my shack by the sea

She Was Standing In Another Cosmic Doorway

She was standing in another cosmic doorway

I was searching inside a neon rainbow cloud

She was standing in another cosmic doorway

I was searching inside a neon rainbow cloud

In the suburbs the windows were empty

a streetlight flickered down on the road

I thought that I'd carry on walking

and find somewhere better to go

She was standing in another cosmic doorway

I was searching inside a neon rainbow cloud

She was standing in another cosmic doorway

I was searching inside a neon rainbow cloud

In the city the night lights were dazzling

there were plenty of people about

on club doors and walls I saw posters

and wondered if I should find out

She was standing in another cosmic doorway

I was searching inside a neon rainbow cloud

She was standing in another cosmic doorway

I was searching inside a neon rainbow cloud

I found her in that cosmic doorway

a glance and a smile at me

a promise to show me a sunrise

sharing peace and love that was free

She Was Standing In Another Cosmic Doorway - Originally written and recorded in the early - mid 1970s as a song called She Was Standing in a Doorway (the cosmic bit was added later) and is now a companion poem to "Deltic Rebels" which can be found in the previous book "Rebel Hearts"

Spooky Moon

It was safe back then
to climb over the green iron railings of Earlston Gardens
taking a shortcut home
along the perimeter of expansive cemetery
around midnight in high sprits

I could feel and hear whispers from among the tombs
and the susurrations of bushes
and summer's full sycamore trees
stiffened the permed locks that had strayed off my
shoulders onto my chest

Two hazy dark shadow forms and swift footsteps
cut across and weaved through the gravestones
late revellers returning home
or just possibly
a pair of spritely shuffling *Thetis* submariner wrecked
sea ghosts

The stark sharp gothic spire of the chapel
rises from the glinting distant reflection of sodium light
pointing towards the stars
sparkling out of a dark topaz sky

The branches of the trees rustle their leaves that eerily
wave and shade the lunar effulgent glow
as the high fine stringy cirrus clouds
make pale faced silver streaks
like a spidery web hanging and dangling
off a spooky moon

Spring Again

The first signs of spring peeping
as the radiant energy rises and reflects off the rose
coloured sunrise

And the trees gently wave their over wintered gnarly
branch ends

their outstretched palm metacarpals

like fingerless green mittens

with delicate light buds

just popping out

like pale cream nail varnished fingertips

Stones

I came upon an old man in a hushed forest clearing
sitting upon a on a mossy oak stump
he beckoned me to sit and listen to the silence
then placed a smooth stone in my palm
and whispered ...

“People who throw stones hurt people

those who gather stones ... create and sculpt a garden

where peace can be found

Street Of The Beautiful Lantern

Exiting the door of Vienna's Hotel Kartnerhof
itself almost in the shadow
of Saint Stephen's grand spired cathedral
and turning a turn
right ...
through that arched wooden door
across the well worn smooth cobbled courtyard
of the Cistercian Abbey of The Holy Cross
Heiligenkreuzer Hof
a delightful discovery
in the hidden heart of the city
with a very late September sun
reflecting brightly
turning the pale cream walls a custardy yellow

The light draws through the final stone arch
into a small winding pastel colourful baroque alleyway
Schönlaterngasse
the "Street of the Beautiful Lantern"

and there hangs
that iron lamp on the wall
of house number six

Beware of seven opposite
and the green door
the *haus of the basilisk*
that creature half bird
half toad with a killing stare
now petrified in its' alcove facade
above the portal
be warned!
to carry a mirror ... just in case

After the sun has gone
the narrow streets seem to shimmer
in the descending misty
early autumn twilight

The lantern's condensed glow
creating whirling
shadowy figure ghosts
perhaps the centuries past basilisk's victims
night after night
desperately trying to find their way home
as I head back
under that stone cold arch
into a tavern for a comforting glass of Stiegl

Haiku No 16

Morning glow descends

Your petals open gently

My beautiful rose

Sunset Sinners

The Sunset knows

searching ... looking and illuminating the shadows
of the sins of the faithful

As each day ends

hoping that sleep wipes the slate clean
in that waiting for the break of dawn
and we start once more to fall

Swoon: A Short Story Or Warning

That last day of June
we were given an extra bank holiday
to celebrate the worlds journey
midway through the 21st Century

The new Socialist Party that now governs and controls all
media
launched a food programme
mass health education
advertising campaigns
to educate
us all
about bad sugar ... fats
diabetes ... chemicals and pesticides
some still remember the old days
nothing really changes
only new faces on immersive interactive screens

Our elected launched ... "*Swoon*"
all organic ... natural ... vegan ... safe

What they the corporations failed to say
what we were never told
that harvested extraterrestrial fungus
is toxic in tasty concentration

Within months the over population
had mysteriously died and departed to recycling farms
and only carnivores are left to roam and rule the world

There were always rumours of an antidote
stored at subterranean level 36
deep beneath the capital's streets
kept away from prying eyes
but the world is slowly snoozing
quietly drifting
off into a long sleep
a very long ... deep sleep

The waves today on the the last day in December 2099
lap strangely gently
over the buckled and worn sandals
and on the cusp of a 22nd century
the sand mystic rises from his grey stone throne
to greet the disappearing moon's coral dawn

The Balaclava Bandits

If it wasn't summer

we were always sent out to play

wearing a blue black balaclava

at least they were shop bought

... from T.J. Hughes

... my mum worked there in the sixties

better than the woollen thick itchy home knitted ones ...

sorry Nan!

Great for keeping the cold

and wild estuary winds at bay

when on

the prom

or beach

or sailing back and forth

on those ferries

across the mersey

We all pretended to be
(because we all looked like)
bandits or World War Two saboteurs
crawling through the sand dunes at the back of our
houses
everyone imitated the sound of machine weapon fire
uniquely
and “*herh - herh - herh - herh*”
in rapid succession
sounded more authentic than “*rata tata tata tata*”

Our Sten or Bren guns
were often sticks or convenient shapes of driftwood
washed ashore from another storm
and the best bit
was who could die the best
as we practised screaming and clutching our wounds
before falling
and rolling down the grassy desert dusty hills
in agony

and at the end

remembering to take off

and shake off

the gritty cilice sand from inside those balaclava's

before we went home

The Cat That Got Trapped Inside a Tin

The cat got trapped inside the tin
he couldn't get out the tin was too thin

He tried licking for lubrication
as the crowds gathered in fascination

Some shouted out ...*"he needs to fast"*
so he took to a diet of lots of grass

Then after a week by the tail and a pull
the cat that popped out had changed into a bull

The Girl With Stars In Her Eyes

... you

I saw you

and wondered

would you maybe

pass me by

and then I was drawn towards

the stars in your eyes

The room was twilit only

we took each other there

the faint pale neon blue

hummed

and flickered off the jettest black hair

No words just the caress of glossy lips

and breaths

in that close moment of coming together

an hour in a universe that goes on forever

I never forgot that night
things that passed and pulsated
sharing just briefly the stars behind those eyes

The Girl With Stars In Her Eyes - Started out as a song composed and recorded in 1979 which was rediscovered and published in the autobiography "I Saw Her Standing There". This slightly newer version has been adapted into a poem whilst not losing any of its original intensity of that true encounter and memorable night.

The Glow

The sky is plutonium turquoise

The child's eyes and hands

sense the colours and textures

of wood ...

concrete ...

metal ... turning to dusty rust

the materials that built our world

The child is drawn to the beach

dips their feet into the ocean's infinite waves

then gazes into the once bright sun

that is slowly turning charcoal black

The Glow - A different and longer version of the above entitled "Afterglow" featured as part of the title poem in the book of Anti War Poetry called "Afterglow of Zephyrs" - This alternative version is published here for the first time.

The Last Reed Cutters Of Cley

The birds have now fledged their nests
from among the marsh dry tall dense grasses

The Bearded Tits watch whilst rocking and wobbling on
the purple pink six foot high feathery tips and tufts

The Booming Bittern with a stretched neck takes a peak
then tiptoes delicately before lifting off like a tiny
pterodactyl

The Reed Warblers with new olive brown tufty coats and
a soft gold undercarriage dart in circling flight with their
Japanese fan wings

The Windmill glows in the early sunrise refulgence
striking off it's terracotta curves
and white skeletal sail frames

Squashed white cotton ball clouds balance
in the pale blue sky
before drifting very slowly towards Salthouse and the
samphire marshes

The cold sharp short December day blooms and disperses
the breath of the last remaining Cley reed cutters
and the fawn cut is harvested and bundled up to dry
in readiness for the coming summer thatch atop a flint
cottage or two

The Loch Ness Monster Man

This journey started 30 years ago ...
on the still cold cusp of spring
when the Dan Air - One Eleven
landed just after dawn on the grey blustery apron at
Dalcross Inverness
allowing the luxury of forty eight hours
to try to capture
the following years March calendar picture

The Glenmoriston Hotel awaited
with a room and a view
on the river's Ness Bank across to St. Andrew's Cathedral
and the hired darkest blue Ford Fiesta
was small enough to navigate
the empty A9 nothingness of wild empty beauty
twisting and climbing
through green and gorse to Aviemore
and beyond to Cairngorm
that appeared snow tipped like an ice gem biscuit

A freezing fog
fighting to get out of a descending veil of icy mizzle
obscured the early morning chair lifters
whose dangling legs telescoped with bobbing ski's
swinging like unbalanced metronomes
before being whisked away to vanish in a puff of cloud

The summit beckoned and finally the gloom dissipated
blown away in a whirling dervish wind
revealing a depth of unparalleled blue sky
and virgin white snow almost painfully dazzling
... ah this would do for a future landscape print and
almanac

Time in hand
I had planned
to circumnavigate the waters and Drumnadrochit
but hunger led me to Dores
and the view here was better
than having to spend too much time
concentrating on twisty road manoeuvres

On the banks of the beach

was a dented dilapidated converted metal camper van
and tripod Steve with binoculars bigger than my biggest
and longest Nikon lenses

"One day the creature will appear"

he boldly proclaims

he had all the time in the world

as I raced to the airport leaving behind the Highlands

Decades later ... now it's Logan Air and smaller planes
but little else has changed

detouring past the same Hotel Glenmoriston

not far now ...

... not far now

to Dores

and that camper van

rebuilt with wood

growing permanent roots in the Inn car park

Still there after all these years

the Loch Ness Monster Man

with many a tale to be told from the deep dark waters

and glossy lapped stones on the shores

“One day the creature will appear”

he boldly proclaims

The Lone Soldier And The Angel

The lone soldier

clambers through the rubble and destruction of Naples

the roads and lanes are hollow craters

chalky white

and blinding

in the glare and heat coming off the flames

the liberation would not go smoothly

after the constant midnight jettison of bombs

rained down its deathly showers

Amid the rising plumes of smoke and what remained

the lone soldier

sought out a Sunday Mass

among the devastation

with a simple handful gathering

praying for peace among the chaos

Shielding his eyes
from the haloed glare of an almost midday sun
a young girl
seeking sanctuary with her child
born during that eventide blitz
appears and appeals for help
in desperate need
of the Holy Sacrament of Baptism for her new born

The tiny congregation
after dismissal had quickly dispersed
to find their own shelter
leaving the lone soldier without translation
the only witness and god parent
as the young parish priest
confirmed the sacrament
before fleeing
into the warren of passageways
from the ever increasing crescendo of gunfire

It's 1960 now
and the passing years
had led to an obsession

That lone soldier
came back
each and every summer with his wife
seeking
that holy building
from a confused dislocated echo
of 450 churches that were still standing

One by one
the lone soldier sought
year by year
and five more summers pass ... they come and go
and then in that almost midday heat
and hand shielded glare again
a familiar arch and doorway from a fading memory

The daily midday Mass
has just ended
and a priest stands in the entrance shade
there is a slight hesitance but familiarity
as the he steps into the sun
to greet
the long lost lone soldier
but the remembrance is still there
after all the years still clear

Two decades and more had vanished
and now the bells resonate again
and the clouds over Pompeii
divide and explode in the breeze
into a rippled display in that azure sky

The dusty baptism books from the war
are brought out from the safety of the crypt
and that mother is known
and the address is hastily scrawled
and the priest will go on ahead

It may have been just the heat and sweat
but there were tears to sting
the eyes of the old priest
and the lone soldier

Small and worn the terracotta house
with a blue and white awning
just off a local lane
Maria and her only son
stand up to see the approaching rushing and emotional
commotion heading towards them

The lone soldier
has no idea of the excited shouts
and louder explanations
other than *I'ho trovato! I'ho trovato! I'ho trovato!*
I'l soldato solitario

The tears are real now as Angelo ...
that angel baby born in a ruined city...
embraces finally
the lone soldier
who held him
and helped his single mother all those years ago

The Robot

I saw a robot stall
collapse and fall
and clatter to the ground

Not a groan or whimper or cry for help
his universe now silent and dark

His experiences were vast and many
his cosmic travels distant far and wide

He expired and died for want of love
and just a battery that needed changing

Turbid River

The turbid waters
glisten in the dusky sepia sunset light
rippled in a tobacco emulsion
as water leaking from the sea lock gates
whisks up a frothy flotsam
cutting a miniature ox bow bend
through the mud
itself dark and soft as warm caramel fudge
with a sulphide whiff of mild decomposition

Seagulls chase a coaster
cutting through the river's mid channel
mistaking it for a bait laden trawler
the low tide throbbing of the engine and propeller
causes the diagonal waves
to jostle and toss with the current
and deposit some rotten driftwood
into the deep furrowed estuary silt

Turnips And Tea Lights

As autumn
turned to winter almost overnight
everyone at cub scouts
turned up in fancy dress
that halloween eve of 1968
at St. Chads Church Hall

Still ... I had light on my side ... I think
mum's oversized scarlet red bath robe
turned me into a wizard
having spent the previous week
stapling gluey glittered card stars
and crescent moons
onto the well worn fabric
paired with a stiff cone hat
daft that! - dad's idea
turning me into a magical dunce
still ... better to be Merlin than a demon

It had taken all afternoon
with a paring knife
and a sad looking turnip
working ... turning ...
loosening the innards of the legume
on the yellow formica table top
protected by a soggy starchy and fortunately yesterdays
Liverpool Echo
it was a task times two
till at last the hewn and carved fangs
and harlequin diamond eyes
took on the desired malevolent effect
finished with garden string
and a further hollow
behind the scary jaw
that could take a thick squat tea light

When the party of witches
running round with kitchen mops finally subsided
it was time to light
and create my eerie orange glow
for the trick or treat parade home
through the darkened streets of Leasowe
feeling the breath of ghosts from the shadows
whilst the church's solitary resonant bell distantly tolled
for any departing Holy Souls

The chill air
remained thankfully calm
enough for the flickering flame to burn
and keep on the open porch till dawn

As the skies
tried to tear open the lowly clouds
the whiff of roasted rutabaga rose off the doorstep
that turnip ...
now slightly scorched and pungent
giving the eyes a black mascara lining

offering a twisted macabre stare

into the smoky purple violet sunrise

Haiku No 17

Waiting for the rain

Watching the wild clouds descend

A stormbringer wakes

Turtle Waxing And Early Easter Morning

Bank Holiday

Good Friday 1969

we had our instructions

at our Monday Cub Scouts night at St.Chads

"Bob a Job" chores

Gardening ...

or the dreaded green bottles of turtle wax

with tedious hours

of buffing the dry pale pink stuff

to a shine with me shammy leather

only the posh kids called it

"cham ... mois"

or the clever ones

"sham ... wah"

I thought what a waste of time
even if was done to preserve the body
it always said
printed in red

"Tested in Death Valley"

and

"Helps against acid rain"

well that's a long way from Liverpool

And could it be true

that we all might dissolve some day

when the heavens opened

some said ...

it was all those American and commie satellites

interfering with the weather

I had better things to do ...

my Easter Project

That humongous yellowy lime green striped caterpillar
the length of my palm
a month or so before
jam jarred
with lid holes punctured by dads sharp bradawl lance

Left lying on the workbench shelf
after daily feeds of bright verdant lettuce
had turned into a shrivelled red bullet
with a writhing wiggly pointy end
not long now

That Easter morning
the holiday fog
rolling in over the sand dunes
would burn off
and after wafting away
the pale grey white shroud
from round our concrete garage
I entered the damp oily smelling tomb

A flickering by the window
caught in that first afterglow genesis of daybreak
the glass was full
a furry scary colossal skull
so that's what it was all along

A Deaths Head
had emerged overnight
to a new dawn

A stiff twist of the lid
and in the silence
of the early easter morning
the misty veil lifted

And with a gentle fluttering
the giant moth
climbed onto my wrist
it tickled ...
and let me take it ... him or her into the garden
to place into our tall hedge of privet trees

free to rise

free to fly

away into that holy heavenly sky

Umbria In Spring

The sun had set across the valley
and the pink and white stone bricks of Clare's Basilica
glowed even brighter
under the filaments of the facade night lighting

It was the beginning of Lent
the touristy day trippers had long gone earlier
and a twilight vigil procession would soon start

We joined the local Assisian's for their weekly pilgrimage
as a fresh March breeze whipped up off the Apennine
hillsides feeling almost like a winters night
facing the chill the wind forming tears to make our eyes
sparkle

This was their Lenten liturgy
Stations of The Cross
only here along these holy streets
there were no statues or images
of a Crucified Christ

The crowd simply following the Friars
stopped outside fourteen different medieval buildings
each lit high with a flaming torch
sending candescent embers into the stygian sky

We trod hard dusty cobbles and ancient pavements
opening cathartic senses
of discovering and understanding the true reality
of being a witness as a partaker or passerby
in reliving the mental and somatic anguish of the Passion

Umbria In Summer

It's quite early before breakfast and midsummer
just outside the Eastern Gate of Assisi
for the relative steep but short walk down the path
through the rewarding creation of beautiful trees
flowers and wild bushes
nodding in that hour after sunrise

San Damiano will be open when you arrive
the early morning Mass for 800 hundred years
still celebrated within and on those sacred stones

You may find yourself a solitary visitor
sitting in the peaceful cloister courtyard and gardens
the centre of Clare's entire world
this haven of peace and tranquility amid the olive groves
enlightens and calms the most anxious soul

The sky is powder blue
and just for those meditative moments
an abandonment of life's worries
is lifted in unbounded joy
as the valley opens to the distant town of Rivotorto
and clutching my folded canticle of creatures I start the
climb to leave behind these memories and follow my
dreams

Vacancies

Those were the the days
when it took days to drive anywhere
before the motorways

In dad's Vauxhall Viva H.A.
that was their Standard Saloon
the first one they made in Ellesmere Port
in dark green

Holidays were planned
by just hitting the road
but best to break the journey to Scotland in half
and by half
it was a long way

Arriving in Newcastle
zig zagging
those steep cobbled streets
behind the docks and shipyards

looking for the "*Vacancies*" sign in a window
like a car number plate in front of the net curtains

After a hearty early oily breakfast
time to push on

... to Stirling

not before a long stop

at a cafe by the Forth Bridges

I loved those 39 Steps ...

Kenneth Moore and spies ... and steam trains

In the angular bay window "*Vacancies Tonight*"

wedged in front of the aspidistra

a sure sign then

for the next few nights and days

and this time

we had a view of the railway line ...

so some improvement from the previous establishment

Each morning over bacon and black pudding
plans were drawn up
whilst waiting for the wild rains to cease
that turned the town's black brick mortar viridian

Castles ...

and more castles

Bannockburn Battle memorial was just a field
highlighted though by the man in armour ...

Robert the Bruce's Monument ... nice in the evening
as the white plinth slowly turned all orangey in the
setting sun

One last walk in the early morning

before packing the car

back to the battlefield

to say goodbye

and clinging to the ridges

of those damp memorial stones

a glistening spiders web laden with dew

it was a tempting thought to cut the woven web

but then to leave him in peace

to keep the ghost of King Robert company

And so off it was to find another vacant place in Ayr

but first Loch Lomond and tea in Gretna Green

Vagabonds On The Run

The road leads down to the water
the city can't be far away
I think they'll soon be on our trail
as the weather's changed from yesterday

So can't you hear the voices echo
they are trying to bring us to a halt
we'll have to play it out of danger
and hope that they will have to stop

The arid plains lead to the mountains
beyond them lies a misty cloud
the chase just can't go on forever
my mind begins to think aloud

We met the state line by Lake Topaz
now we are free and on our way
looking back from Fremont California
San Francisco lies across the bay

So we played it out of danger
the terror's over and we're free
the only words the voices echo
are the ones from you and me

***Vagabonds On The Run** - originally the lyrics of a song called "Play it out of Danger" written and recorded in the late 1970s. Once thought lost this was found and published in the autobiography "I saw her Standing There" in 2020.*

Haiku No 18

Snettisham dawn skies

Helix twist of swarming flocks

Breeze laden with Knots

Venetian Lagoon Part I - Sunrise In Murano

The night had been too sultry to find a deep sleep
the staccato howls from the stray cats
penetrated sharply the dark hours
as echoes from the Vera da Pozzo in the Campo San
Gregorio

Last evening's dusky heat descending on the Adriatic
caused the aurora inky blue sky to condense into a
powdery fog
the impressionistic sodium citrine lamps
haloed in blurry mistiness
illuminated the black and gold gondolas gently bobbing
against the quickening saffron diffused breaking of the
dawn sunrise

Before the tourists arrive at the quayside
that is the most perfect time to disembark
on an early vaporetto to Murano
to catch a sweet breakfast and cappuccino

watching the lapping waters
flicker off the Cammaregio Canal
then off in search of a pale lilac
and blue crystal glass sun catcher
that will capture the future spinning sunrises

Venetian Lagoon Part II - Midday In Burano

A shortish island hop to Burano

the dazzling light off the wild pink, cobalt blue, scarlet
red and teal houses in the Rio di Terranova momentarily
hypnotise the eyes

but the pale yellow campanile of San Martino is really ...
wonky and not an illusion

The midday crowds are arriving
and displace the calm balance

so a quiet panini prosciutto crudo

and a Menabrea Ambrata will suffice in the Laguna Bar

before exploring the maze of more vibrant colours

in search of fine lace at Dalla Lidia

a fine single bright white snowflake will suffice and
bought then folded away in my waistcoat's breast pocket

Venetian Lagoon Part III - Sunset In Torcello

Mid afternoon and time to take a turn to sleepy Torcello
and wander down the long waterside and field path to
see the Last Judgement
at the Basilica Santa Maria Assunta

This is a wild and almost deserted place of quiet cold
Roman stones
the perfect getaway to hideaway
yet there is a spare hour to sample a spaghetti vongole ...
fritto misto and a Veneto red at the Taverna Tipica near
the jetty

The early evening water bus collects just a handful as the
pink sky silhouettes the basilica and we depart into a
golden sunset
the coppery orb suspended over the lagoon
leaving behind the shadowy ghosts of Hemingway and
Du Maurier

These three islands that appear to float and shimmer
through the seasons are now left behind
... and our launch cuts through
the still waters of the lagoon
taking us back to still further haunting twilight
passageway's of old Venice

Haiku No 19

The mackerel sky

Rippled in pink and purple

Swims far out to sea

Waning Moon

The time between that autumn and winter
before the gales set in
at Dinas Dinlle
watching and timing those winds and tides before the
midnight breakers
and anglers casting strong and long into the Irish Sea

Their buckets look full of yuck
slimy lug and suicide blown exploding rag worm
wriggling ... glistening in the yellowed light swinging off
the grease wicked Davey lamps

A wind howls eerily through the old fort above the beach
screams of the dead in a skin crawling horror
what demons live beneath these wild seas
as sea bass are caught and landed on the shale
iridescent in the last light of the smoky waning moon

The waves retreat fast here and for the fishermen

it's time to return home before sunrise

I am just a driver

revved and ready

my flame orange Austin Allegro speeds away before the

dawn

mine are the only hands clean of bait ... blood and oily

foul smells

Xipra And Her Fading Moon

Xipra waits for her moon
and points to the fair stars

She is the falling dusk
She is that incandescent glow
She is night scape

She is bitter
She is pale
She is spooky
She is waning

She waits for dawn to glimmer break
and hovers on the ledge ...
that edge of a celestial precipice ...
to pull and cast her foes to demon depths

Suspended in her crushed purple cherry and bruised sky

She waits for us

She silently waits for us

save for the movement of the breeze

as I forever swoon with a wild heart

under her fading moon

Zig Zag Girl

The people of this town
I see them every day
the people of this town
going their own way

And I know that I'll find
if I turn right down the lane
my zig zagging girl
who's home here to stay

Down by the River
drifting down the prom
there she strolls
looking all alone

Everyone sees her
but looks another way
hair tossed by the breeze
the way she walks and sways

So I turned right
and wondered down that lane
joined her that afternoon
in wild and crazy ways

And the people of this town
still walk their own way

Zig Zag Girl - is the sequel to the title poem of the book "Zig Zag Road"

Epilogue

*I found small mercies
In places you would not believe
To ground spent forces
From turning me around*

*Acts of kindness, underrated
Jewels in the crown
The moon shines wonder on the water
As daylight fades
I wait, I linger
Small mercies hold me, sway*

*A kind of glory
In day-to-day reality
To open, open doorways
Amazed at all I see*

*Smiles that linger
In the moment
Long enough to say
Way beyond the rhyme or reason
As daylight fades
They're always with you
Small mercies hold me, sway*

*Acts of kindness, underrated
Jewels in the crown
The moon shines wonder on the water
As daylight fades
I wait, I linger
Small mercies hold me, sway*

*Acts of kindness
Jewels in the crown
The moon shines wonder on the water
As daylight fades
I wait, I linger
Small mercies hold me, sway*

*As daylight fades
I wait, I linger
Small mercies hold me, sway*

*As daylight fades
They're always with you
Small mercies
Sway
They're always with you
Small mercies hold me, sway*

(Kiki Dee & Carmelo Luggeri - Small Mercies)

If you enjoyed the poems
and would like to know more about

Where Art & Books Collide

Please Visit

www.johnpaulkirkham.co.uk





Hidden from too inquisitive eyes
were fabulous full colour posters
from his wild insurgent days
still striking in vivid bright tone shades
"Camarada" ... workers in fields of wheat
holding sickles and rifles
"Asturias" ... in bold block ... peasants and fists
would bring a tear to his eyes

And from his thick and soft crocodile skin wallet
he would pull out
an old slightly creased but not faded hand tinted
photograph
proudly pointing to an azure blue pocket square
as two young people danced and clasped
on the quayside in Buenos Aires
that last tango before bringing his girl back to
Lancashire

And after those succulent fresh peaches
were put into a brown paper bag for us tea
Clarence's would recite his weekly adios:
"One day lad the revolution ...
the people ... the workers will shine through"
whilst surreptitiously slipping
that last tango picture into his breast pocket

Supporting Free Reading Worldwide