

# Spooky sayings

*By Ian Barker*

*The difficult third collection...*

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## Acknowledgements

**S**o we reach the moment where I have managed to release the third collection of my poetry. This work contains many of my more recently-written poems along with a very few of the older ones. A few people ask me, when I am out in public reading poetry to those who will listen, “what is the difference between poetry from when you performed in the UK to how you find things in the USA?” The straight answer, even though it sounds slightly glib is...accent. That’s about it really, words, thoughts and emotions delivered in a British accent versus an American one. Fellow Brits also ask me whether or not a British accent helps or hinders in my adopted country of America. Almost exclusively I find it to be an ice-breaker. Americans can sometimes go a bit glossy-eyed at a clipped British vowel sound but, after a while, an audience forgets about this and instead focuses on the actuality of the poem. I have had, more than once, someone say, “oh I could listen to you read a telephone book and it would sound great” but I *think* they were mostly kidding. On the whole, American and British poetry are close cousins who sometimes say the same things in slightly different ways...but it’s all good.

My special thanks should go to some especially close poetic friends. In particular I would like to thank Heidi Hermanson, my poetic best buddy and fellow traveller on the seas of literary exploration. She is no mean poet herself and runs a night in Omaha, Nebraska called “Naked Words” which is exactly that: poetry in its most pure and wonderful form. She and I have read and listened to poetry in a growing proliferation of bizarre places including one time where the two of us sat for nearly three hours on a bridge over the Missouri whilst the forces of nature tried to fling us from the heights with every type, strength and direction of wind gust possible without actually being a tornado (this is a serious possibility, living as I do in America’s ‘tornado alley’). Passers-by would stop every so often to listen to these poetic lunatics and join in the words. Bardic spirit at its best. Heidi, you rock.

I have thanked him before but I should mention again the excellent Matt Mason who runs the Nebraska Writer’s collective (amongst other poetry-related endeavors). Matt is a dynamo of poetry who, with the NWC, gets poets placed into local schools (paid!) to spread their love and passion of the written and spoken word. He is a true star.

I should also mention my good friend and word-spouting crazy Mark Niel. Mark is, at the time of writing, the official Poet Laureate for Milton Keynes in England. Milton Keynes is a surprising crucible of artistic creativity and Mark has played an enormous part in making this happen – long before he was nominated Laureate. We have performed together on many occasions in all sorts of venues large and small and I never saw him offer anything other than consummate professionalism and bon viveur.

Many others deserve a mention, perhaps in the next book, but I should at least name-drop the irrepressibly well-read Jack Cox, a.k.a. Encyclopedia Jack, in the hope that on his return from Italy he will read this book and start writing poetry with the engineering precision he oozes from every pore and therefore abandon scaring the living daylight out of me with his hand-built yellow hot rod racing cars, even if he does manage to pick the coolest license plates in America.

Finally, I'd like to indulge myself further for one moment to mention my wife, Lisa and my daughter Brittany both of whose love and perfection mean that any unhappy poems herein are entirely fictional. Oi, geezer! x

### About the author...

I an Barker for many years wrote under the pseudonym of "Alex Sykie" in the belief that no-one would ever want to read poetry written by someone with such a pedestrian name as "Ian Barker". It turned out, however, that despite the name quite a lot of people wanted to read and hear his work (and could never spell "Sykie" properly anyway).

Born in London, England in the 1960s Ian grew up in the British home counties and Midlands. He has performed extensively in the UK at various open mics, public events and festivals. In November 2009 he emigrated to Omaha, Nebraska, USA where he regularly confuses people by pronouncing everything in a "pretty accent" once freaking out the local librarian by making the only request in living memory for a complete set of Kerouac and Frank O'Hara anthologies.

### **A note about the ebook version**

Currently there is a huge surge in republishing and publishing of books and periodicals in the form of ebooks - in fact, you're reading one now so you're probably 'in the know'. As an author, I think it's a \*good\* thing - it gets my work in front of people wherever and whenever they might wish to read. Also, it's a relatively easy thing to do and very cost effective - it could even be argued that it's more environmentally friendly since we don't have to cut down a stack of trees or other suitable sources of fibrous material in order to make the paper and there are no chemical bleaches or glues involved. To be fair, I was never really one for saving the planet but hey, if it helps.

The only downside is that the current digital publishing industry is still taking its first baby steps into maturity. This means we're not quite there yet in being able to make the books look exactly as we could wish. For example; the formatting of text by most ebook reader devices is a little bit random and leaves a lot to be desired (and I don't single any one out here - they all have their problems). This is especially a problem for poetry. Most poems look or work a bit better when the stanzas, verses or paragraphs are laid out so the lines break at quite specific places. Unfortunately this choice of where the lines break is probably the single biggest thing that ebooks are not very good at dealing with.

As a consequence of the limitations of the media this ebook does not try to lay out the paragraphs in the same way I would choose to were I writing them out by hand or using a word processor and a nifty little printer. The printed versions of my books have nice extras like charcoal drawings, embossed pages (because I think my poetry books should be aesthetically pleasing to the senses - I'm a bit pretentious like that) and text which dances around the page into shapes that fit the flow of the rhythm of the words. The ebooks, however, can be loaded onto all sorts of electronic devices, weigh nothing in themselves, are searchable, and are instantly accessible by the side of a glorious swimming pool or romantic beach...if you have the right kind of connection to the wired world.

Either way, I just wanted you to know...

***Ian.***

**For...**

*For those who write and never read out-loud, for those who worry their words are not worthy, for those who think they can't "do it properly", for those that tried once only to be shot down in flames...*

*Do it anyway, fashions change: become the fashion, write for the generations to come, write for you, write for the sake of it, write what your heart tells you must must **MUST** come out because the words are bubbling inside your head – beware the caste of men.*



## Rider

I wrote this poem because of this: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom\\_riders](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_riders)  
and this: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Zwergs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Zwergs)  
but mainly this: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jimzweg.jpg>

Rider comes in.  
STRIDES in.  
Not a swagger.  
Not a shoulders back front out puff up bowl down the bus.  
A grit of teeth, sure,  
a won't blink look right ahead.  
Down the bus.  
Down the middle of the wrong bus boy.  
The wrong color bus.

And he settles in a seat and grips the bar in front a little too tight.  
Riding.  
In his neat suit.  
A proper suit.  
With neat hair,  
a little blond flick  
at the regulation length.  
And at some stage he says he'll get off first when the bus stops.  
And at some stage he wins the half-hearted argument.

So when the bus pulls up,  
he's there,  
at the door,  
and steps into the  
swing of a hate-swung baseball bat,  
and a motorcycle chain...  
and a metal bar...  
and a painful dinosaur bone of a table leg  
which is studded with nails  
that rip into wrong color skin  
that steps off the wrong color bus.

As it swoops  
to mix spittle with blood  
they whoop  
*"betrayed your own kind boy"*  
even though he can only grunt yelps like a kicked puppy in return.

But they don't see the legendary camera flashes.

They don't see that sodium white

bouncing boy's jelly-blood dripping face into history:  
the day the buzz-cut white boy  
rode the colored bus.

He said "*I just prayed I'd survive*".  
"*But why did you do it?*"  
"*Because...because it was the right thing to do*".

Sometimes when you ride the bus  
you don't ride it for you...  
you ride it for freedom.

### The first layer is size

The first layer is size. It seals the medium ready for the magic.  
Then comes a sketched outline. Shapes, tentative at first;  
A false start or two or more. An expression that doesn't  
Quite emerge right from scurrying lines is smudged back and  
Pulled again from the canvas by spidery lines and swirls.  
This is the second layer, everything is built on this.  
How you sketch this layer is vital. Skimp on the effort  
And it doesn't matter how hard you work on the  
Later layers, they'll always be lacking. Something  
Will bother you when you see those sort of pictures  
Hanging around in shops and factory staff rooms. A gut  
Instinct that the basic sketch was not done right.  
But a picture on which loving time has been spent,  
Where the painter took the canvas and drew and  
Redrew coaxing the strokes to represent what they  
Were meant to be, well that's plainly beautiful to see.  
Artists; go home to your canvases and rescue them  
From doleful neglect in tobacco-stained houses  
Where they will languish splashed by a momentary  
Escape of alcohol and the stickiness of cocktails  
On a happy hour Friday or lie in sodden resignation under  
Cardboard in a Detroit gutter surrounded by  
The broken window glass of disappearing  
Factory routine twelve hour grind and time  
And a quarter Saturdays. A good outline, as  
A framework, helps make your creations  
Hang on the right walls and be seen in the  
Company of work by successful artists.  
Bad things still mishap a well-executed sketch  
But a good strong starting layer is the rock  
From which the potential can rise.  
Artists; go home to your canvases and  
Pour your love, experience and skill in to  
The lines of the first sketchy layer.

## April (with annotations)

This is a poem written for those who study the mechanics of poetry as an art looking for signs of rhyming, of assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, homophones and anaphora – this poem has all of these . . . and more.

Hint of flake

**and here**

**and here**

from high: a squadron of

Canadian angels who

in formation we hear

**honk honk honk** herald the

coming of the **thing**

and beat the flakes from the gray

with **wing**

and bounce on unseen drafty sky.

And through the cold coat of

Winter **wear**, a greener bud

**begins on branch that dares**

to hope for warmth and better **light**.

**Here, here and here**

**there** lifts a **brave blade** of

grass, **defies** threats of frost

and **skies** overcast by monochrome **bright**

Sun shaded from **sight**.

Then tumbles flake into warm drip

of life and **wakens** and **washes**

the dust from daffodil eyes

who poke a cautious tip through

earthy blankets

first one **there, then there**, now

**here and here and here and here**.

And then a yellow **strikes** upon the

V of beating wings, and **kisses**

the sleeping bark awake on trees

who unwrap their groggy **arms**

**and** stretch towards the **rays**

with greening finger **leaves**

**and** catkins and stickybuds

**and** squirrels who agitate

**and chatter**

**and** bees who sing a welcome **again**

to tulips who rush to the surface

to greet **them**

**and** rabbits and foxes who chase

**and** soon we **two** join **too** like lost peoples

**returned** from long dark adventures, **emerged**,

to add to the **business bustlings** of  
**Spring.**

### **On a hotel room**

*Just a quick reminder to those who are unsure or, on reading this believe I write from experience: my poetry comes from imagined fiction – I make stuff up – I am not planning on buying a motorbike or having fights with my wife (although I am surely ripe for a mid-life crisis)*

### **On a hotel room**

An unsteady squint strains at these reeking walls,  
Tar-stained from the puffing of road-warrior nightjars  
Who drank deep on drams of their superior's wishes  
And tormented their second-best wives  
With lies that they both sensed the taste of  
On tongues which waggled a tarantella dance around  
The sharp bull horns of cheating, his bright fighter's  
Cape of platitudes furling around him as her doubts, fears  
Of betrayal stamped the ground and snorted a steamy  
Spittle that shook the doors of their marriage.  
Another night death-gripping the bedcovers with her  
Suspensions. Another knocking his rocks against  
Bell-ringing glass and sucking the brown burn  
Of bitterness drowning as it washed resentment  
From teeth electrified by edge against edge grinding.  
He has no reserve of desire to drag  
Doing The Right Thing along with him. There are  
True selves to find in motorbike trips and  
Many destinies thwarted by coming home on  
Time and painting the bedroom walls white.

He claims, by example, better use for tomorrow can be made by  
Hung-over vikings who arrive red-eyed amongst  
The enslaved and clocked and desk-bound.  
His warrior clothes strewn with a confetti of  
A fixed agenda torn to shreds stuck on

With cock-sure machismo spirit. The gaunt evidence  
Written for posterity across the deepening creases  
Of his buffalo-tongue face betrays the wear and  
Fraying as his identity and purpose bounce away from him  
Into the tragic pile of Things He Could Have Done.

## Five Guys

Five guys rollin' in a motor  
burn up road like it don't last.  
Big bass rockin' on the radio  
I hitting the wheel to fake a drum thump.  
Sunshine burnin' through the window  
toppin' up tans to staccato crunk.  
We all starin' at the fender we followin'  
lip bit focus from the fella who drives.  
Davey 'im a snooze and he sweatin' up a storm  
the others shift position like they on hot rocks.  
Five guys packed in and all packin',  
colors on our backs, full-on inked and all that.  
Five guys settin' on a mission  
teach a guy a lesson he's really gonna get.  
Five guys flexing up their muscles;  
tonight: click-click bang-bang respect.  
So we reach a shady corner  
and see 'im slouchin' like a drunk.  
Waistbands ripple as we pull our metal out  
flashes of munitions and pop pop pop;  
sloucher hits the deck and his baby-momma drops.  
There's a screamin' and a wailing' as we screech away fast  
this lesson is a lesson that's really gonna last.  
We whoopin' and a yellin' coz we done our bit o biznizz,  
9 mil teachers smokin' up the car.  
We're slappin' and fist bumpin' and biggin' up ourselves  
whilst the driver stamps the pedal and he turn his knuckles white.  
Five guys start the path to penitentiary  
where the tats are tears in the corners of your eyes  
but five guys only got one focus  
coz five guys happy with their retribution night.



### There is a caste of men

There is a caste of men who say:

"think like this"

or they will burn crosses on your lawns.

They will huddle in judgement  
and point bony fingers at your differences  
to how they wish things to be.

They hold the money,  
they guard the doors to their temples  
and pulpits

but they do not hold the keys to the gates  
of heaven nor speak directly to God.

They say: "speak like us" and "write like us"  
and "use our accent to fit in with us".

But dust tumbles from their tongues.

They say: "we are the kingdom of Zion"  
and "we are the true disciples, you pretender".

But they are wrong; dust tumbles from their  
tongues as they huddle in judgement.

Stay away and keep whispering, louder  
and louder until you blow away the dust.

Rhyme, don't rhyme, shout, project to the last  
seat at the back or say it softly through tears  
but for their sake and yours do it your way

and strive to keep away from turning to dust  
and finally: never, ever burn any crosses on lawns.

## The Good Samaritan

So a man walk up to me an 'im say  
That do fearing that he die today  
And never had done a good ting in his life  
He will give me all the money him has  
In his wallet  
And it would be a blessing to him  
For me to take it  
And for me to eat well with it  
Or to drink a hot coffee on dis a cold day.  
Then he look at me with a serious look  
On him face and him say  
that I not to use it to buy drugs  
Or to buy drink to get me drunk  
For a shame meself and by that  
Shame him too.  
And he tell me that he have done  
Nothing good deed in his life  
And he has family that he never  
Has spoken to in a long time  
And that when they did last talk  
It was all hot words with them high talk  
To each other and it spin out of control  
Until now none of dem talk and none of dem remember the subject  
But nothing else but the high talk for more  
Than five years with no slips.  
Water pass under the bridge  
Plus he no longer has a name for  
Where they all live or even if they live.  
And he say to me this happen over nothing  
But stupidity and big pride of himself and one another  
Of his others.  
And then he looks at me all sad and says  
For his god to bless me and he hope I keep warm.  
I say to 'im I never have the want of drugs and I don't  
Do getting drunk because I sit here and wait  
All my time  
For enough to eat and nothing more.  
So then he makes this kind of unhappy face and says  
Sure he believes me and just goes off  
Like a smell chase him away quick.  
And I look and he has put to me \$10  
In my hand  
Which I think is a poor likkle amount to carry out

If you think you are thinking you might die  
Without a good deed to your name  
When the time is up.

### The tragic tree

Since May it has blossomed  
and greened as the days grew longer  
and the weather warmed.

Each of the weekdays I walked past,  
even-paced, noting in my head the  
progress of the brave little tree.

The weekends, when I have no need to  
pass by, it grows more quickly, like  
anything that is not watched for microscopic  
signs of progress.

The rainy days might have made me miss  
some tree events too as I ducked my head  
in to the wind and tried to stop the  
rain-drops running in to my eyes.

They carry germs, you know (although I  
still stick my tongue out and catch them  
in case they taste like an unreachable river).

Day after day after day without pause  
the branches span out leaves and petals.

The bees tickled the petals into life.

Then the petals swelled in tiny steps to buds;  
and every day I walked past I saw this thing  
happen and marveled at how it does and  
wondered..why.

One Monday as I passed I saw that the little  
buds were now the beginnings of apples which  
have grown on to become juicy and tempting.

When the apples began to drop in the first Autumn  
wind I was so tempted to lean over the  
old stone wall and pick one...just to try.

But I'm not that brave.

Now this Monday I see the weekend weight has proved too  
much for a little tree to shoulder and the fruits  
are scattered at its feet, rotting.

I'm sorry I waited, tragic little tree.

### What use is space travel to frogs

It is a frog's destiny to seek further for the sake of seeking, to strive harder to go croakily where no frog has croaked before. They "do not do these things because they are easy, they do them because they are difficult", they do them so that frog kind can say "we did it even though we are but frogs"; because they were not satisfied to accept that in all the vast expanse of their pond and the nearby mud and the great void of grass lawn beyond there could only be themselves as the only representatives of frogs that there could be. They dreamed of free frogs, pond frogs, pet frogs and brightly-colored tree frogs that oozed poison from their skins that could be used by other strange creatures for medicines or to coat the tips of arrows and kill giant creatures that were nothing like frogs and who lived in ignorance of frog life. Some frogs are content to be frogs...but some hope for more...much much more.

**You are made to fly**

*For my daughter...*

You are made to fly.  
To soar high  
cutting clouds with your wings,  
looping and circling on  
eddy currents of sun-warmed air.

Today I saw a moth  
trapped in a frantic corridor,  
beating and striking in torment  
against a nemesis of window glass  
again and again  
dodging the savior gap of the door  
I opened until finally it fell, stunned,  
spent and defeated to the ledge,  
laid to rest amongst the foolish corpses of  
ants and bugs who strayed too far  
from a beaten path.

I just wanted to remind you  
that you are meant to fly.

### Stand-up

There's nothing to the tops of his ears  
they went in the same flash as his left hand  
and now, in the spotlight, from behind the microphone  
you can see how fire eats the unwary or plain unlucky  
it eats hungrily,  
it eats indiscriminately,  
it eats like there'll be no tomorrow  
even in the sulphur bowl of an Iraqi desert.  
First it licks, to taste your hair,  
then it wraps its tongue around your screams  
and tries to finish in one enormous bite  
of delicious melt-in-the-mouth you.  
The mark of the man is not that he went through this,  
his personal trial,  
an unasked-for act of faith.  
The scale is what comes next and  
we are all there to witness it.  
He walks with stiffened legs up to the mic stand,  
no visible purple heart,  
raises the stump of his left hand in the air  
and strokes the patchwork of his head, slowly  
enough while his pretty cornflower blue eyes fix us,  
one and all, in a challenge to the stereotypes.  
Leaning in, for intimacy, he says, with a smile:  
"You..."  
"should see the other guy".  
And we all laugh.

## Plantation

If this was a tobacco field  
back before an age of conscience  
and the force of marches  
and good dreaming speeches  
and they were your boys  
it would still be wrong.

Though even as you have swapped  
wicked, bitter leaves for tomatoes,  
same family, different purpose,  
and bullwhips for voices,  
it will still be wrong.

And now, though they have unholey shoes  
and sweaty shirts on their backs  
with sunstroke avoided by  
the wearing of caps:  
it is still wrong.

Because, as then,  
you look away from their  
provenance, their documents  
old scars created without witnesses.  
Because desperately willing hands,  
for a picking pittance,  
which enriches your farm,  
is still wrong.

Nobody sings in your fields.  
Croppers join together with glances  
and a furtive hola in mother tongue.  
The purpose for them is different:  
exiles by choice and paperwork,  
not leg irons and death-barrel ships.  
Yet it is still wrong  
and tomorrow,  
it will still be wrong.



## Party Pictures

We pulled out the party pictures  
from that last retirement hurrah,  
champagne and carriage clocks,  
we use them as memory prompts;  
there was nothing but an empty stare.

Questioning and prompting:  
it looked like you;  
but it wasn't you,  
you weren't really there.

We fight over choice of pullover,  
your tan belt needs another notch,  
brown cowboy corduroy  
sagging in ruffled troughs.

I tug your chin toward me,  
gaze down the sinkhole of your eyes,  
but can't cling with fingers of recognition,  
or see flickers from embers of old fires.

A mind dripped into dreams and catchphrases;  
you left with no proper goodbyes.  
The cruelest of positions,  
a thousand times the pain,  
because in your condition  
you'll be here...  
...but never really here again.

## Guitar

She staggered up to me,  
finger pointing,  
mouth gaping.

Small, growing big,  
two feet of life  
with years to match.

Gaping and pointing,  
with eyes that bounced with her footsteps. A tottering dolly  
in mini-sized sneakers.

I strummed on my guitar  
and continued to busk, beamed out a benevolent smile and hoped  
she'd drop coins in my case.

"La" she bellowed "la"  
(a poor attempt, I thought but at least she likes it)  
I nodded and bridged and patterned-out chords.  
"La!" (louder)  
"Laaaaaaaaaaa" (screaming)  
"Laaa aaaaaa aaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaa".

Where was her mother? Appreciation for my  
efforts should be accompanied by ritual;  
you drop a coin, I duck my head and mime 'thanks'  
when our eyes meet;  
"Laaaaaaaaaaa";  
then you stand for a few seconds whilst  
I play a little more earnestly and you smile  
like you own the music.  
"Laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa"

Then her mother came and scooped her up  
like a red-coated parcel.

Gently, on her daughter's cheeks  
she turns the little face towards her and starts to  
mouth her words theatrically  
"music, honey, this sound is called music".  
Then, to me "I'm sorry, it's all new";  
"Laahhhhhhhh"  
she points to the metalwork behind her daughter's

ears;

"implants";

(I fret E minor and stroke down on the strings);

"Laaaa laaa laaa";

*"switched on today.....you're her first guitar. I think she likes it".*

## Swans

*(This meaning and imagery in this poem is discussed on my website)*

Swans on a mirror,  
ripples of peace,  
brushed by heart-shaped necks reflected in a swan embrace.  
They break and slide apart at a matched pace,  
a slow arc that suggests they glide on glass,  
until one strikes with sun-shadowing wings  
that juggle the air into lift and forward motion as they dance,  
with a single swan cloud climbing upon the reddening  
beams of approaching twilight.

Amongst the rings of bouncing lake  
she is left now, remaining set fast,  
a subtle flick-flack of tail that hints her mind state.  
Smooth-sailing in the setting of the sun  
to swathe through the drab ducks who  
bristle with mock indisposition,  
knowing better than to stray too long into  
her meditation.

## Vengeance

Vengeance flashed like flint sparks in her eyes  
And a boiling rage surged into her fists so they balled  
Bitten-back fingernails into paper cut palms.  
With a shivering tremor of limb and an incongruous arrangement of  
cheap cotton blouse  
She threw herself, frenzied at the painting with a guttural, primeval  
death rattle  
That rose a little wilder from within her with each crash of her skin  
against the  
Coffee-colored women and their nakedness.  
Her hands clawed like a trapped dog desperate for escape  
As her dervish transfixion cried out a profane lament, over and  
Over again to whoever it was she was trying to connect with.  
But the Tahitian girls, just shimmered and mocked her from  
Behind the glass, even as the blood ran from the friction of her hands  
Against ebony frames and rough old screws under layers of varnish  
Gently fogging with an aged burnish.  
Gauguin is tricky like that.

## Time

Time kills.

So we kill time.

Time heals.

Does everything heal with time?

Time is made of some sort of plastic  
because Dr Who and Einstein can bend time.

Although it's quite small since it's  
so easy to lose track of time.

Time can be stolen.

We steal time.

We take a minute,  
snatch a second.

Time has wings,  
time flies.

Time deceives,  
time can play tricks.

Time changes everything.

Everything changes with time.

Time passes and,  
once it's gone

it never comes back.

You can't own time though,  
we never "have" time.

Time is addictive nowadays  
because we never seem to have  
enough time.

Unless you're in prison;  
then you can't get rid of it,  
you have time on your hands,  
you're doing time,  
your own time not anyone  
else's, just yours. The judge  
gave you time as your master  
and now you serve time.

Until it's finished with you  
or, like money, you've spent all your time on nothing,  
wasted your time and now you've had it,  
you've run out of...time.

## Mr Tran

Oh Mr Tran stop taunting us  
with your legs that pose a fine Irish jig, frozen in time.  
Dainty, dainty, decorously sword-dancing, suspended perilously  
above a discarded cigarette packet  
and your cane, Mr Tran, knotted and ridged –  
weapon of choice of a time-fighter  
leaned ready to strike when the clarion call comes, Mr Tran,  
when the call comes for you.  
It will come, won't it?  
You perch there, Mr Tran, buried in the sackcloth and folds passion  
of a thrift-shop coat triumph of convenience over fashion.  
It ill-fits you Mr Tran, can you not see? Does it not BOTHER you?  
The first owner had more beef to him Mr Tran, more bulk of good  
things eaten too well and he never had to scroll up the cuffs.  
But then he never stooped against a knotted cane, Mr Tran,  
nor did he peer quite so close at the headlines of yesterday's hastily  
reassembled newspaper which he did not have to hunt  
fluttering along the streets  
amongst the wrappings of candy-treats, Mr Tran,  
he just pitched it into the trash can  
ready for the wind to pull it out, sheet by sheet for you.  
He has not yet had his careless plans come to...nought,  
or see blue-sky ideas get drowned behind the gathering rainclouds  
of the winter of his life, Mr Tran.  
I'll bet he whistles as he showers, not a bad..thought  
entering his fully-crowned head on his unbowed, undowned  
shoulders. No arthritic back for him Mr Tran.  
No uncorrected vision, squinting at what the world  
has become.  
He wears tailored blue shirts and has a magical phone  
which can display the weather in seventeen different languages,  
only one of which he can read.  
Blue shirts, Mr Tran, neat.  
SEVENTEEN DIFFERENT languages, Mr Tran.  
He has a future. He is going to BE somebody.  
He is going to change the world, Mr Tran.  
He is never going to sit with deck-shoes  
hanging from Irish jig legs.  
He is never going to be a nobody, Mr Tran.  
Or is it the other way around?

## Contemplation

Let's go Alice, let's jump into Ron's garden filled with the  
bouquet of silica and sand melted and colored for us  
roses of flat, imperfect glass  
in pop art arrangement  
of the profound tic tac toe of the choices of life.  
An overwhelming smell of green cubes of jelly glass.

If you stoop, and gaze through, your world is there.  
Through the looking glass. Box upon box, rose upon rose,  
lens upon lens...reality upon reality.

In the top row are the roses of happiness. Puppies freshly  
brought home to chase toilet rolls into shreds of naughtiness.  
Champagne bubbles up your nose. Flowers on Valentine's day.  
The urgent kisses of a new love on an unfamiliar doorstep.  
This is where the rose of unexpected pay rises and ice-creams  
that drip down your chin in the summer live. The smell of a baby's head,  
the feel of good food on your senses, wine in a warm sunset.

The second row is the row of roses of despair. Break-ups for  
shattered hearts. Pink slips at Christmas. Fatalistic diagnoses in  
dark corners of a doctor's consulting room. Gums that bleed and turn  
out to be something serious after all. Dogs that die in hot cars.  
Last wishes that are a litany of regrets and missed opportunities.  
A T-bone at a jumped red traffic light. A spill on a speeding motorbike.

Row three is the gathering of the roses  
of the illusion of choice and the blooms of excuses.  
A flower of party party party or study hard while your mind is young and fertile.  
A bud ready for breaking  
of fitness and ready horizons where you can step into success with shiny skin  
and bright eyes to become....someone. Someone who looks into their  
morning mirror and smiles, who sings in the shower with a voice that  
carries a bouncing spirit of vitality, who pats the backs of strangers  
with genuine want-you-to-do-well bon viveur . This is a rose  
that takes time to say "I love you" and who hugs their dog and because  
it knows it is loved it wags its tail back in little flicks and scrunches its muzzle  
into a toothy doggy smile.  
This is the row from which to pick flowers and place them all in  
duckling lines in the row of happiness.

Row three is for you..if you want it, if you choose it, if fate lets you have it...  
and that is why it is the worst row of all.



## Friend

This poem was written when I was playing around with the idea of Jack Kerouac's stream of consciousness style and is really about the representation of deities and how every culture I know of has at least one "god". In a way it is a discussion about the theme of wandering in the metaphorical spiritual desert and emerging.

## Friend

This is the spirit of Kerouac. Hotel Chelsea spirit,  
English-style.

I mean it though. To you: I want to call you friend.

I cried and you listened to my sobbing.  
I laughed and the laughter bounced back.

And we lied about understanding.  
It was the easy thing to do.  
It wrestled with my rational side.

You were my morning friend. My good-time  
friend. My comfort.

I want to call you friend.

Do you remember the songs?

Happy, clappy songs.  
It wrestled with my rational side.

We were wreathed in sweet-smelling smoke  
and chimes. A childhood duty,  
kissing feet, wiping cloth, reading  
what we couldn't do and never what we could.

Authorized words. Approved and translated.

Then songs about being happy to die because  
there would be something there. A song relying  
on trust. A tussle with my rational side.

You were never my rock standing in a sand-filled  
desert, filled with emptiness. You were never  
the hand that guided the art.

White man. White woman. Nails in the wrong places.

Olive in the skin. Oil on the hair. Painted  
by the unbelievers.

Words that banned things. Stipulations,  
prostrations by action and abstention,  
by observance in reverence. Until the difference  
between the free and those who still listened  
grew greater in my mind.

And the difference between the free and me  
became so paper-thin you could rub your  
fingers through it and they would touch.

Such a fine gap. It wrestled with my  
rational side.

Move on move on. More wraiths of smoke.  
Breathe in for peace, hold and release.  
Breathe in for solace, for solace, for solace.

Mind walks, takes a run up and jumps into the  
dream sky of possibilities.

Made our friendship look very different.  
Less rules, more creativity. More of  
everything: colors, creeds, good and bad.

I want to call you my friend.

Breathed in, moved to the jungle beat.  
Made our friendship look very very very different.  
Gave you a new face, a new size.

I danced in the warehouse. I danced in the street.  
Everybody was there but I was on my own.

Then I hugged the trees. I squeezed their bark  
and ran my hands up and down them; my connectors  
to the Earth, a divination of you. Stroking them  
with my palms and hugging the hard woody trunk like  
a lover come back from a long journey and you don't  
want to let them go.

Your face looked so very very different and you  
lived everywhere and you were truly beautiful.

It wrestled with my rational side.

### Beneath a sharp sun

Beneath the sharp sun  
where the blue cloth of summer next-by is waiting  
for the cotton clouds of washing  
gems of rainy drops which never come  
there stiffly hobbles a cocoa-man and attendant dog at leash straining  
not for an appointed place requiring timing  
nor a needed break  
for creature comfort.  
No, neither have a given destination or agenda,  
(and one needs the other for unclear reasons),  
but for the simple pleasure of turns about a park  
to scent out smells or wave to others of their kind, or bark;  
for it is the need one has to feel like a dog  
and for the other it is again to feel a little human.

## Wilderness

This poem was written when I was asked to appear as one of the guest artists for a performance at a Lenten event for The First Christian Church in Omaha.

The poem is inspired, as requested, by the following Bible paragraphs:

Mark 1: 12-13 <http://bible.oremus.org/?q|=196001055>

Matthew 4:1-11 <http://bible.oremus.org/?q|=196000947>

and Luke 4:1-13 <http://bible.oremus.org/?q|=196001136>

I did explain before I agreed to write that I do not refer to myself as a Christian however it's clear, I hope, from the poem, that the passages and I found some common ground in this time of moral wilderness that we call 'recession'.

## Wilderness

There's a sparse and spartan void  
and in it echoes a real steal  
where, hands who shun the touch  
of feelings that have no path to profit  
offer sacks of stones for you to  
turn into nourishment.

Gnarled hands whose encouragements  
serve their purposes;  
*"take our offer, get one meal,  
get one free,  
it's a devil of a deal.  
Buy now....  
PAY later  
it's all hand built  
and cheaper than ever!"*

Then they say *"come with us  
to the top of the House  
act like us,  
think like us  
own the moment,  
be a demon of the soundbites  
and from up here you will  
see how you are better than  
the little people,  
who you can rule  
and have everything you deserve...  
...and everything you don't,  
everything..."*

*it will be so cooooooof'.*

But, through the clouds you see  
the temples to financial avarice shimmer  
and shudder with immoral greed  
that must feed and feed but fail to feel.  
Where weaker eats meeker  
and all the chariots are too large  
and that making breads from rocks  
is neither sensible or sane  
and the walls of the palaces are  
buckling at the strain  
and nobody knows what to do  
because though they tempt  
they have joined us in the wilderness  
and it's an uncomfortable terrain

But you see this kingdom that you're offered  
is a sham and a shame  
and the wander in the desert  
has a purpose; to learn to  
live simply again.

So you'll tough it out in the present desert,  
leave the sand to dust your feet  
and let the branches sing Spring  
from solid trees which sprang from seeds  
who rooted in deeper, slower ground  
which has no need for angels to catch them,  
to demonstrate their faith  
that they will, undeserved,  
be saved from dashing on the rocks.

### The mountains of Omaha

And here cut and incized against threatening gray  
Which augurs snow, hanging low crawling towards  
The peak through tops of pines  
Dancing amongst a waterfall mist  
That wets your breath,  
clinging nature to city nurture.

You will come to question  
The wisdom of traffic lights  
And busy intersections  
Where the lyrics of so many birdsongs  
Sink, lost, into the flowing rapids  
Of the river road and tumbling out-of-state plates.

The dripping dew that bounces  
With a vicious pop against your urban neck  
Started its dive dislodged by the foot  
Of an angry squirrel who scolds  
You in chirrups and tweaks of red tail.  
This, should be a normal day.

**End..**

Thank you for reading

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