

LEAVINGS  
dave calder









# LEAVINGS

dave calder

Otherpublications

© dave calder 2012

Otherpublications 2012  
96 Bold Street, Liverpool

Isbn 0946057 93 1

Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have previously appeared in:  
*The Isle Is Full Of Noises (Benham)*,, *Whispering Worlds (Riverrun)* and *Making Connections (Stride)*

## CONTENTS

Act 1, Scene 3

Avocados

Caber

The Director of the Terran Safari Park

Edgy

18th June 1815

Exam

Excavation

Facile

Ferries

Grendel, by his mother

Greyfriars Bobby

Highly evolved

The house that Jack does up

Imperfect

Leavings

Lines

Litho

Marie's brill

Mayday/maybe

More dust

Ned

1956

On the granite city

On the late massacre in P ..

Panhellenic vs Illion

A precarious living

The real Bill Shakey writes a fan letter

Refugee

Return to the planet Ozyman

The riches of embarrassment

Sisters

The stolen child

Talk

A time for everything

Time's up

Tired

Traditional

A victorian

Waiting to go

Who's counting?

Wool gatherings





## Act 1. Scene 3. 1040 AD

The old women stop the two men,  
these men on their ponies, armed,  
blood-splattered, on the moor

Hail, Thorfinn called Mighty,  
Jarl of Orkney, Lord of all Islands from Man to Shetland;  
of Sutherland, of Caithness and Ross,  
blood heir of MacAlpin, feeder of wolves,  
doom of Duncan macCrinan:

though you rule for fifty years great as a king,  
and from honour choose to hold only  
the half of what you could claim,  
the breadth of your lands and the fame of your deeds  
will only last while the raven flies

Hail, Son of Life,  
sword of Gruoch, Mormaer of Moray, macFinlaech,  
furious red one, tall golden-haired one, joy of the North,

you will reign seventeen years and so settle the kingdom  
that you can pilgrim to Rome without fear of traitors  
and be rich enough to scatter alms like seed corn:  
but your kingdom will pass to one who owes  
his crown, wife and army to the Angles and Norse -

and though you will be remembered forever  
it will be through the wicked lies of your enemies:  
that you murdered an old man in his bed  
and died with no achievement, a plaything of fate

"I cannot envy your word-fame, cousin and friend,"  
said Thorfin Sigurdson.

"All blessings are mixed.  
We will both have but six feet of earth at the end,"  
said MacBeath, Righ Mor of both Scots and Picts.

## Avocados

at dusk  
in the city of Cartagena  
Cartagena of the Indies

at dusk in the old port  
where the galleons of Spain  
bellies heavy with rich pickings  
once heaved on the slow swell

at dusk  
on the stone quay  
beyond the clamour of the market,  
comfort of steaming rice and beans,

at dusk  
I passed three warehouses  
three deep barrel vaulted caves  
with their great arched doorways open  
to the sea, to the light breeze and smoldering light

and the first was filled with ripe avocados  
and the second was filled with overripe avocados  
and the third also  
was full of avocados, rotting,  
their skins polished to a hard dull sheen

enough for a hundred lifetimes  
like a great treasure of dark emeralds  
an abundance becoming worthless  
a wealth so great it turned to waste  
on the quay at Cartagena  
as the sun at the sea's edge  
spread and spoiled and sank

## Caber

For this sport you need a field,  
a damp field by a small town,  
and persistent drizzle -  
so that the ground  
on this chosen summer day  
stays soft and slippy  
and the spectators can say  
they're enjoying themselves  
despite the weather.  
And on this muddy field  
you bring together  
a pinetree or larch  
some 20 feet long  
shaved to bald straightness  
and a man who's strong, strong  
enough to pick and hoist it -  
and run about twenty yards  
with a sturdy fishwife's weight in wood  
poised against his broad shoulder  
cupped in his hands -  
and stop and stand and throw the  
pole so one end hits down  
and it flips right round before  
it smacks onto the ground.  
Now you're  
thinking it's the distance it goes that counts  
but it's not - no more  
than the colour of kilt or size of the grunt  
or how loud the pipes skirl or how many wee girls  
are jigging nearby - all that's important  
is whether it flips and how straight it lands  
and lies in a line from where it was tossed.  
Right then. Not too hard to understand  
or join in, is it? Next we'll discuss  
the dangerous sport of hurling the haggis

## The Director of the Terran Safari Park makes a statement

We know some visitors still find them amusing but most would agree that they've become pests. They've spread everywhere - and everywhere is now marked by their waste, their litter, by the mess caused by their curiosity or their strangely destructive behaviour. They were a favourite attraction, full of clever tricks if a little nasty, and seemed to pose no real problems so we were really, I admit, taken by surprise when in less than one Plutonian year their numbers grew out of control, and so did the damage to the park and specialised species. Maybe we could have acted sooner, but we, and I'm sure our fellow animal lovers, would rather we interfered as little as possible with nature: but something now must be done to manage the problem: visitors rightly want a clean-up with improved facilities and are disappointed when the park seems to have only one sort of animal. We have ruled out a cull as being too distressing to the creatures, so our experts are considering biological control, a new disease perhaps. Trust me, we'll make it as painless as possible.

## Edgy

when young he climbed trees in the dark,  
crossed frosted fields to scale barbed factory fences,  
to pad softly on the catwalks, slink slide the roofs  
balanced above the floodlights, the watchmen,  
the workfloor spied below beyond sheet-glass  
with blueprints left on benches his secret trophies -  
was this an ache for adventure or simple exploration?  
nothing wilder to do, sport without side or team,  
or merely a *why-not* adolescent arrogance?

Older, he'd climb houses when locked out  
or visiting friends, shin up drainpipes,  
squeeze onto window ledges, traverse  
gutter and roof, pick skylights -  
he did it because he could, was  
alone and reckless, intent and intense -

*because it's there, because maybe I can,  
because if I don't even think about what  
my body does then fate will hold me up,  
like swimming, like riding a bike  
like walking, like writing,  
like waking up still alive*

How strange to have sidestepped death so many times,  
so carelessly, without thought, as simple as breathing -  
and now, to go plod-plod, one foot after the other  
up the stair, across the floor, the paving,  
and every balance at height or drop somehow measuring  
the closing edge of a life's space or time -  
the willing spirit sensing weakening flesh  
waits for the grip to cramp, to slacken, to yield,  
for the fall to come as almost a hard-earned relief.

18th of June 1815

At 3 that afternoon, by the hedged lane above Hougemont Farm, Sergeant William Fraser of the 92nd Regiment, Gordon Highlanders, at 22 a veteran of five years war in Spain, was gored in his side by a French bayonet: ' he stuffed his sark into the wound and fought on.'

At 4 o'clock he stood at the corner of a square swaying unsteadily - Wellington, riding by, told him to stand still. Then the cavalry came smashing against the wall of men and muskets again and again, and artillery fire between each charge - sometime before half 5, William Fraser lay helpless, shot through both knees.

All that night, and next day and another night he lay among the great stench and groan of 40,000 men and 10,000 horses dead and dying, till he was taken to Brussels in a straw-lined cart and survived. So I exist to write this poem.

## Exam

He read the question. He understood the words.  
He should know the answer. He tapped his pencil  
on the desk. he looked at the white paper.  
The answer didn't come. He scratched his head.  
The more he thought, the less he understood.  
And that scratch had filled his fingernail  
with dandruff. He looked at it. He cleaned it off  
between his front teeth. He rubbed his head and grey flakes  
floated to the desk and settled on the paper, on the question.  
The answer, he thought, the answer is .... His head itched.  
He probed with his pencil and its point came back  
thickly crusted as if it had picked a scab. He sighed,  
shook his head to clear his thoughts. At once a cloud of dust  
dropped so dense and sudden he lost sight of his hands;  
and when it cleared he felt curiously light-headed,  
the question had become meaningless: in fact he could not  
remember what he was doing or who he was,  
and with each nod of his head more of his mind drifted away  
to fall as a fine powder on the desk and floor

## Excavation

they came to dig into the matter. they brought the familiar machines and cameras to record their revelations but although the trenches got wider and deeper no foundations emerged, no bones or artifacts they recognised. they found nothing, or perhaps nothing they understood: the hidden meaning in a simple pattern eluded them and finally all they had discovered was the extent of their own ignorance.

the local people would come to stand at the fence and watch with interest or amusement: in their faces was buried the architecture of their past. the hidden was not secret, only that generations had chosen not to remember those events they found less to their liking until they had decayed so much that even when dug up they would remain unidentified or could simply be denied to ever have existed.



## Facile

perhaps it was while you were sitting about,  
reading a newspaper, watching tv, whatever -  
you'd not noticed the bite, if that was what happened,  
certainly you'd not have noticed the germ in the air -

you know these things are there but say it doesn't bother you  
until the time the bite, the bug brings an infection  
and this worry begins to swell, to fester, to drive  
your immune, your security, system to panic,  
to over-react - for something's  
got into you that it can't understand or deal with, got  
under your skin, into your blood  
and now, without perhaps any more outward sign  
than a mild feverishness of speech,  
the tiny worms of thought are multiplying,  
breeding uncontrollably, and your own actions,  
in hot or cold blood, are spreading infection

and in an epidemic the cry is to find the enemy  
to define and isolate the other, and somehow  
it leads to the marks on doors,  
the pits filled with corpses, squads  
of the kindly ones disinfecting with chemicals and fire and gas,  
putting those suffering from humanity out of their misery.

## Ferries

1.

this is where we go out

dark river, rattling chains  
slaughtered hope of the hooter  
ebbing, ebbing

I cannot count the people, they are  
as various as endless as waves  
and follow their own moons and tides  
turning, turning

the heavy satisfaction of the dropping anchor,  
blood-red watchtower, scatter of white birds,  
the shouting, the litter, the buses, the hesitant  
light at the river's bar

this is where we come in, rising

2.

We were alone there on the upper deck, four levels above water:  
three above the huge refrigerated trucks of shellfish off to Spain:  
before us, islands in the west sank into the sea in a roar of that  
stunning red folk and photographers merge with beauty, passion, and loss

Maybe it's the size of ships has now shrunk seas to straits  
that what my parents thought of as passages are now wee hops  
but still my head seeks a satisfying definition, some edge  
to the elastic container of a word's meaning. That ferries cross

and carry over is mere dictionary - I feel they should be short -  
you should, at least, see the other bank or feel one could walk round  
if one had time, had not good sense since the age of hollowed logs  
and coracles suggested a more risky but swifter way. Maybe the word

should narrow to crossing rivers, forths and kyles  
rather than minches, north or irish seas, the bay of biscay;  
so count Glenelg, Portavadie and Dunoan, and surely the brief haul to such isles  
as Gigha or Cumbrae, to Ulva, Iona. You witterer, she says. Just look.  
The past disappearing, the future a dark shore, nearing, unseen.

## Grendel, by his mother

He wasn't a bad lad  
just a bit on the wild side.  
My marsh stepping boy with fire in his eyes,  
his great fist like iron, nails of steel.  
How he stalked the fen,  
the misty moors and wolf cliffs,  
from the darkness of the rocks from our flood  
under the earth. His shadow black beneath the clouds.  
Twelve winters I watched him  
go hunting, with that wide pouch  
I made for him from dragon skins - with these hands  
I fixed the clasps, hung it on his waist. My boy.  
My growing boy. What a hunger he had!  
He could eat a body just like that, rip it apart,  
drink its blood and swallow it down, even hands and feet.  
Twelve winters I watched him  
come home happy, drenched in blood.  
My child. My child lying there with one arm gone,  
with his shoulder torn apart, with his body burst open.  
My dead child.  
And no revenge, not a hundred grey warriors  
ripped limb from limb, can sweeten my sorrow,  
give him life again

## Greyfriars Bobby

Across from the kirkyard where he famously  
sat for months by his master's grave  
a statue on the street commemorates  
the little dog, who did not save  
a drowning man or find a missing child  
but simply stayed where no food nor  
kindly clap would ever come again -  
was this devotion or mere error?  
It seems so much a human-only thing:  
these carved memorials, where we  
praise qualities we admire but often find  
lacking in ourselves - loyalty,  
unfeigned affection, blind faith or trust -  
this says something about ourselves. for sure -  
if only that we have this deep desire  
to leave behind something that will endure.  
and words, as in this couthy tale of virtue,  
can stand the test of time as well  
as cast metal or stone, Enjoy story and statue  
but then ask yourselves who, among  
themselves, do the dogs admire,  
and for why, and how, and for how long?

## Highly evolved

One for sorrow ... a magpie leaps onto the grass  
sure of his part on the world's stage  
and cocks his head sideways to fix me with a hard sharp eye:  
Raptor, he says, Jurassic Park - I can do that -  
and he lifts one claw up, treading air, then struts  
in a bouncing run, head stretched forward - How's that?  
Cats edge away, dogs won't push it -  
Sure, lizards and crocs do pretty good impressions too  
but they're a bit, what'd you say, stuck in the mud,  
who wants to be crawling or needs a beak-full of teeth ,  
- yes, I think we came out best - as for you  
what thatcher, forager, weaver's our equal?  
body weight for brain who's really got the bigger?

when it comes to survival, you cheeky overgrown monkey,  
it's not size that matters, it's what you do  
with what you've got

## The house that Jack does up

This is the house of builder Jack  
there's a skip at the front and a shambles at the back,  
there's bags of cement stacked to block the pavement,  
and a heap of rotten timber, cracked and bent  
and leant on the fence by the plastic sacks  
full of mouldy plaster and rusty tacks.

There's a sand-dune in the gutter that's clogging up the drains,  
there's a little cement-mixer (hailed inside each time it rains)  
and the skip that squats like a toad in the road  
gets filled till it spills its overflowing load  
and a crumbling muddle of grimy rubble  
tumbles off to huddle in mud-befuddled puddles  
or slides down the street in a dusty tide..  
but it's worse inside -

behind the front door is a furious tangle  
of wood and metal at curious angles,  
there's a hole in the floor and loose pipes dangle  
from the tattered battered ceiling down to the mangled  
clutter stored in the hall -  
broken skirtingboards and gutters  
wall to wall -just waiting to fall ...

This is the house that Jack is fixing  
he's pulled the inside out and put bits of it back in,  
he's hammering, banging, heaving, mixing,  
chucking muck out and humping new bricks in,  
slapping plaster on like an elephant's thick skin  
to cover up cracks deep as ditches in the kitchen  
for

this is the house that Jack is mending,  
the time he's spending is heart-rending  
it seems the work is never-ending  
drilling, screwing, sawing, bending,  
each job that's done  
leads on to another one:

all he's doing  
is make the house a ruin.

## imperfect

he gathered his tools and brushed up the dust and shavings.  
it was reasonably good, he thought, despite a nagging discontent,  
and certainly most of the floor was firm  
but everything was getting old, warped, out of joint;  
a careless slip or misplaced foot might cause real damage:  
scarred discs no longer support the spine  
splintered tongue no longer grips the groove

he sat on the stair.  
it creaked beneath his weight  
and there was also a satisfaction  
to know nothing could be perfected

## Leavings

No-one knows what they'll leave behind,  
the praised poem is forgotten, the pot crumbles,  
the cunning metalwork corrodes, the estates are worn away -  
what will we be remembered by?

Though all are equally dead, history it seems cannot  
cope with so many, such a richness of lives,  
and boils a generation down to acts of blood,  
great betrayals, those heroisms flattered by the press  
or found convenient to a politician's cause -  
whatever happened, whatever was achieved, the voices of the dead  
are censored, simply left out: unmentioned in footnotes,  
anecdotes, indexes, they fade to silence.

Of course this is surface, gloss of fame, a gaudy show  
that what's important is what the so-called important do.  
It cuts us out and lets us off the hook. But what if we accept  
that each act, each look of ours, is part of real history,  
forms part of lives and choices other than our own  
and moves them to be this not that, here not there, now not then;  
that all is still as it was before the priests and scribes  
and we are recorded in the minds and bodies of the living  
in the tales they tell of us to those we'll never know



## Lines

- *Can I tell you something?* -

the child is crouched on the gravel,  
trying to catch stubby-tailed frogs in the shallows. It's hot:  
the River Teith drifts under the high banks of Doune  
in a stunned shimmer and tiny fish  
swarm and swerve over the flat rocks at my feet  
like the shoals of words dancing from the boy's mouth  
or swimming through my head as I try to grasp  
a pattern of thought, to fish out how to cast the lines,  
to comprehend the patience and the craft  
it takes to land poems with such seeming ease.  
But the words turn and twist and are lost in shadows  
and return with the same swirling restless flow  
wondrous, beautiful, yet not fit to net;  
and a heron rises and flaps away with a great cry  
that mocks all the small words and the boy  
stops blethering to answer it with a fluent echo.  
And so it is, imitation and babble till the voice  
finds itself. But at least the boy spoke to the heron  
and the heron certainly  
knew what she wanted to say.

- *Can I tell you something:*  
*if you could find me a piece of string, a hook, then -*

but we have only our hands and the words  
wheel and scud, beyond our control,  
and in the unreachable mid-stream the idea,  
the magic dancer with a golden gift in its mouth,  
leaps and is lost to sight,  
and whether I wanted it or not  
this is what has found its shape from the flurried waters,  
and whatever else I told you would be an echo of what  
you know already, having known so many rivers,  
even that wide one the heron sought,  
and before we reach there, we can only take  
joy in the fishing, whatever we catch.

## litho-cracy

In this corridor a long shelf bears the heads of many emperors  
and folk remark odd facial features or the sculptor's skill:  
a gallery of graven images of self appointed gods,  
the constant, of their day, reminders of who's in control;  
most barely remembered now, but for exotic infamy.  
In nearby rooms there's more - the body posed in the usual ways  
to mime valour, strength, authority, occasionally wisdom,  
it's all the standard show unchanged for centuries;  
and in the courtyard outside or in tips beyond  
are thousands more relics of similar publicity,  
giant body parts hacked and dismembered,  
elephantine thighs, fingers larger than men;  
and in the streets and squares stand others more recent,  
of smaller scale if not of less vanity or ambition,  
lifted on plinths as if to avoid eye contact,  
monuments to flattery of power or wealth, not virtue,  
most more forgotten than the unearthed caesars.  
But stone misleads us into thinking that mere substance,  
the garlanded idol, the object of adoration or subjection,  
what can be pulled down, smashed, buried, is the thing itself -  
time will deal with what has passed - meanwhile  
a million images in film and print project the status,  
the celebrity, of our present rulers,  
the messages they want to ingrain repeated and repeated  
till they are as accepted as those stamped on coins,  
till they congeal in the mind, their lies embedded,  
the constant drip of their myths set as concrete  
as hard and onerous to shift as stone

**marie's brill** *(after Apollinaire's Marizibill)*

in the playground after school  
she stands by the wall and waits,  
bites her lip, wonders who'll  
say what to who; if her mates  
think she's a wee slag or dead cool.

at the corner of the yard  
fingers intertwine like snakes,  
she looks clingy, he looks hard,  
life is full of such mistakes -  
as soon as we start we're scarred.

what we want too much we get  
rarely does it match our dreams  
and not as we'd imagined it  
we are the victims of our schemes,  
choices we choose to forget -

but such is life, get on with it.  
what's to regret?

## Mayday

It does seem rather odd to me  
that this springtime festivity  
with dancing round a ribboned tree  
should have been chosen to be  
a signal for distress at sea.

But then again - happiness  
is what saves us from distress.

## Maybe

May bees thrive!  
For if bees do not survive  
to be the blossom's go-between  
to ferry life from tree to tree,  
if they do not help flower to berry,  
seed and fruit, maybe one year  
there'll be no May

## More dust

He runs the damp cloth along the tops of things,stuff,  
a book-shelf, a picture frame, a desk - now  
a door's mouldings, a skirtingboard's rim, top of a tv, -

there's always something there- a thin grey crust  
of uncountable years of ground-down matter, pulverised dinosaurs,  
exploded stars, trillions of crushed ammonites, the burnt fragments  
of humans constantly slaughtering each other over centuries,  
of those parts of a young bomber that torched as his plane  
was blown up over Kiel after fire should have ceased,  
of shredded skin from a girl who smashed down into pavement,  
of the fallout from Thira, Hiroshima, Chernobyl,  
the exhausted particles from trucks on the motorway,  
the blown soil that holds centuries of my folk - of some their ash,  
of others' bones, discarded rags, some gristle a gut could not hold.  
the winds' sieving of fields in the Lothians, the Buchan plain:  
this dirt is us, is our people and their lives and labour,  
they and we are and will be the earth, the dirt, the dust

Here then is comfort: there is no thing but time will grind it fine,  
In truth in dust we will all meet and travel endlessly -  
disease, weight, width, deformity, infirmity - irrelevant.

A year after his mother died, his father stopped dusting :  
after decades of tidying. He said - you don't notice  
the difference when no-one's moving around, I sit here,  
by the window, watching the past fall into the garden  
and only wish I had kept her ashes to hold to myself-

And when he also died there was no point in holding on  
or even placing his ash anywhere in particular, for sure  
not with his forbears in the deep lair on the Calton Hill,  
for he would only have wanted to be where she was -  
and she was not under Mormond Hill, she was not anywhere

She was lost to the wind and he joined her and  
now they are everywhere forever and so long as dust falls  
and I breathe  
they are with me

## Ned

was always swanky, started young  
lifting gear from smart clothes shops  
stealing stuff to impress the street  
snazzy, wicked, the right labels, neat;  
went on to swagger round the clubs  
liked his suits sharp as his blade  
cutting deals and cutting a dash -  
classy style, just this side of flash;  
he thought he had it made  
the cash, the clothes, the attitude -  
respect and fame were sure to come.

However hard you act, whatever you put on,  
we're all the same soft stuff underneath.  
He forgot this and came to grief,  
fell out with his unpleasant friends  
and this is where his story ends  
down the river without a boat  
a fashion victim in a concrete overcoat

1956

The fire in the stove growls:  
I crouch in the flittering light  
with a hammer wrapped in a cloth,  
cracking to mouth-size chunks  
the brownblack coalhard smokesmelling  
sheet of treacle toffee;  
across the room my sisters  
dook for green apples bobbing in a pail,  
giggling and spluttering, shaking wet hair;  
above them more apples, jiggling on strings,  
dangle from the drying rack  
and in the doorway stands my mother, laughing,  
and she  
and we all  
are ghosts

## On "*The Granite City*"

By mid-morning everything was stale in the compartment -  
the smell - so many bodies stuck for so many hours in so  
small a space, the sandwiches, the conversation, gone stale -  
the games all played, books read, legs itching,  
the window clouded grey and the smoke still pluming past -  
to open it to get air or see the sea was, don't be, stupid.

I went into the corridor, the train shaking like a rattlesnake's spine,  
stood with my back to the woodwork by the carriage door, yanked  
the thick worn leather strap from its brass peg and, who cares?, let  
the glass drop in a sudden scary shudder. Stuck my head out.

And the world woke, roaring. The train was rounding  
a wide bend in the Mearns, I could see, at the end of the curve,  
so far away at the end  
of the tense tilting wall of carriages  
it seemed to have nothing to do with me riding its lurching tail,  
the engine like a huge maddened beast spitting cinder and soot,  
sweating oil and water, hurtling to doom or Aberdeen

and the whole heaving clatter,  
the heavy drumming rumble of wheel and piston,  
all the pounding jolting rattling thumping through me  
wild with dreams watching  
the sunlight spread across the flat farmlands and splash the grey windows  
and the air full of the ripening grass and the sea on the wind whipped  
in the smoky surge of the going, going



## On the late massacre in P....

If they had had tentacles or three heads  
we would have treated them with more respect,  
if they had had exoskeletons or antennae  
uncertainty would have stayed our hands

but in their shapes we saw our own vulnerability  
in their faces we saw our own fear and treachery  
they were so like us. How could we be sure  
that we would not, in time, become them,  
given time, that they would not become us.

And then how would we know ourselves,  
be chosen and unique in all the universe?  
So we killed them - once we started  
the moans, the screaming, the red mist of blood  
certainly made them seem different; and then it was easy,  
as easy as killing ourselves.

## Panhellenic v. Ilion *[an extract]*

and now brave Hector traps the passing ball  
and forward urges it beneath his speeding feet  
as when a flame the winding valley fills  
and runs on crackling shrubs between the hills  
so he outpaces all the grim pursuit until  
bold Ajax closes in, but with a cunning feint,  
a stabbing lunge, he parries the fierce challenge and  
cuts free, and careless of the cries to cross  
from Paris in midfield or of the roared insults  
from mocking hordes of terraced Myrmidons  
he reckless storms through the greek defence  
as pressed with hunger from the mountains brow  
descends a lion on the flocks below,  
till his great rival, furious to engage  
rushes on him regardless, but with one sudden swerve  
he leaves godlike Achilles sprawling on the grass  
clutching his ankle, raging at the ref  
who, just arbiter, rules play on -  
now only Agamemnon between the posts  
protects the sacred depths of his webbed cave  
and he, made reckless by the impetuous hero's charge,  
comes out to meet him but in vain, for Hector,  
guided by the gods, slides sideways to the left  
and with a mighty blow, boots the ball into the net

".. a precarious living.."\*

For a while it seemed like he was never off the chat shows, one of those minor celebrities who tell much the same story, who are asked all the same questions, each time they appear. The press called him a character - his tales of wild adventure went well with his mild manners and soft Irish speech and as for his boast of being 'the only man Hook feared' of course none of his shipmates were around to disagree. 'A cuddly old villain' wrote the reporters, and indeed as he, with that now well-known sad smile, sat polishing his spectacles, it was easy to forget just how many folk he'd casually killed, skewered, ripped and gutted with his cutlass Corkscrew Jenny. Of course he blamed everything on his deprived childhood, or on Hook - there was talk of a film, a book, - you know the sort of stuff that lily-livered landlubbers like, comfortably rough. So what went wrong? It wasn't Tiger Lily's complaints - the cruelties of a small war with faraway natives don't interest the British tabloids, and it wasn't Peter Pan - talk of such a person was kept with the weird stuff - the alien kidnappings, UFO sightings - good for a slightly uneasy laugh. But then the lost boys were found, or found themselves and their voices and what they told of his misdeeds, especially with a little girl, turned the press nasty, began a savage frenzy for his head. "Worse than crocodiles, them journalists," Smee said, from his cell.

\* *Peter Pan, Chapter 15*

## The real Bill Shakey Spears writes a fan letter

Shall I, like, say you're like a summer day?  
you seem to me more like an Ibiza night -  
you're alright. I sit here for hours and play  
your cd over and over in the failing light

on our kid's smart stereo after school -  
it's raining again - I get lost deep  
in the music and your voice - like a warm pool  
or cave where I can hide out, half-asleep

and dream of running with you, hand in hand  
like in your video I saw on MTV,  
to dance at the sea's edge. I like sand,  
sun and loud sounds - I just want to feel free -

anywhere but here - could we meet in June?  
My auntie has a caravan near Troon.

## Refugee

who remembers being a baby  
and what does a baby remember ?

the smell of straw or the fearful voices  
the urgent whispers in the cold alley,  
first sight of the sky shouting with stars?

you'll remember none of this,  
not even the warmth of your mother  
the soft strength of her arms

not the smell of her milk or the mountain herbs  
or the slow unsteady rocking of the donkey,  
hour after hour, day after day, mile after mile,

not the hidden paths through the hills,  
the crossing of deserts or great rivers,  
none of the adventures, none of the difficulties,

because you are new to this world  
no land is stranger than another  
and years later, when your mother comes to you

where you're playing, her voice excited,  
you are happy in her strange delight  
but you do not understand back or home

## Return to the Planet Ozyman

The desert stretched to the horizon, bare and empty - only two vast blocks of stone stood on its level sands. Old, decayed, like pillars from a ruined temple; we were sure something had made them when this land had life. But searching in their shadows we found simply nothing, no sign of who or what had raised them here. There was just a knobby rounded rock, lying half-sunk near there, its huge hacked surface split by deep cuts that seemed to sneer, and on a slab beneath them we saw marks that might have sometime been words: man or king perhaps, perhaps mighty and despair. It was not important. This world was wrecked, by who and why no-one could know. It was cold. We were getting bored. It was then the odd-shaped rock yawned, opened wide blind eyes and wrinkled lips. "Put me back on my legs at once!" it roared.

## The riches of embarrassment

He was used to praise - Ottar the Black and Sighrat Thordarson  
nightly sang his bloody conquests and the quantity of carrion  
but these fawning courtiers were talking nonsense

so he had them carry him in his chair down the shingle beach  
and set him before the incoming tide. He tried to keep his face straight  
as he spoke to the water licking his feet.

He ruled three kingdoms and two seas, this son of Svein Forkbeard,  
had a dry sense of humour, was shrewd in managing men and opinion.  
His thin nose sniffed at the salty wind, he thought

this will make a good story - he could hear it already  
and it was worth getting his feet wet, it was worth  
more than any laws, more than a thousand soldiers:

after two centuries of war, after the constant intrigue,  
pointless violence and irresolution of the english earls,  
after Ethelred the Ill-advised, the betrayed Edmund Ironside,

he needed all to trust his justice, his judgement. So he sat there,  
his Norse bodyguards to get the joke, his English bishops to get  
the message.  
Then he raised his hand, and soaked, shame-faced men lifted him.

## Sisters

1.

The battered rubber balls  
beat on the wall beside  
the kitchen door. The sisters  
stand side by side  
weaving patterns in air:  
unapproachable, almost frightening  
in their passionate intensity.

2.

The sisters are in the bathroom.  
Has it been an hour, or more?  
Their muffled voices slide under the door  
in a swoon of scented steam.  
Are they splashing water at each other?  
are they bombing sponges with the soap?  
No. They are forced by strange madness  
to become totally spotless and clean.

3.

The upturned table is a fine raft, its thick round legs  
good to swing on as high seas surge and heave. One sister  
brings the tablecloth to spread draped over the legs,  
to keep off the sun as we drift to desert islands. Another  
brings a toy teapot and tiny cups, the third  
clammers aboard with a shipwrecked doll. The raft  
sails on, the sailor expects pirates any minute, but now  
a greater danger threatens - the sisters have made themselves at home,  
are thoughtlessly running off for this and that,  
and either they are walking on water or we've just run aground.



## Sisters/2

4.

The sisters are out to the shops. And though  
no-one is around he hides  
behind the armchair, nervous of discovery.  
His hands move stealthily as he begins  
to explore the strange and secret  
world of their comics.

5.

The sisters are not just girls. They are not  
impressed by his tricks. Like oracles  
they look through him with a knowing indifference.

6.

He's feeling big. He's just kissed the girl  
old enough to have a saturday job at the cafe on the links.  
His sisters and hers run around the echoing house,  
disturbing dreamy rooms and gloomy corridors,  
shrieking the news with their hands at their mouths,  
giggling madly between outrage and delight.

## The stolen child

The swollen moon hangs behind bare trees, it shrieks  
No, no. wake up! Its light sobs across the bedroom floor -  
Look, look! but the parents are sleeping, deep, deep -  
The owl is sitting in the tree, eyes sharp and shouting -  
Look, look! But nothing will rouse them

And the child is dancing on the grass, grubby stubby feet.  
The snowdrops glimmer, frozen bells, icy tinkle, lullaby.  
Wake now, parents, humans, now, now, wake  
though sleep is soft and blue and deep as long long years under earth,  
the owl warns, the moon moans, wake now, now

In a shimmer of silver, what or who moves here  
not quite seen, laughing in the lure of flickering light,  
songs soft as nettles, green hooded cloaks

away. away,

under the hill the queen is waiting,  
gleaming circlet, dagger of bronze,  
o child, o child

## Talk

We cannot live with ourselves,  
we feel alone, we need  
a reassurance -  
new gods, barbarians or slaves.

Machines speak for us to the stars,  
metal ears flower in the fields,  
listening. We are waiting,  
please, say something, anything.

What do we want to hear,  
we who have not learned  
to talk to each other,  
to ourselves?

Yet we are so anxious, and soon  
we'll go out there, stand shouting  
in the dark under the lighted windows;  
thinking the further we are from here  
the closer, the louder, will be the voices.

We want to hear talk -  
to feel, to see, is not enough  
to fill the haunted hole of silence:  
suspecting we are deceived, rejected,  
we watch the stars, the moonlit ceiling -  
talk to me, we say, talk to me.

## A time for everything

He stood up, glanced at the paper before him on the table, cleared his throat, looked straight ahead, and began to speak.

How he liked this subject, how well he understood it, how sure he was that everyone, anyone would find it interesting

His voice rose with excitement, with pleasure in explaining his pleasure, perhaps even pleasure in his own voice

his speech, which today was so fluid, so commanding, spinning an entrancing, glittering web of words. He stopped precisely.

He smiled with satisfaction. He looked towards the window. Never he felt, had he spoken so clearly, been so witty, so engaging.

A small voice asked what was for breakfast.  
The cat scratched itself. Saturday morning.

## Time's up

Close your eyes, snuggle down.  
Today is finished with, there's no  
time left to do a drawing, read a book,  
no shops open to go out and buy  
that tacky toy all your pals have,  
no light outside to play the game  
that will set right the mistakes you've made.  
The day is over, what's not done  
will have to wait. You've not got to the moon  
or raced up mountains on a bike - well,  
never mind. That's what tomorrows are for.  
Sleep now so the wounds of the day can heal  
and when you wake up you'll be strong again,  
and after our dreams we can try once more,  
you and me, both the same. But now  
our time's up. Let's meet  
the other side of sleep and start again.

## Tired as Tiresias

I who have foresuffered all  
and sat among the dead before the wall  
know no reason why there should  
be any excuse. Look, in this haunted wood  
we are all equal in fault and despair  
and only lack of understanding gives us airs.

For my mistakes, all grievous once,  
are old friends now, my doings as dunce  
or worse, once over, are the past  
and only in the future, maybe, at last  
can recompense be made, although  
it would be daft to think it would be to those  
to whom the hurt was given. As for hell  
we make it most ourselves, expecting our well-  
being, self-esteem and pride  
to be somehow the magic that will override  
the proper needs of others

To see ourselves straight is to discover  
the worst of everything, that all  
we touch can rot and sour and fall -  
but this is how it is. Know your best,  
learn when you fail, to hell with the rest

## Traditional

It's a cruel sport, but very ancient. In the gloaming herdsman gather in an open field, a level field with no trees or walls to the south east. They bring a picnic of soup or porridge in an iron pot and set out large bowls and spoons on a folding table. Their dogs chase each other in the failing light but the men move slowly, without rush or fuss or idle gestures, until the moon rises, full and bright. Then one brings out a fiddle and tests its tune, softly playing some old sad song. Another sets down a sack whose contents squirm and hiss. Some look at the moon as if sizing it up for market, others watch the gate. So they wait. They are used to waiting. They call their dogs to heel. The gate opens and an old man leads in a cow. The moonlight gleams on her flanks, on the small silver crescent hung around her neck. Now the men begin to show excitement, praising the cow's long strong legs and slapping hands to seal their bets. And now they get behind the cow, and the fiddler's tune speeds up, his gnarled hand whips the music to a wild whirl while the men stamp big-booted feet, whoop and yell till the cow starts to run down the field in a panic towards the man with the sack, to run faster, faster and faster fleeing the frenzied fiddle, the shouting, the manic baying and waving, faster and faster till its long legs gallop in a powerful stride, till the man on the ground slits open the sack, and the cat leaps out, and the cow can't stop in the face of this sudden spitting fury and so it jumps. Right into the sky. Amazingly high. And that's that, more or less. The men stand shading their eyes or point up, for a while. There are murmurs of satisfaction. Then they eat, wooden spoons clattering as they feed. And if you ask them, they say - ' only we who breed such beasts can understand this sport' - or - ' the cow enjoys it'; and on the bigger question, of what happens when the animal comes down, they are silent, simply shrug, as if it was of no importance.

## A Victorian

George Calder, merchant in the Canongate, was born ten years after Victoria Imp & R. but, like that queen, he also inherited the family business in his eighteenth year. As her empire prospered, so did his trade: the year after Prince Albert died, he married and was photographed (more bemused than grave) having moved from crowded close and narrow street first to the New Town, then when the railways and his family grew, south to the suburbs. They had nine children: common to those days, three died young. Ordinary might be the word for his life. But no-one's is. For one thing: six of the children were born in the thirteen years before they married - very privately, almost exactly a year after his mother's death. For another: In 1889 George was found lying by the railway line near Colinton on Christmas Eve - dragged from the platform by his tail-coat, caught in a carriage door. Carried home, the summoned doctors chose to amputate his injured leg, at midnight on his fine dining table, and that killed him. My grandfather, who watched, was eight.



## Waiting to go to Arima

At the bus station  
the passengers for Arima  
form a long quivering snake  
whose head has been trapped  
in high metal barriers, baited by  
the empty bay.

Three bus drivers arrive  
and standing outside the grille  
begin to chant "Only trust him",  
which the smallest of them  
follows with a stomping sermon  
on "Let there be light".

The queue observes them  
with polite murmurs  
and the tolerance extended  
by those bored by waiting  
to buskers anywhere.

At last the preacher  
calls on us to pray  
for our deliverance,  
and in the soggy heat  
a deep murmur rises  
wordless, heartfelt,

and the bus to Arima  
snarling its gears

drowns out the Amen.

## Who's counting?

Dear future reader, these words are written in the one thousand nine hundred and ninety ninth year of our era measured from the supposed date of birth of a religious figure but this will be little help to you - he left no buildings, only ideas, and ideas pass through time like ghosts through walls. To add to your problem I should point out that though most use this time scale to share technology there are at least four others currently in use and to many this is the year 1420, counting from a journey made by another religious figure. Lest this seem unscientific, too much like the ancient practice of measuring time by the reigns of rulers, there are others who claim to reckon from the creation of the world, but for some this was 7508 years ago and for others 5759, and regrettably both are wrong by several thousand million years. You can see the problem, it's always the same, there has to be a point a year zero to start counting from, and even our atomic clocks accurate to the click of cosmic decay, do not fix us in a universal year. And who knows, by the time you read this, our counting may have stopped, like the Maya, whose impeccable time-keeping became unimportant on the 1,756,712th day of their long count, when the Spanish invaders finally destroyed the last city of the Itza and smashed their temples and observatories. To the conquistadores this was the fourteenth of March, in the year 1697 of our age: the numbers they counted with they had learnt from the Arabs, who had ruled them for 500 years; the month was named after a god of the Roman empire, which had collapsed a thousand years before, after 1200 years of counting from the foundation of their city.

You see how it is with us. Despite rotating constantly with sun and moon politics and religion have controlled our time, both usually through war. Still, there's some hope - it seems an era can start for any reason, any time; so why not by anyone? I'd like to have some more. After Burns, perhaps, or Blake, someone not bound by empire, faith or state. start from my mum, her grandad, your or your child's birth- or perhaps, since counting years reveals the sorry waste of time and every day is new under the sun, not bother - and live always in year one.

## Wool gatherings

on the hillside, the drystone wall  
sprawls beneath its fleece of moss.  
the stones have memories but do not dream,  
they have been at rest for hundreds of years.  
the grass shudders, the flock of clouds run before the moon.  
in the crook, the sheltering bend in the arm of the wall,  
on the chilly sheet of frost, are the sheep  
sitting out the night as unmoving as white boulders,  
slipping in and out of sleep as simply as clouds scud by the moon  
but what are the dreams of sheep?

\*

the constant wind has hushed to whisper. the soft  
summer light of the long dusk comforts the eye.  
the huge sea pulses, more felt than heard.  
the boy with the yellow bucket comes up the slope  
of scrubby pasture, followed by some thirty sheep.  
no dog. no shouts. only the dry rattle of what's  
in the pail and the assenting murmur of his flock.



## Dave Calder

Dealers and dancers

Cube

Fingerbook of Thumb

Me, jane & KONG

Duplicated

Leaf of Mouth

Spaced

The Batik Poems

Continents

Buchan

Islands

Theorems of Violence

Passages

A Garden for Dracula

Snake Songs

The Walls

Spaceman

Delivered

Dolphins leap Lampposts

A big bunch





