

# dave calder

These are poems from the pamphlets  
**april** and **xii**  
*[1973, 1974]*  
and others first published at that time  
in anthologies or magazines  
which were not later published in collections



I am sitting thinking chewing  
a rancid morsel of dismay  
when she comes in  
and it is hard not to sniff at her  
trace her other lovers' scents  
maul her memories  
But they would not die, and it  
is better to accept her  
not even desiring  
understanding: for fear whispers  
falsetto in all hidingholes,  
comparison makes rodents  
of us all. Quivering, angry  
or dishonestly submissive,  
we bite our own tails

outside the squared city, my walls  
herds of unladen lorries wait  
to race into new lands.  
my hopes are like jammed trafficlights.

small floods appal a rotting branch.  
to feed the new the spring devours  
what winter left.

the game's different.  
checked kings sacrifice themselves to pawns.

yet here i sit between the come & gone  
defending both their pieces, feeding off memories,  
& though the sweetness still remains  
corpselike it catches in the throat.

on my own i must raise this siege  
since i sit at both sides of the board.  
to wait with the spring will be to wait till autumn.

better to leave the board, the citadel  
get in the first lorry drive off  
risk the crash

## **under the cathedral**

he left the house, shuddering with slammed doors,  
set off down the street, gloriously alone

and found the consul in one of his various disguises  
not disagreeable but drunk  
his eyes bulging as if they still faced  
the stiletto sun of quauhnahuac

leaning a little too carefully upon the railings  
staring with the raging gentleness of those who have  
nobody them with, who are already set separate from world  
trapped in the circle of themselves  
themselves all worlds

staring  
at the chalked statement, yellow on the wall,

more chill  
than any biblical command,  
more warm than any hope of heaven;

it is not possible to live without love

in the forecourt the gravel turns  
into paved roads and deserts  
a small white stone into a mosque  
a grey pebble to a peasant's hut

but then as sudden as the sun there is

this broken twig, loitering  
at the edge of the imagined road  
too big to be ignored, too small  
to be no part of the new landscape

and you sit  
and you think what can that be  
and no imagination  
can make it anymore than a twig

and all the huts and mosques and roads collapse  
and all just are what they were and are  
stones gravel pebbles

so smooth so uneven  
so amazing in the sunlight

and indeed every imagination  
should have a twig like this

## Tullimet 1973

A grey day. Roaring winds.  
The snow has hardly thawed.  
A calm voice from Aberdeen suggests  
breeding more deer for sunday dinner.  
Stench of the scorched whitestone  
reek of the burnt rooftree.

Behind this house for forty miles  
sheep huddle in razed villages  
and graze moorgrass where gardens were,  
while to the south for fifteen miles  
the deer and grouse alone may make  
a home within the fences and the wire.

How do lands come to this: prison farms  
where wealthy warders breed whatever stock,  
human, sheep, game, trees, will raise most profit,  
then slaughter till all's gone to sustain their crude economy?

I go outside choking. A great white light  
rises from Strathbran, blinding out the hills,  
pinpointing each sheep and deer and tree and me.  
World so sharp. so alive.  
Trapped, awaiting consumption

I am drinking tea  
with the woman in the house  
across the road  
and wishing I knew her better

or should I say  
I and the woman in the house  
across the road

are drinking tea at the same time  
sitting at our respective tables  
looking at each other  
across the road,

which is wide and full of rain.

## In Nottingham *[for Chas]*

dusk discourages inaction. instead  
there is a grim chill swirling the  
homegoers, fragments  
of burnt paper, drifting without  
volition up the flues of buses,  
listless nervous morbid among  
the ashes of this fumey evening

sad clowns dominate the junction  
slightly contorted their masks  
more than a joke

not quite despair, and yet we still  
convince ourselves that we have  
purpose direction even destination  
within our fluttering control

none perhaps more foolishly than me

In this tangled world who knows what causes anything,  
why there are pigeons, why when we meet  
it's in a bar and Tuesday,  
why we ever met, why we have shape at all

Some said that seven lame men keep the world  
intact, and that great minds make the roses grow,  
maybe a blackened tree is holding the city up  
and one worm coiled in its roots supports our love,

and something, some stray dog perhaps,  
gives me life, experience ... and I wonder what  
I am keeping in existence without knowing it.

The questions come and I cannot answer  
which is as well, for if I could we both and maybe  
everything would find its reason  
and could we face that? But curiously ...

## **through one door - the maze - out through another**

the small door opens & in you come

millions of lives in the make of your body  
millions of thoughts in the threads of your brain  
millions of years in the most  
minute bit of your blood

the small door opens & in you come:

carrying the past through the wall into present  
carrying the gene that made the maze of your body  
carrying the questions; how  
why & what's best to survive

the small door opens & in you come:

millions of years you've been changed to get here  
& you know what to do

the gene opens your mouth & the cells shout food

(later they will teach you other hungers

maybe we are always here & nothing was ever done  
or we exist only for moments while universes collide

but how should this concern us, flickering

between streetlight & shadow  
the party and the vomiting

who are creating our worlds  
out of our every pause, each

small collision of hand or eye,

& whose every small decision  
fixes us and that moment in time

## St. Augustine's Bride

for ten centuries he has encouraged her  
to sit this way, hands folded  
by the lily pool; her white gown  
freezing the light, her face demure,  
downcast: she has been taught  
to mask the fever of her eyes.

around her feet gross lies have gathered,  
tales of love's suffering, of joy  
in pain, how love deepens through obstacles,  
of pride in lack of consummation.

the saint sits by her, his fingers twitch  
towards his crotch, his eyes  
sneak this way that way heavenwards,  
each fibre in his body strives  
towards that which he still denies.

till finally she sets  
her embroidery aside:  
i have been cheated and  
we are not talking of the same thing  
you and i  
she says

such strange trees  
glorious & deformed  
our fantasies sprout  
in cones & livid flowers

but though these can  
be snapped or wither  
no heavy foot or hand  
can break our dreams

which are not found in branch or root  
but everywhere like  
dew or rain unstoppable

they seek their sea

## a complex solution

from the grove at colonus  
what sight threw the kings hand  
across his eyes when the dread mothers  
received their prodigal?

a naked old man dead on grass

a seeing  
of that which governs without  
authority or claim,  
of the paths of the labyrinth  
and the thread he must follow  
in amaze and humility

before he  
as any  
fated wanderer  
finds home

## **small fairy story**

& after 5 years in the cave  
he managed to delight  
the dwarf sat on his shoulder  
sufficiently to allow  
the small hole to be enlarged

& in this way he crawled  
through all the cloudy avalanche  
finally pushing aside  
the last stone & the dwarf  
emerging

on the overgrown planet:  
nervous of spring  
he takes the coins & candle, goes  
in any direction, stepping over

the sleeping forms  
of guardian angels  
& other such hustlers

## Opportunity

shriveled by thirst & here  
a hairy fat  
cow whose udder's alarmingly full

at moments such as this who fears  
an absence of technique must leave  
his bloated desire to distantly ruminant

while the fearless unthinking can put  
head between legs & cheerfully  
suck

satisfying myself spent  
cold days and nights away  
from the rubberplant

what can cherish so  
many things at once ?

i only help that which  
never leaves it - such  
a careless servant

[and part-time too]

## wet afternoon

this afternoon i wear rubber boots  
protection from rising floods outside  
and electric surgings here within.  
cats ease across the nervous  
carpet to be stroked, friends that take  
your time and hands away from you

out in a brainstorm, under trees  
in waterfall, i find the mangled corpse  
of my earlier thoughts surrounded

by policemen. their faces are severe  
they are maybe the faces of my friends

they also say i murdered him. there  
is a rubberboot mark in his mouth.

hanged man in a dripping tree  
stares upward from a puddle  
catching rain in upturned palms  
strangely empty rubber strongholds

## a story

There was a street - small houses squeezed together on a stony road staggering up a hillside.

And in the street lived an old couple:  
the woman marked by grey hair bearding her chin,  
sturdy, full-faced, a black mole on her cheek -  
if a child said hello to her, his friends  
would jeer - ugly, ugly - you know how children are.  
But there was a thing that upset all the street,  
the clacking tongues, the eyes behind the curtains,,

the houses had no inside loos, and naturally  
the old kept a night bucket to save them cold dark journeys,  
but in the morning - this was her great sin,  
instead of carrying it out the back, she'd haul  
her bucket out the front, lift up the grid  
and pour its contents down the public drain.  
In a street like that, nothing can be done  
early enough to avoid notice. She was despised.

But, one day, she didn't appear. No metal bucket clanging, slop-sloshing,  
no crash as the grid fell back. Not that day, or the next, or the next.  
The curtains quivered with a different apprehension. And on the  
third day,  
the women at their work-talk, their doorstep scrubbing, sent a  
young lad  
legging over the backwall, shinning up a drainpipe,  
in at a window. And when he opened the front door  
his face showed triumph mixed with fright - so they found the  
couple lying,  
fully dressed, in bed; laid out, it seemed, and the house a cess of  
well-aged smells

## A story/2

They cleaned all day, the windows open, shouting to each other, shooing the curious children, the loitering men, joking, cleaning, cleaning till the house had their approval, felt, smelt and looked just as it should.

Then they went home. But every other day  
one or other would come to flick a duster, let air in, keep it right.  
When the old returned -- it turned out that they'd been dying  
of forgetfulness mixed with hunger and old age --  
a sense of satisfaction was in the street, a sense of their own value,  
dignity -- not smug, not spoken, but there.

The next morning, at first curtain tweak,  
there she was again, the old woman,  
slopping her bucket out the front.  
And all those same neighbours cracked about her,  
turned their heads, despised her once again.

The story ends there. No moral. What it says about ourselves is what we always knew.

A peasant tale perhaps, Italian villagers, South American?  
No. This was Peter's story. From Liverpool.

And the street has been pulled down.

## **worknotes.**

1.

work that is work  
is not the work  
the work is play

2.

when you cannot make it sing  
in you or move in dance,

whose funeral are you walking to  
what urges on your hand?

that you are paid makes you slave  
to everything you then can buy

for every shop's the companies' store  
when the companies rule the land.

3.

people can screw dead bodies  
said the crazy lady  
but  
they never feed them

so much  
for a society of useable people  
doing tasks they cannot resist.

4.

what hands are these making baskets of broken reeds  
or striving to build high with slime?  
whose minds are these so far now from the ground  
their owners build where none will even enter ?

who moves a cog or turns a wheel  
that makes desires not basic needs

## worknotes. 2

shoves on the belt of debris & decay;  
and he who strikes to gain more of this crap  
instead of asking for his rights  
control,a voice, responsibility  
is equally pushing it & all our corpses.  
if your labour is worthless, what good  
is any payment, however large, that merely  
maintains you & that labour in existence ?

already most that's made's for waste  
ragged scrap in bloated mud:  
two centuries of economic diarrhoea  
the labourer did the easy task,  
the paid job alone, & built the cesspit  
that he & his now drown in.

& shall we, freer than our forefathers,  
work on to selfish ends among  
the rubble that our ends end in,  
narrow, fearful, nervously denying  
our proper needs, our right for each  
to be responsible for all ?

& shall we sacrifice the future to ourselves  
as in a long nights history of manunkind  
or curb our swollen appetites in face  
of endless unborn hungers ?

5.

the strong man retires  
despite his likings  
this the weak man  
cannot aspire to

here is the work. how hard do you find it ?

## Lauds of Washing Up

All praise to thee Washer who hath delivered us from  
the slime and smell of that stagnant pool wherein we thought  
to dwell forever

All praise to thee Washer who hath delivered us  
from large and dismal places the which were covered in decay  
of uneaten food and grease and ash

and who hath set us up in our just and proper order  
each according to his nature, shining bright  
upon the clean but boring kitchen shelves

All praise to thee Washer and also to the Trinity  
the Sink, the Water and the Washing-up Liquid  
by whose help is our salvation gained

All praise to thee Washer  
who when our life is done  
and we are cracked and broken by careless chance  
wilt treat us as thine own  
even taking us up and placing us within a casket,  
in which on strong shoulders we are conveyed and consigned  
into the earth from which we came

for as long as i can remember - she said -  
i've known what i wanted: a special friend,  
not a cuddly toy, not a furry pet,  
not make-believe whispers from my pillow -  
i've had all these, they were only substitutes,

and other children? i had many friends,  
we played and laughed and learned together  
but were too much the same, we mirrored each other,  
i trusted them no more than i did myself.

at night i'd stand at the window, staring out  
at the unseen roads my friend might travel,  
at cloudships sailing from the moon,  
at harbour-lights of distant stars -

still now, in old age, I wait, I hover  
between great hope and a final despair

## Plant Bakery

Where they turn the dough  
is cool, the long blue windows  
let a shaded summer find its mirror  
in the gleaming giant bowls

and where you pat and plait the dough  
and throw it in the conveyed tins  
is no worse than a tropic hut  
in a wheatdust desert under metal crags

but where you grease the oven tins  
caged with an oilcloth and the turning stack  
is the black back of a blistered beast  
at whose mouth, ferment fetid, breath  
blasts four times hotter than your heart  
till lungs brain hands are swollen as the bread  
and all your fingers, under flapping cloths,  
asleep to pain, are burnt to senselessness:

and as the tins are emptied, and the tower  
of loaves rises up the cooler to the town,  
you race relentless ranks whose turn is done  
for one clear space to run the fifteen feet

to fill a much-used plastic cup  
with acrid lime-juice from a metal urn;  
to taste, in this strange world of food  
too hot, too fresh, too everywhere to eat,  
of alien climate and thankless machines,  
light years from those long light-blue dreams,  
something more human than your sweat or shouts:  
a small, hard-won, sour satisfaction and relief.

## the ministers tale.

who first we meet knelt by his bed  
a guest in this house lost among dark trees  
praying for a swift release from flesh  
weakened by lavish hospitalities

smothered by walls and blankets  
he staggers down & out into the night,

circles the house in flapping pyjamas  
slithers in what is it, falls into slime, wet  
knees in roots crying to old gods and mothers.

put on his dignity by a sudden moon  
he stumbles back to shelter to find  
the door closed the bridegroom deep asleep

though in pitiful condition and lampless  
he was not humble enough to knock & dragged  
his body once more round the walls in search of openings

a small window not too high seems the only entrance  
corpulent but desperate he girds his loins  
& heaves & squeezes through - it is a small room, the door

is locked, he has no strength to repass the window, his torn  
pyjamas hang sodden from his scratched & muddy flab he sinks  
once more to the floor

& so we leave him awaiting morning's discovery  
the day of judgement  
communing with who knows what

past all possible prayers  
his knees on the soft mat, his head  
bent over the lavatory's bowl

## **holiday sport**

As the players came out, everyone shouted,  
yelled at each other, at the sellers of food,  
waved their arms, cheered, jumped up and down -

what skilful tactics, rapid passes, lightning strikes -

How they urged on the reckless attack,  
jeered as the defence crumbled - they got really excited -  
they enjoyed being excited, for the feeling itself

much more than the game:  
those small figures running desperately about,  
so far away below their roaring pulsing stands.

And at the end, whether they laughed boastfully  
or turned away with a grumble of disgust  
was of no interest to the losers

or to the lion, tearing at them in the dust.

## **overtime**

shovelling cement from the silo: a rainy saturday  
half-built houses gape at a shapeless sky.

an aeroplane stumbles cursing through clumsy clouds  
one dog patrols the unadopted road.  
despite the rain, cement dust flares & floats  
like conjourers smoke: again, despite the rain  
each pitted shovelfull has to be heaved  
into the mixer with sand that 's just as sodden

& shoreshiny gravel; & then with rain  
churning inside my collar, i fetch the hose  
to water the mix. cloudgrey powder coats  
my front & boots, thin rain soaks through my back.

somewhere i know there are other men, one comes  
sometimes to take a load; this forms a purpose, but

for now, lost in the rain on this half-made afternoon,  
the straggly dog (coat flapping, paws solid grey) & i

stare at each other with a sideways bewilderment  
at finding ourselves, here, in each others baffled eyes.

## Dustmen

We count the days by shops and alleyways,  
each bend and length is measured by our shouts,  
and know the houses by the state of their backgates  
the people by whatever they've cast out.

Close to the end of things we heave the reeking bins  
from paving stone to shoulder with one rising turn  
and with the harsh wry humour of gravediggers  
we mock the maggots shaken from the metal urn.

In the maze of broken brick and antique slippery slabs  
where wild potatoes flower and charred tins rust  
like hunters we know creatures by their leavings  
and view them more with interest than disgust.

Into the wagon's wrecking jaws I've crammed a three -  
piece suite, a bedstead, a piano, a dead dog in two bits;  
slummy goes into the sack, but for a modest fee  
we'll crush anything to nothing and drop it in the pit.

And every week twenty more tons press on four collar bones:  
what you throw out lightly falls heavily on us  
who bear your past away and bury it; you who'll become  
worn bones and spoiling meat, old clothes, handfuls of dust.