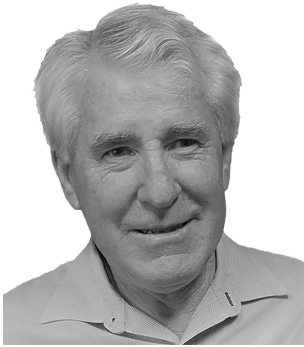


VOLUME 3: THAT WAS THEN

The Early Poems
Project



Glenn Martin



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G.P. Martin Publishing



Volume 3: That Was Then

By Glenn Martin

Published 2019 by G.P. Martin Publishing

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Book layout and cover design by the author

Typeset in Sitka Heading 11 pt

Printed by Lulu.com

Front cover: Photo of author at age 3 (1953) at Punchbowl

Back cover: Some of the author's exercise books

Cover pages of the five sections: Photos by or of the author

Book layout and cover design by the author

ISBN: 978 0 648 08115 9 (pbk.)



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

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Words on words

When I started this venture, I discovered a volume of poems by Wilfred Owen: *War Poems and Others* (1920; Random House Australia, 1986). We had read Owen at school; it was part of our education. In my new discovery, I read this in his preface to his work:

Above all, I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

And he said:

A true Poet is one who tells the truth.

My poems are not about war, but I would say that, for the most part, I am not concerned with Poetry. I am concerned with seeking to articulate truth, or at least, my experience of it and my understanding of it. Yes, sometimes I get beguiled by words, and yes, I know that the concept of truth seems to have gone out of fashion, at least for some people. Nevertheless, as I said in *I in the Stream*, I offer no apologies.

But I have addressed my cause with a caution. The sceptic says:

*Is there an authority better suited to hijack one's own
history than one's current self?*

But I say: Be that as it may. I get up in the morning. Either I speak or I don't speak. I choose to speak.

Guide to the volumes

The poems I have published previously are mostly located in three collections, which each consist of poems plus stories that I included to put the poems into some kind of context. The first two volumes were compiled at the same time, in 1989 – *Flames in the Open* and *Love and Armour*. They were not given volume numbers; I wasn't thinking that far ahead. (I didn't publish them until 2007.)

When I put the next collection of poems together, in 2017, it reminded me that I had not dealt with the early poems, and it had always been my intention to do so at some point. Accordingly, I gave this collection a volume number, and called the book *Volume 4: I in the Stream*. This was fine, but it left me with a residual problem. It was easy enough to explain where volumes 1 and 2 were, but where was Volume 3?

I am now rectifying that instance of illogicality.

I also recognise that I included numerous poems in my book, *To the Bush and Back to Business*. In that book (2012) I had taken another big step towards delving into the archival box of poems (writings) that sits under a table in the corner of my office. I wove some of those early poems into the story of how I grew up in the city, left to live in the bush for about 20 years, and then returned to the city. I was interested in who I was after the quest to carve out a new 'alternative' life. Was I wiser in retrospect? Disillusioned? Penitent? Reconstructed?

In describing that book, I said:

Our protagonist is not a tidy historian. The only records he has to call upon are a stack of papers, folders and exercise books in a box. We have to glean the history from what comes out of the box – poems, short stories and notes on scraps of paper that ignite memories. This is archaeology

*that brings us face to face with ideals and desire, loss and
hard circumstance, and passions that endure.*

I have decided that all the published poems are best left in their current contexts, in the four books. Besides, I didn't realise how many early poems there were.... So this is *Volume 3: That Was Then - The Early Poems Project*.

The volumes

Flames in the Open (2007) (Volume 1)

Love and Armour (2007) (Volume 2)

Volume 4: I in the Stream (2017)

and

To the Bush and Back to Business (2012)

Preamble

Eventually, I had to come back to Volume 3. It was unfinished business. It was too hard in 1989, when I compiled my first two collections of poems in my house at Horseshoe Creek, Kyogle. I called the books *Flames in the Open* and *Love and Armour*, and they consisted of poems from the first part of my adult life over a period of about twenty years, but not any poems prior to then. I had balked, even at that time, from addressing the poems of my young years. I was dodging an issue, which was, how would I deal with those poems?

I deferred the project to the future, but it remained too hard in 2007, when I finally prepared the two compilations for publication, so they were published without volume numbers. And it was still too difficult when I came to the next volume, in 2017 – *I in the Stream*, which covered the two decades up to that point. In violation of logic I called it Volume 4. I did not apologise, yet I was aware of the transgression. Where was Volume 3, and what was it about? It was an indication that the prospect of tackling it continued to be daunting.

And wiser heads would say, anyway, “No, you don’t want to do that. It’s early stuff. It could only be embarrassing. They are young poems, pre-adult.” I understand why early material should be kept packed away: In youth, the difficulties arise from the very profusion of all that is struggling to attain form.

However, it’s the idea that draws me in, the idea of a writing life, and what there might be to say about that. I started to see myself as a writer when I was aged nine, and began to write small, rhyming poems. When I was eleven, I started recording them in an exercise book. I had some poems published in the (Sydney) *Sunday Herald’s* Children’s Page. And I had poems published at high school in the school’s magazine.

Perhaps there is some disappointment involved. I reached the end of high school and had no idea how to pursue life as a writer, so I opted to become an engineer. At least I accepted the realisation at the end of two years' study that I did not want to be an engineer, and I withdrew from the course. I see it as my first brave decision. But then I did what many people do, and became a teacher for want of another clear path. And even in this I was thwarted, because my demonstrated knowledge was in Mathematics, not English, so I became a teacher of Mathematics.

From then on, writing had to occupy small pockets of my life. I always had a day job. I fulfilled my financial responsibilities as an adult, a husband and a parent. But there was a dribble of poetry throughout the years, because for the making of poems you can create modest pockets of sufficient room. Other people smoke cigarettes, which gives them a brief bubble of time outside the door of the office. I squeezed enough time out of other pursuits to inhale unleashed air and scribble down a poem. I scribbled on pieces of paper that were to hand, so my poetic history is charted on the back of such documents as maths exercises for students, posters for professional events, and lecture notes from courses I was enrolled in.

“You have to die many times before you find your real adult life.”

I realised, when I was preparing volumes 1 and 2 for publication, that I did not have to push the poems into the public eye without support, or context. To accompany the poems, I wrote some accounts about what was going on at the time I wrote them. I was trying to explain myself to myself as much as anything else. And it felt good to do that.

This time, I think, the task is greater. There are different periods of time and they seem to need a different approach. For example, there are the school-boy poems. I will include the first poem I recorded, “Fireman Dan”. It may have been good enough for the Children’s Page of the *Sunday Herald*, but what does it look like now? I suppose it still looks

like a school-boy poem, and that is actually just fine. But then there are poems about young-man anger and righteousness. There are some poems about loves, and a section about the months I spent in hospital after the motor bike accident I had at age twenty-three.

This is my early writing life. I have asked myself the question: What do I want people to know? But I am still trying to make sense of the wild profusion that life seems to always be, looking for threads, looking for resonances across time. And these early words are part of the mess of it. To write is to accept the premise of your work being read, so if I ask, “What do I want people to know?”, the answer is, “More than I am comfortable with”.

Nevertheless, it is curious to be looking back that far. To go back to your own childhood is a big test. It becomes a judgement on your whole life. For the most part, I find the poems here are like Goldilocks’s porridge, mostly too hot or too cold, but this is only to be expected from youthful poems, and I am interested enough to examine the attempts anyway. Occasionally, there is a bowl that is just right, at least to me. Accordingly, I have certain phrases and statements that have become bedrock for me, sentiments that, once I had expressed them, have become an integral part of who I am, phrases that are at call. That’s a staggering thought. It is humbling, and it makes me think there is some value in talking about the life from which the poems come.

Once I decided to include poems in my book, *To the Bush and Back to Business*, the memory of particular poems kept coming back to me, rising up. The story was summoning them up.

I gave up long ago trying to get any of my poems published. There were a few occasions in my late teens and early twenties when I sent some poems away to poetry magazines. There were a couple of occasions when a poem was accepted, but I have no records of them now, and there were numerous occasions when my efforts were rejected. I received a couple of comments back from an editor that encouraged me weakly to keep throwing mud against the wall because some of it might eventually stick (my metaphor, of course, not theirs).

I have more affection for my poems as collections. A poem by itself is either exceptional, like the *Mona Lisa* is as a painting, or it belongs in a collection, so that you walk around the gallery and look at all of the artist's work on show, and the feeling builds. Or, a musical artist or group releases an album, not a single, so the feeling is in the collection of things together. And there are always the two perspectives – what is to be said about the thing produced, and what is to be said about what is happening for the poet here?

I have, at least, arrived at the point where I think that what I am doing is not nothing, and what I wrote over the period from about ten years to thirty years old, as gathered here, has a coherence, a consistency and an evolution that reflects on who I was becoming and on who I am.

I am always looking sideways at singers. It is a parallel world to writing. In recent years I have been to concerts by Joan Baez and Judy Collins. They were both in their seventies. Both their concerts included anecdotes as well as songs, and it seemed fitting. When you are an older singer and have had lots of experiences, you start to think (I imagine) about how the songs fit into your life, and things that have happened around the songs. And that is what they talked about.

In contrast, I remember seeing Australian singer Sarah Blasko when she was young, in a big marquee at the Woodford Folk Festival, and she hardly spoke at all. She just sang the songs. It even took her until the fourth song to look up at the audience. She was shy, but the songs were good. Now, twenty years later, she talks with ease on stage.

Sometimes singers will sing an early song too. Sometimes.

I decided to be a writer when I was nine. I liked being able to put words together in ways that entertained and that accessed feelings. I practised this for many years. But I learned to do other things too – I learned to use words to articulate knowledge and construct arguments. I learned essays, reports, articles, assignments, plans and proposals. There was a period of time when I lived at Kyogle when I wrote short stories too.

In the overview of the sections, I say that I avowed publicly when I was a child that I wanted to be a Maths teacher, but that this was just a cover story. The truth was, I didn't know how I would earn a living as a writer, given that I didn't like the idea of being a journalist. (I might think differently about this now. I had a very limited set of impressions then, and no role models.)

My self-doubt and defeatism might even be on display in the photo on the front cover. Looking at the photo, I ask myself, who am I being? Two things occur to me – a teacher, and an engineer. I was either holding forth as a teacher, or I was exhibiting the bridge I had built between two chairs. Had I already adopted a serviceable persona?

In adulthood, the poems and the short stories got pushed into corners. I was dutiful and competent, and wrote the reports and the other documents that were required. They served their purposes soundly. But if I want to know the deeper roots of me, the salient clues, I don't look there, I look to these scraps of paper, these meagre, unschooled attempts at expressing what was wanting to be expressed. And it bears all the imperfections of me, not just in words but in character.

I am doing what I can to provide my own commentary, so that it all makes some kind of sense. It is good. Now, as I read it all, I go backwards and forwards between the poems and the story. Poetry and reflection and the movement between them, the movement illustrated in the infinity symbol. And that is where I leave it.



Overview of the five sections

The poems break down into five sections naturally enough.

Section 1

Section 1 is from the beginning – the first recorded poem at age eleven – through to the end of high school. Not that there was a huge output – there were just 33 poems across seven years, but it was a conscious, chosen aspect of my self, and a competency I was trying to develop, although I did not see how I was going to exercise this competency as a livelihood.

From about age ten, when adults asked me that fearful question: “What are you going to be when you grow up?”, I told them I wanted to be a Maths teacher. This was not true, but I didn’t have another answer, and this answer invariably pleased them, so it effectively dismissed the question. And it was plausible, because I was by now proving to be good at Maths, and teaching was a respectable occupation. (It was before the era of consultants.)

I even said I *wanted* to be a Maths teacher, to make it more convincing.

At the same time, I acquired the nickname “Glenn the Pen”. So, even if I didn’t admit it, my peers knew I was a writer.

Section 2

Section 2 is three years long, when I was 18 to 20. They were my first years after high school, and they were years of great tension. I was exploding, for I had squeezed myself into a utilitarian career path, engineering, and the rest of me was in revolt. Consequently, I wrote 96 poems in this period.

I had a sense of being both trapped and abandoned. I didn't blame anyone for that, but there was so much I wanted to know, and so much I was unhappy with about our society. Of course, there are people of this age who are questioning society, but many others would say, "Why weren't you out having fun?"

The answer is, I did go out and have fun, but it didn't obliterate the questions. I could laugh and drink and dance, but it was for relief, not fulfilment, and it was only temporary. I wanted knowledge, I wanted understanding, and I wanted justice. So, the poems of this period came out of this turmoil – I was groping with urgency. Accordingly, the majority of these poems are.... well, they don't need to be aired publicly. They were grist for the mill. At the same time, I want to represent this period. It was pivotal in my life.

Section 3

Section 3 is a period of just two years. How is it different to Section 2? There were different things happening. I only wrote 33 poems in this period, because I had started full-time work, teaching at a high school in the western suburbs of Sydney. The experience was both confronting and gruelling, and it took all my energy. For the most part, I wasn't able to process it through the poetic lens. I spent most of my time feeling overwhelmed.

Section 3 was also short because an event brought it to an end, the motor bike accident that happened in January 1973.

Section 4

Section 4 consists of poems from the period I spent in hospital and in recuperation, getting back on my feet. I spent several months in hospital, and then I was in plaster and on crutches for more months. I kept a diary, although not very well, while I was in hospital, and I wrote now and then, in fits and starts, but some of the poetry was just writing to keep the wolves at bay. I was somewhat fragile – up and down emotionally, trying to stay steady and hopeful.

At the end of 1973, when I was out of hospital for good and back at work, my sister got married in Hobart, and I flew down for the wedding and then took the opportunity to go on a trip by myself after that. I hitch-hiked up through the middle of Tasmania, across to the east coast, and down the coast to Hobart. I kept a diary on this trip, and wrote a couple of poems.

Section 5

Section 5 covers the subsequent period, four years, in which many changes occurred. In 1974, in rapid succession, I went back to university and then abandoned it, I got together with a lady and we got married, and we had our first child. I left teaching and worked for a few months as a psychiatric nurse, but then we left Sydney at the end of the year and went to live in Mackay, where I became a school teacher again. We had another child and only lasted in Mackay for eighteen months.

Then we began life outside of society, living in the hills on the far north coast of New South Wales. We were part of an alternative community. It didn't last either, and we ended up on a bush property in Horseshoe Creek outside of Kyogle. Two more children were born – twin boys – but towards the end of 1979 my wife left me, taking the children with her. I stayed on in the house next to the creek. By this time I was back at a job in society, back school teaching.

What part did the poems play in all these changes? They were an erratic accompaniment, so they cannot be relied upon as an historical record. For one thing, at least in 1974, I was undertaking other forms of writing – university assignments in education and philosophy, and articles addressing social values (in university student magazines, New Age magazines and alternative Christian publications). The trouble is, the poetic form of thinking is different to writing that focuses on logic, argument and persuasion. One is oil and the other is water. So, poetry was peripheral at this point.

Over the four years there were just over 50 poems, not a huge output. Of these, I have already published sixteen. But I should also say

that of the 50-odd poems, twenty-two were written in 1974. I could call it the year of the great disruption.

I did not write many poems over the next two years. Then in 1977, I wrote seventeen poems. What did this mean? I think, apart from being in a different mode of thinking and expression, it was about being on a practical mission that I was driven to fulfil. There was little time to sit and write; I was trying to establish an alternative way of living. In *To the Bush and Back to Business*, I asked, “In the end, was it anything more than loss and failure?” It’s no accident that nine poems from this period were published in that book.

There is just a little irony in my calling Section 5 “New life in the far-away hills”.

Poems from ages 11 to 13

Dan's reputation

Friday 1 September 1961

Fireman Dan is very proud,
He has a cause to be:
His engine shines like fire
When he scrubs it before tea.

Not a thing gets past his eye,
He sees it in a flash
And it gets an extra polish
With his trusty yellow sash.

Helmets, hoses, everything,
Hang sparkling in their place.
When Dan has finished washing,
Of dirt there is no trace.

The enticing prairie

Sunday 3 September 1961

Oh, how I yearn for the wide outback,
By myself beneath the sky,
Sitting astride my horse's back,
Feeling as if I could fly.

I would not be with anyone
As I'd loathe the company,
And I'd stay out there beneath the sun
'Til I had to come home for tea.

Waiting

Friday 6 September 1968

I am waiting,
Waiting for a little man to run through my mind
And pick out the thoughts and words
Which mean me.
I am foot-stamping impatiently,
Wondering what I am now.
Or will this moment of turmoil-me
Be just lost?

Screw loose (use, noose, truce) – A 1920 avant-garde poem

Monday 7 October 1968

I sat down to write prose (knows pose goes)
To throw away rhyme (time chime mime)
But I had to give up (up up)
In disgust (must trust no foe)
Go to bed (head read) instead.
Oh!
Away (say) I said (red)!
Go! Go! (echo go) I cried (inside)
Oh no! (Oh?) I give in! (Sin! Sin!)
I'll march (2-3-4) in time (2-3-4)
I'll starch (2-3-4) my rhyme (2-3-4)
I'll tighten (2-3-4) my form (2-3-4)
I'll heighten (2-3-4) the tone of my verse (2-3-
What? Out of time already steady?
Get back in fine line!
And do as you're scold-told!
Nasty little prose poet.

Poems from late 1968 to August 1970

Survivor

Thursday 28 November 1968

The hot winds remind you, vaguely,
Of someone's horror,
More than the black print and "First pictures!"
The searing skies
Fuse you and some child's eyes,
Wide eyes holding to the smouldering remnants,
The mourning fridges and foundations –
Homes, graves.
It's all, all, all gone,
The Mystic leers elsewhere
And plunders.
And he is left, waiting.....
For church clothes,
 Hostels,
 Handouts,
For church bells to bury the dead,
For awe to recede,
And hope resume a birth.

Not sentimental

Wednesday 29 January 1969

We were running with a recklessness that ripped the sifted sand,
Watched! And matched! The waves that, crumbling, fell,
And something in us bowed before a vibrant, unspoken demand,
Pinned us naked as the note of a bell.
Around us folded wings of rise and dissolution,
Stinging in a crisp and crowded ecstasy,
Wiping from the sand the letters of my resolution,
But some days none is necessary,
For seeping through our flesh is something more:
A bond, sanctified in this circle of awe,
An approval of our naked and new-born core.

Staring from my window seat

Sunday 10 May 1970

Staring from my window seat,
From the mute shuffling peak-hour crowds
To streaking billboard streets
Where headlines reach me – loud, loud,

Between each clatter of the train
The flak of guns at night rains:
War stains

My placard raised shoulder-high,
We hundreds behind the barricade
Chanted our painfully simple cry,
Prayed that no one would evade

But the people who heard the call
Collected even their shadows that would fall,
Left nothing at all.

Did you know that you were wrong
And since then three thousand people have been killed?
Over books the days grow long
By the price of ignorance I am stilled,

Seasons lengthen around,
“I do not shake the leaves down!”
I bleed also.

Poems from August 1970 to late 1970

Feeling good

Friday 6 August 1970

Drag feet down
Dusty road, thumb raised
In lazy salute
Hoping to hook the next friendly
Grin to drive by –
Easy morning,
Breast of the day rising freely,
Can't wait to get
My body wet

Warm sand,
Cool waves drenching,
Bursting on my skin shining,
Wave upon wave
Like a heart beat
Leaving little foam urchins
Nibbling at my feet –
Little toes sucking and gurgling,
And flesh stinging under my skin.
Feeling good.

Not your self-sufficiency

Friday 16 October 1970

Going? Just anywhere,
Anywhere, for a barefoot
Walk on a gravel track,
Maybe I'll reach you,
Or go loose at the crucial moment.

Sharp stones needling my feet –
Tell me lies about yourself, push me away laughing.....
Yes, I'm walking to Adelaide
Next month / think I need
To burn my face,
You know the sun bleeds alone,
And I have never asked to be embraced
By any rag doll
Who let her head fall helplessly
On my shoulder
In timid experiment,
And turned cold
When I thought I understood.

I'd walk across fire to reach you
If I thought it would do any good.

Saturday

Saturday 21 November 1970

“The sun was high, but the cold wind was blowing.”

I

You curve screaming into a corner,
Two wheels biting, holding,
Front end lunging down.
Brake, brake.
Road sheeting past your head,
Closer, hard, closer,
Then receding – now throttle,
Surging, wind tearing your face.

II

My hand over your hand on the rail,
Welded there by the beauty that surprised us –
The untidy coastline that
A brooding artist with an eye for detail
Had pencilled in,
The meeting of earth and water,
The sea salvaging its dignity
Against the onslaught of time,
The land tumbling in activity –
The dust of man building
Over the ashes of his forefathers,
And the soft wind was sifting us,
Fanning the pure flame
Of our warm core of certainty;
One hour of worship,
One of the unequal moments of time.

III

In country towns one is inclined to see
Churches in which one still whispers,
Because the foundation stone

Was laid during the gold rushes,
And the reverence of simplicity before the unknown
Was built into the walls and preserved.
The wattles tell you that that it's spring
With gold spilled out like
Nuggets on a rough bench;
Or it might be autumn.
Time is measured in circles,
There is no barometer of history or progress here,
No rough beast lunging
Towards a better tomorrow,
So that one is inclined to hesitate
When it is time to leave,
And ask for forgiveness.

Travellers

Monday 18 January 1971

The sun is at a sharper angle now,
We have been moving since the first wedge of light.
The wheels cut their tracks in the ruts like a plough,
Flinging stones, stinging red dust into momentary life.

Five minutes after, the crust has reassembled,
Has forgotten – us tense and balancing over sand as liquid as surf;
The old synthesis – master, concrete-world-creator – has
 crumbled,
Smaller, travellers, we find ourselves in balance with the earth.

Second thoughts

Tuesday 26 September 1972

I saw you crying
And wanted to come at once,
Because, you know,
People don't cry for nothing,
But you had screwed yourself up
Into a tight ball
And pushed your tears
Into a corner
And smiled.

Phoney! I said.
Why is she dishonest?
But you weren't saying,
And I had to fight off
My first instincts
And sit sullenly in the back row.

At times there is
No Right Thing to do.

But you,
Will you amputate your dull pain
And live at half-pace?

A cold passage

Monday 12 February 1973

Inside the corridor
Was a cold passage,
Linoleum tiles,
Hospital-sterile.
Doctors are business-like,
Do what they have to,
Keep their thoughts
Professionally secret.
For two hours a day
There might be a little warmth,
Soft voices,
A hand on your arm,
Genuinely touched.
But the words are crammed,
Or take too long to thaw,
And then it is good-bye, good-bye.
Ritual “Good morning”s
From starched matrons,
The rattle of plates,
All of a kind,
Machine-washed,
Goes down the row of beds.
But after meals
There are hours
When the cold, unfeeling mattress
Sucks the life from your body.
One wraps the blankets
More tightly around,
And tries to keep moving,
Towards the end of the passage,
Searching out
The return of faces.

Another day

Tuesday 19 June 1973

From the windows it is a drab day,
Under cloud the trees are still beautiful
But weigh heavily,
And hosts of leaves
Hold their places unmoving,
Fragile, maybe, but determined;
Laughter will not loosen them today.

Say a word;
Silent, pyjama-clad, seated,
I wait for hours,
And when someone comes
I listen perhaps too keenly,
Yet after a minute I might slip away,
As indiscriminate as a falling leaf,
Leaving their words hanging.

Everything has been fingered twice over,
Absent-mindedly,
While I live inside birds' wings,
Tree trunks, old friends.

In the sparse view from the pyjama world
The stray word grows enormously
And too often plays the tyrant –
And so to avoid the shouting
I escape into
Anything I can fix my eyes on.

It is only from the corner of my eye
That the chaos rides in again –
A moment before I can turn my head
The leaf falls
And I start over, unnerved.

Accidental high

27 March 1974

Sometimes get so high –
Moved by the infinite
Walking
Past dreams of laughter
At oddest times
Going to a lecture
On how to keep your feet
On the ground
God shakes moments
I see behind
The world is paper thin
I see behind
Sometimes get so high
Almost by accident
Going to a lecture
Father-God is watching
From the verandah
Us playing marbles
Magically it's alright again
Us playing the Infinite
Marble Game
In God's lap
You are brown
And I am blue
The marbles are golden
And the angels are ecstatic
I go home
And write in my diary
"The Magic Accident"
And it's alright.

The furthest dream in the mind of God

29 April 1975

My words could never scratch the back
Of an evening or a memory:
The sky was grey
Or the child spoke
But it all passed,
Today screamed,
Whether in ecstasy or dismay,
Someone waited for deliverance

Whatever it was,
Whether all requests
Were turned down today or not,
There was a foothold
And at least
The trap can always be set
And time can always wait on fruit:

This is the furthest dream
In the mind of God.

The winding way

Thursday 12 January 1978

No, you were never one for listening,
And I was never one for talking.
And you with your ideas about love
While I'd grown in a different way....

I have loved you through mists and confusion,
Reeled through starless nights,
Scratching fuel from anywhere handy
To keep going.
There I learned the pathways of darkness:
Do I trip on your bright dreams?

(And it would help
If we understood
But there is that need again)

I watch you plunge and plunge,
I hold out against the ideas
And do no good,
You fade into mists again,
You give me opinions,
Want words,
When all I ever said was
Come along
And excused the emptiness
Because it never is....
Happy that way,
Love you.

Afterword

It has been more uncomfortable than I would have thought to trawl back through the things I wrote in this period of time so long ago, from when I was about ten to when I was about thirty. The discomfort relates not so much to the thought of literary ineptitude as to the circumstances and events and my reactions to them. Much of this time was turbulent – big things happened, and I made many big life decisions. Big things happened both for me and for the society I lived in, and there were no walls between the one and the other; they all took place on the same stage.

In all of this, I am sure I made a few decisions that were wise and many that were foolish. In any case, they changed the trajectory of my life irrevocably. In defence, I say that this is what lives are for. It is probably easier to think whether my decisions were morally admirable or not, and more salient – guilt is the ghost that lingers. I would say I tried to do right, according to my lights. In retrospect it did not always seem so.

The point of this book was to compile a collection of things I wrote in that period, and to see what it looks like to me now, the one who is in a position to hijack the past. But I have not found the past so easy to hijack; rather, it has been more the other way round. So many of these pieces stare back at me with retrospective realisations at their elbow. Having been stirred, they will not easily be quietened.

It is a little like Wilfred Owen's War. In my case, I have come through, I have survived, more or less decently. Despite the discomfort, I have found joy in examining it, and I see rich grounds to be grateful. If some of the poems here are wayward or confused, I am sorry, but I had to leave the shore and drift, and see where the current would take me.

As Owen contended, in his way, poems are more about you than they are about poetry. It is exposure much more than it is performance. Nevertheless, one tries to assemble words together to express insight,

one tries to say joy, hope, anger, sorrow and laughter, to aim for the moon.

Now I say: with each word I correct my aim. And my only disclaimer for the poems here is that “that was then”.

And for myself I say, in the rushing water of the unquiet ghosts: the journey is over; let the past dissolve. Now I may rouse new energy and follow new connections. I have my vision.

There is one poem I should mention here: ‘How Is It Going to Be?’ because it gazed into my own future. It was written in December 1972, and dared to look twenty years hence, not knowing any of the tumult that would characterise my life, even up to the far-flung age of forty-two. I did not accept the truism that “everything’s alright”; I said “It is the business of the future to be dangerous”.

I predicted that I would have a library, and I do have one now; I have worked to fulfil that wish, and it is a source of strength to me. I asserted, even then, that I sought to live “close to the source”, and I would still say the same, and I would still not consent to narrowly define what that means; the life within us is a mystery.

I did not wish myself a life of ease. I said:

How is it going to be?

Forty-two and the light

Strong and defiant in my eyes.

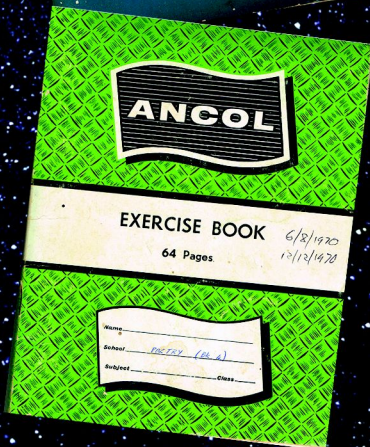
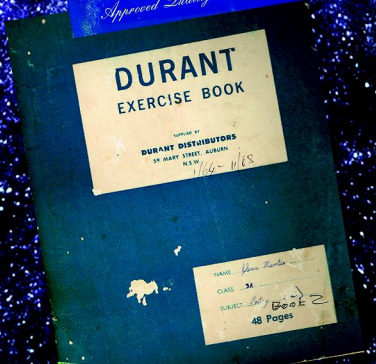
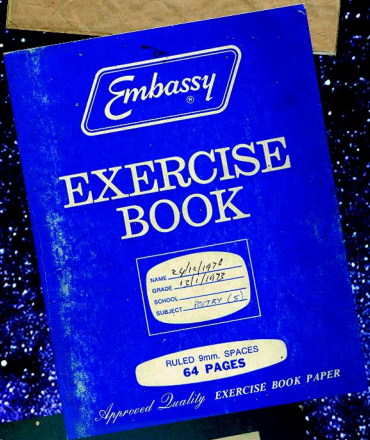
Now I am much older than forty-two, but the statement still seems apt. This morning I got up early, before the sun breached the horizon, and there was still one star visible in the paling sky. Perhaps it is not so much defiance anymore; it is steadiness, constancy.

Am I a writer? Whatever the world says, it is what I do.

END OF SAMPLE



This book is about five stages in a writer's young life, and the poems written in this time. There is a story to it. He is a school-boy, inexperienced; he is learning to write in poetic form. He grows older and leaves school. Now there is a greater urgency about understanding life, determining what is good, and expressing it fittingly. He enters the workforce, unready, still trying to put sense into words, still seeking to be noble-spirited. Then he has an accident on a motor bike – he is knocked off and seriously injured. His life is thrust sideways. It takes time to mend. And it comes to this: he resolves to leave the city, to make a new life in the hills.



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