

## scrabble

scrabble at Christmas  
Grandma Burke visiting  
mam and dad in a team  
me and Jem

clicking clicky tiles  
looking up at the ceiling  
making occasional  
afcse  
cafes  
facse  
faces

the clock ticked away  
intellectual vigour  
then suddenly  
magnificently  
she farted

deeply  
sonorously

the adults kept playing  
as though Grandma  
had not in fact  
let one rip  
all three

dead straight faces

mine  
and Jem's  
were pressed into the carpet  
belly muscles in spasm  
aching cheeks

the more serious they looked  
the more we howled  
it couldn't  
be helped

[IMAGE: Grandma Burke & Car-  
rolls]

## **moron**

I have to admit  
it was pretty funny  
Jem overpowering me  
to write in the middle  
of my homework

“Sister Mary is a moron”

I stuck some carefully cut paper  
over his contribution  
and continued my essay  
over the top

she discovered the subterfuge  
and called me up  
in front of the class

it wasn't so funny  
being shaken

by the ears

[IMAGE: tie burning]

## bang

weedkiller and sugar  
burned with a supernatural light  
a fierce lancing  
to the eyes  
utterly  
fascinating

my brother packed it  
into a big glass jar  
and made a fuse  
out of string

in the lee of a fallen log  
I lit that string  
the flame wouldn't blow out  
to smoulder slowly  
but instead raced along  
my eleven year old face  
inches away

turning to run  
at the last second  
I remember wheeling

off my feet  
the glass hitting my back  
whistling past my ears  
I was most impressed  
that I could briefly make out  
a me shaped hole  
in the blasting debris

lying on my back  
listening to a very high note  
my brother called my name

distantly

[IMAGE: Jem & Hughie]

## the strap

a professional maths teacher  
asked us  
“how many right angles  
in the corner of the room?”  
the class dutifully responded  
“three”  
“no, four” she said  
and claimed another  
“look, right across the ceiling”  
me and Kevin protested  
“what about the other two walls  
then?”  
surely that’s six  
or even infinity  
if you allow that one”  
  
my mistake  
was in telling the truth  
that she was factually wrong  
she demanded silence  
and restated  
her ridiculous claim

a few days later  
filing out of assembly  
she noticed my shirt  
little pictures  
of bicycles or trains or something  
a technical infraction  
of a little known rule  
  
she sent me for the strap  
I waited outside Egen’s office  
on his way in  
I saw him spit  
another thing  
that would’ve got us punished  
  
twice he put his back into it  
leather across the palm  
any semblance of integrity  
they believed they had  
vanished right then  
never to return

## XTC

my first proper gig  
late seventies  
fourteen maybe fifteen years old  
XTC at The Affair, Swindon  
we used to write  
"XTC R NRG"  
in the dust on cars  
they were the most thrilling thing  
to come from that town  
they were my connection  
to the zeitgeist  
me and my mates  
put safety pins in our clothes  
and tried to punk it up a bit  
the band's effect on my nervous  
system  
can't fully be reckoned  
the echoes  
of the vertiginous excitement  
reverberate still  
a blast of power

right up close  
that's what a Catholic boy needs  
raw decibels, invention and pace  
to drive out the fakery  
the polite suburban dream  
exploded  
years later  
a motley assortment  
some original members  
including Barry my chum  
at his glittering best  
wheeled out some of the old tunes  
in a packed pub  
back in Swindon  
they jammed the bit at the end  
of 'Making Plans for Nigel'  
the bit that repeats  
'steel, steel, steel'  
the whole crowd sang  
shouted  
bellowed in unison

'STEEUL, STEEUL, STEEUL'

-2-

we were all wrinkly and fat  
but that edge was suddenly back  
the glee  
the remembrance  
the heartbreak  
the zenith  
the tragedy  
of a nothing life  
in a nothing town  
and yet here we were  
shoulder to shoulder  
dancing  
jumping  
sweating  
singing out  
for our lost youth  
our refound joy  
an exuberant requiem  
an ecstatic lament

steel

steel

steel

[IMAGE: xtc]

## dancing Shiva

dancing shiva acid  
sixteen years old  
Stonehenge  
surrounded by bikers  
hippies and punks  
I was fresh from Catholic school  
and more than a little  
out of my depth  
  
paranoia came like a wave  
elemental and overpowering  
I locked myself in a car  
and whimpered in fright  
it peeked and plateaued  
as I watched the freaks pass by  
  
a girl held her arm all stiff  
as she talked to her companion  
that was anxiety  
the same that I could feel  
and suddenly I realised  
we were all in the same boat

we all of us felt fear  
a universal tension  
brought on by how time  
always removes  
all the illusions of certainty  
  
my trembling turned to compas-  
sion  
a vast empathy with the broken  
I left the car and floated  
possessed by a deity  
  
at some point near the dawn  
I changed a baby's nappy  
the mum was out cold  
and the poor thing was crying  
I had never done it before  
  
the sun came up and burned me  
my skin is deep sea white  
I got naked and covered myself in  
mud  
something I saw in a film

seeing how everyone's minds  
where filled with self-concern  
I saw how redundant it was  
to be self-conscious

and thus at last  
I broke out of the suburban dream  
primordially in touch  
with Mother Earth  
and Father Sun

the whole experience marked me  
and set my life's course  
around that time  
I had my ear pierced  
and thus the rings remind me  
of that ecstatic rite  
a journey of tribal allegiance  
to what I later learned to call  
the Way of the Bodhisattva

[IMAGE: Ananda's cave]



## glassed

they both weighed  
twice as much as me  
my rugby mates  
I was tough and wiry  
but weedy by comparison  
we threw the ball about  
and each other  
until we were sufficiently  
muddled  
and our clothes  
adequately ripped

having worked up a thirst  
we ran off to the pub  
to further compete  
in a royal quaffing  
at some point  
deep in the ale  
one took aim at his head  
with an empty pint glass  
"one, two" SMASH!  
it looked for all the world

like he really had  
glassed himself  
he had let it go  
between "two" and SMASH  
it had really just  
broken on the floor

the other guy  
was also convinced  
so he gave it a go  
somehow by chance  
he only nicked himself  
glass all down his chest

"Wow!" thought I  
"I didn't know you could do that!"  
so "one, two" SMASH!  
and I had severed  
two arteries in my forehead  
as I stood up  
I saw two beautiful red jets  
spurting  
right out in front of me

quickly I was blinded  
I grabbed someone  
and got them to lead me  
outside where they  
picked out the glass  
I lay my head against a wall  
and they pressed against the cuts

the ambulance and the police  
arrived pretty soon  
a copper rugby tackled  
my friend  
the one stopping the bleeding  
an ambulance man  
started berating the policeman  
as people streamed  
out of the pub  
an old nurse took me  
by the elbow  
and quietly lead me  
into an ambulance

dabbing away the blood  
just enough to see  
I thought I made out  
two people locked in combat  
rolling out into the road  
it had turned  
from a fracas  
into carnage

-2- as we zipped off  
to the hospital

they stitched me up  
no anaesthetic  
and left me  
to sleep it off  
at some point in the night  
there was an accident  
with a bed pan  
which was already full

they let me out in the morning  
and I stumbled through the rain  
an old lady flattened herself  
against a wall  
to let me past  
looking horrified

I glanced at my reflection  
in the window of a bustop  
covered in piss, blood and mud  
clothes tattered  
two black eyes  
and wires  
sticking out of my head  
I looked quite a bit  
like Frankenstein's monster

[IMAGE: Hughie, Ilkley art show]  
{.center-img }



## The Inevitable Split

the college band  
was modelled on Kid Creole  
and the Coconuts  
1984  
Orwell's year

eight of us  
different courses  
different years  
not all in college at all  
so we called ourselves  
The Inevitable Split

we did tons of gigs  
Leeds, Bradford  
all over

the best one by far  
was at a military place  
an amputees recovery unit  
only us in the band  
not in wheelchairs

a crate of beers  
got thrown onto the stage  
I tried to remember the chords  
as I watched open mouthed  
at them dance

I knew you could balance  
on the back wheels  
but I didn't know  
you could pogo

on one wheel  
until it broke

the guy held his stomach  
laughing  
he got dragged off the dance floor  
the broken chair  
chucked in a corner  
another chair materialised  
only to be trashed again

it was like a medieval melee

jousting destruction

they shouted for more

at the end of each song

we belted it out

in awe

at fifty drunken blokes

in hysterics

ripping up

their world

[IMAGE: Hughie, Inevitable Split

1984]

## groupies

two girls in the audience  
had clearly taken a shine  
I played my funky guitar  
and tried not to make  
eye contact

they seemed enormous  
and looked sweaty  
something about  
their eagerness  
and bulk  
made me want to run

they waited around  
while the band packed up  
and I hid  
waiting for an opportunity  
to bolt

they weren't giving up  
and the last of our gear  
was about to go

it is a two person job  
carrying a bass cabinet  
I scooted down behind it  
and scuttled along  
hoping they wouldn't  
see my feet

[IMAGE: Hughie, Inevitable Split  
1984]

## sword

my old jiu-jitsu teacher  
used to have a short sword  
its blade milled off  
it was used occasionally in class  
it was from Korea  
and had been used  
in World War II  
so we were told

there were loads of cool things  
that we learned all about  
the stances and cuts  
the formal defences  
this was some of the actual stuff  
the Samurai would learn

I borrowed it for a while  
to practice at home  
once the teacher trusted me  
enough

back in my room I studied it  
having the time and quiet

and found seven notches  
right up by the hilt  
  
I began to think what they meant  
and reality came to stay  
I couldn't sleep  
with it there in the room  
it gave me a cold shiver  
I no longer thought it cool  
and gave it right back  
at the earliest opportunity  
I had come to see  
that we had kind of been playing  
on the bones  
  
of the dead

## Joanne Whalley

they were filming Edge of Darkness  
at the Ilkley College Student Union  
I showed up to get some chips  
and wondered why there was  
cables and tech stuff everywhere  
in the canteen  
there sat a woman  
the most preternaturally  
ethereally  
beautiful creature  
I had ever seen  
in my whole entire life  
after a few questions  
some chums lent me  
a notepad  
so I approached her  
Joanne Whalley  
in the glory of youth  
saying I was a reporter  
for the college rag

I bought her a coffee  
and wrote down  
what she said  
but I wasn't really listening  
having already drowned  
in her eyes

[IMAGE: Joanne Whalley]



## 2 Hot 4 July

the only band on the island  
2 Hot 4 July  
we had a special gig  
in the ancient Greek amphitheatre

I was furious with the leader  
he hadn't paid us tuppence  
all his promises  
like his Jamaican accent  
turned out to be fake

my song was Psycho Killer  
when I took the main mic  
for the guitar solo  
I made like Jimi Hendrix  
leaving the thing  
on the stage  
with broken strings  
and feedback screaming  
the starry vault above  
torn in half  
by the ecstatic howl

afterwards a man came up  
he claimed to have signed  
Madonna  
he asked me to send him a tape  
but I had no songs of my own  
and somehow lost his address

[IMAGE: los amphitheatre]

## body-builders

a beach bar in Greece  
a gang of bronzed  
German body-builders  
it was my round  
and as I headed to the bar  
their ring leader  
cracked some joke about me  
they looked up  
at my pale scrawny body  
and all roared with laughter  
  
a classic moment  
almost the proverbial  
sand kicked in my face  
  
but then I thought  
of all the nationalities there  
from all over the world  
it wasn't ok to laugh at their skin  
my skin was from my ancestors  
they were laughing at them  
seized by an unexpected rage

I stared at their boss  
his gang  
one by one  
noticed me glaring  
and broke off laughing  
to look down at the floor  
  
at last their leader noticed  
his gang not backing him up  
his smile suddenly gone  
I lifted my fists in victory  
the whole bar erupted  
in applause

## white hats

people kept warning me  
about the white hat police  
on Naxos

the last busker  
the previous summer  
had his banjo  
bust over his head  
and had been  
jailed

doing a show  
on the waterfront  
there was a sizeable crowd  
forming a circle  
four or five deep

it was going well  
everyone having fun  
suddenly some shouting  
two white hats  
burrowing through the audience

my hat was full of drachmas  
I yammed it on my head  
the people behind me parted  
so I could leg it  
round the corner

peeking carefully back  
the police had got to the centre  
the circle had closed around them  
it looked like folks were expecting  
the next performance

a striptease maybe?  
expressive dance?

[IMAGE: Hughie beach juggle  
Thailand]

## finale

[IMAGE: 'Phil' at Snapdragon 91]

street juggling finale  
looking straight up  
throwing those balls so high  
I didn't see the kid  
romper suit  
reins trailing  
wobble out of the crowd  
and punch me  
  
right in the doodads  
  
as I hit the floor  
the demon returned  
to its parents  
as my juggling things  
landed on me  
and I tried  
not to be sick  
  
it was the biggest laugh  
I ever got

### 3 minutes

the clowning workshop  
could really get rough  
away for a week  
with some scary genius  
at one point  
we had to go on stage  
for a timed three minutes  
we were not allowed  
to move or speak

at first there was panic  
self-consciousness at its worst  
it felt like something pressing  
hard up against my face  
a thing I had been avoiding  
for as long as I could remember

the thing is  
anxiety can only go so high  
and then it can't maintain itself  
and naturally begins to drop  
the pressure eased off

I noticed someone in the audience  
and they noticed me  
noticing them  
for some reason it was funny  
and people began to giggle  
pretty soon it was riotous  
I'm still not really sure  
just what was so funny  
but my God, funny it was!

my three minutes was up  
I felt like a king  
never again did stage fright  
come to spoil the party

[IMAGE: Snapdragon 90 spectacular]

## Eisteddfod

me and Peewee were put on last  
then the compere went home  
so our slot became open ended  
no one to stop us

a largish crowd  
three or four hundred  
in rows of seats  
in a semi-permanent hall  
in a park in central Cardiff

we improvised from the start  
and things became wild  
at one point I climbed the rafters  
over the audience's heads  
no safety of any kind  
that was kind of the point

the audience went with us  
the Lords of Misrule  
the children's reactions  
being the main source of fun

at one point I asked  
"Ok kids, who wants to be  
DECAPITATED?"  
a forest of hands went up  
Peewee explained  
all the glory details  
while I went hunting  
for a plausible implement of doom

I returned with a table leg  
and Peewee had our victim  
a sweet young girl  
on her knees  
hands behind her back  
head bowed  
and apparently willing to die  
in the name of entertainment

the adult part of the crowd  
had turned into a mob  
something atavistic  
had curiously seized  
this celebration

of all things Welsh

things went all the way

right up to the point

where I only had two options

carry out a brutal bludgeoning

or ask for the applause

the young girl in question

took several

curtain calls

[IMAGE: Peewee & Hughie]

## necrophilobats

acrobalance

I think it's called

Peewee would get knocked

in the head

'die'

and get rigor mortis

he could then be moulded

into a base

Kim would balance on him

upside down

pretty nifty

I played the swanee whistle

for drama

a touch of mockery

and gave a facetious commentary

I changed it one day

ad-libbing

"jadies and mentlemen

watch as an acrobat

turns into

a necrophilobat"

now it's potentially dangerous

upside down and everything

but watching the two of them

trying to keep it together

while having hysterics

was profoundly pleasing

especially since

it took

some time

[IMAGE: The Weedplants]



## chocolate

long distance club passing  
the final  
European Juggling Convention  
Maastricht 1989

I had teamed up  
with Pete the Punk  
he had a smile  
that warmed from a distance  
we were up against  
legends  
the hot favourites  
Haggis and Lee

someone must've nobbled them  
somehow they went down  
and we won

the prizes were Dutch chocolate  
made into juggling clubs  
a whole pound of it  
each

flushed with success  
we entered the three legged race  
whilst juggling of course  
I remember it being funny  
but now how we fluked it  
winning that one too

another wee ceremony  
another two clubs  
making four pounds  
of Dutch chocolatey darkness  
to smash up  
and distribute  
a process that took  
seconds

[IMAGE: chocolate club prize,  
Hughie, Maastricht 1989]

## giraffes

it might've been Llanelli  
or somewhere just like it  
me and Seb did a show  
at a shopping centre

we had giraffe unicycles  
and the help  
of a grumpy security guard  
the natural enemy  
of the street performer

I remember the enjoyment  
of making him carry  
some of our stuff  
making him look  
like part of the show  
his suppressed fury  
made me happy  
a sweet sweet revenge

Seb discovered he could hover  
on the five foot uni  
onto the walkalator

that went up  
to the second floor  
he made it to the top  
a death defying feat  
and received a tremendous  
round of applause

the obvious thing  
was for me to try it too  
he came down  
as I went up  
high fiving  
in the middle

the entire shopping centre  
at a standstill  
hovering  
without security

[IMAGE: Peewee & Seb in the fish  
car]

## wind

we had been climbing  
all day long  
the wind at the top  
was steady  
as a rock

the routes were shortish  
I spent a fair amount of time  
bringing in the ropes  
leaning on that wind  
so strong

right at the last  
before going home  
we went to look over  
and say goodbye

the angle we stood at  
put the eyes level with the rim  
and the feet about  
a foot back  
appropriately enough

I don't know what possessed me  
but I inched forward  
so the toes  
got to the lip  
the eyes looked back  
onto the headwall

nearer to flight  
I couldn't get  
a snatched moment  
delirious  
eternal

oh but you could lean  
on that wind

was it an act of faith  
or tempting fate?

[IMAGE: Stanage Edge]

## Dobra

Nick had told me  
about the Dobra Valley  
how no one had ever gone down it  
and come out alive  
how he had tried by himself  
a few years previously  
how close he'd come  
to starving  
during an epic escape  
he needed a chum  
so down we went

we had ropes  
supplies  
training  
but the first big challenge  
was a waterfall  
way taller than our ropes  
we picked our way  
down the side  
hundreds of metres  
of scree

one false move  
and pfft

after that we were committed  
neither of us imagining  
we could go back up  
so on we went  
after some nosh  
and bravado

the valley narrowed  
there was time  
for photos  
so we thought  
but the river disappeared  
around a bend  
between vertical walls

it was hard to choose  
but we swam

stupid

the rucksac took me under  
should've taken it off  
there was not enough strength  
to get back to the surface  
as my breath gave out  
he hauled me up  
by the scruff of the neck  
and there I was  
worrying about another waterfall  
beyond that bend

both of us scared  
and exhausted  
we forced our way on  
down a broadening valley  
at one point seeing  
human footprints  
our eyes always craning upwards  
for any possible escape  
the sun dipped low

the walls narrowed again  
water quicker  
blackier  
another bend  
we both knew  
we were not going to make it  
not this time

-2-  
we backtracked  
feeling desperate  
but there  
in the failing light  
we saw a barn  
way up high  
that had to be an escape  
  
forcing through brambles  
heaving steep and loose  
scrabbling up moss  
it was night  
by the time we flopped  
over a little wall  
into a meadow  
we laughed and cried  
with relief  
the little cabana  
would have a loft  
full of straw  
we could sleep in  
  
a bull  
  
yes a bull  
came to have a look  
it pawed the ground  
tossing its head  
just like a cartoon  
my last bit of adrenaline

sped my wobbling legs  
over to the barn

I looked back  
to see how Nick was getting on  
he sat where I left him  
the bull bellowed  
but Nick bellowed back

"FUCK

OFF!"

to my astonishment  
it did

after a night of space-blankets  
shivering  
dehydration  
blood-loss  
and straw beasts  
nibbling at us  
we hitched back to our base  
the local Guardia Civil  
were surprised to see us  
having told everyone  
that the last two people  
to give it a go  
had never returned

[IMAGE: Hughie, Dobra Valley,  
1989]

## leather jacket

that leather jacket  
kinda saved my life  
  
stepping off the train  
in Sowerby Bridge  
I shivered  
a half snow  
had come  
to kill  
  
huddling through the market  
I saw prominently displayed  
a rock & roll jacket  
red on the shoulders  
red on the elbows  
all beat up  
but lined and warm  
  
a sticker on it  
said £10  
so I rummaged through my pock-  
ets  
a night out in Bradford

at my chum's place  
chess, beer, spliffs  
and I was a bit hungover  
and worried about no dinner  
the circus tour  
had left me skint  
and threadbare  
  
there!  
a tenner!  
hang the dinner  
the jacket won hands down  
winter  
won't be sniffed at  
  
back at the bus  
my folks had sent a letter  
inside  
was a tenner

[IMAGE: Hughie in leather jacket]

## red faces in the park

Finchley Fair had asked  
for a contribution from the circus  
so a bunch of us piled in a van  
we were only down the road  
  
that morning a Minister  
after an anti-German rant  
had been forced to resign  
  
guessing the iron lady  
might put in an appearance  
Finchley being Thatcher's con-  
stituency  
we learned the tune  
to the beautiful old hymn  
"Deutschland Deutschland  
uber alles"  
they changed the words now  
  
I was on trumpet  
and could only just about  
hold the tune  
the sax and trombone

were real proper pros  
and did all the glorious harmonies  
  
when we got there  
dotted about  
were heavy set guys in suits  
with earpieces  
sharp haircuts  
and bulges under their arms  
"Thatcher's coming isn't she?"  
but they wouldn't answer  
  
ten minutes later  
suddenly there she was  
a surreal pantomime dame  
she rocketed around in a circuit  
surrounded by heavies  
so  
1, 2, 3, 4  
we played the tune  
  
a local guy leaned over  
and bonked the end of my trumpet



loosening my front teeth

moments later she was gone

the Sun reporter was beside him-  
self

delirious with joy

hopping from foot to foot

he took our details

and sure enough

the next day

in that appalling rag

“Red Faces in the Park”

a tiny article appeared

“Cheeky clowns

embarrassed the premier

after Ridley’s resignation”

a bruised lip

was a very small price

for such a deep satisfaction

## Tel Aviv TV

"quick quick grab your costume  
we'll explain on the way"  
Israeli fixers with radios  
hustled me into a jeep  
"they need someone from your cir-  
cus  
to be interviewed and to perform  
so that's you - COME ON  
the plane is already waiting"  
  
the dust flew up we sped along  
and skidded to a stop  
at the airport  
more people with radios  
waving us through  
we ran through the building  
and out on to the runway  
the plane looked like the one  
at the end of Casablanca  
  
a soldier let me have  
his window seat

"I've seen it before"  
he pointed out the Sea of Galilee  
Nazareth, Bethlehem  
I held back tears  
we saw the golden dome  
way over in Jerusalem  
I was lost  
in astonishment  
the plane came to Tel Aviv  
and wheeled out over the sea  
and back to land  
suddenly I was on the pavement  
no one there to meet me  
  
I twiddled my thumbs  
feeling like a lemon  
until a car zoomed up  
"Oh God, we're sorry!  
there's been a mistake  
the TV studios are shut today.  
How about some shopping?  
Your plane back

is this afternoon”  
I wandered around  
found a nice necklace  
and bought it for my girlfriend  
I tried to haggle in Hebrew  
having learned “one” to “ten”  
the guy spit out his toothpick  
laughing  
slapped his thighs  
and called his friend out  
they said they admired “chutzpah”  
back at the airport  
I joined the queue  
to check in bags and guns  
an enormous man in front of me  
pulled out this massive cannon  
silver  
amazing  
from a holster under his arm  
it sounded like a typewriter  
when he clunked it down  
my turn came  
they opened my suitcase  
and pulled out some beanbags  
two ping pong balls  
some rizla papers  
they guy hefted a juggling club

-2-  
with a look of sheer contempt  
it looked like he was thinking  
“how could you kill someone  
with that?”  
back in Eilat at twilight  
I was bunged back in a jeep  
“quick quick the show is about to  
start”  
again the dust and speeding  
this time past a huge crowd  
my brain was already overloaded  
but it was suddenly time  
to step out and go to the mic  
“erev tov kahal nichbad”  
(good evening honourable audi-  
ence)  
8000 people cheering  
really knocks your socks off  
the show went ok  
apart from some dayglo paint  
accidentally poured  
on my hand and in my eye  
just before I was supposed  
to juggle  
the excitement of that day  
faded all too fast  
but that night over beers

I thought it would last  
forever

[IMAGE: Eilat, Timna Park]

## library

the book had the title  
"Speed Reading"  
in big bold letters on the cover  
I slid it across the desk

the librarian was large  
an example of what  
used to be called  
"matronly"

she went through the rigmarole  
of cards and ink and stamps  
thunk! thunk!  
and slid it back

I riffled the pages with my thumb  
thrrrip!  
and sliding it back once more  
said "thanks very much"

she froze in her clumpy shoes  
and gave me a look  
Lucifer himself

would have been impressed  
a look of winter  
of savage contempt  
of something beyond the grave

I felt that dreadful gaze on my  
back  
as I speedily withdrew  
my giggles forced down into si-  
lence

back outside  
I think my laughter bursting out  
was accompanied  
by a tiny drop  
of wee

## snapdragon before

so exciting  
to winch up the king poles  
they held up the little big top  
for Snapdragon Circus  
  
they head hunted me  
to be in the show  
I was thrilled to bits  
1990 and so called 'new circus'  
was all the rage  
  
the king poles were held in place  
by a big heavy cable  
sledge-hammered into the ground  
with two enormous stakes  
that first time for me  
putting the tent up  
was like dreaming  
  
I climbed one of the poles  
during a break for tea and cigs  
looking around  
from way up top

I realised it was  
"a moment"  
a reddolent pause  
where the scene was set  
the characters introduced  
all the drama  
about to begin  
  
that beautiful blonde girl  
big bouncy barky dog  
old green Bedford bus  
I was about to properly fall  
head over heels in love  
  
musicians and children  
acrobats and actors  
technicians and weirdos  
artistes and fools  
tightrope, jugglery, costumes  
all laid out below me  
relaxing

-2- nightmares?

the show was basically theatre  
my character an outsider  
who keeps stopping the action  
on some administrative pretence  
the ring master's magic powers  
would trick Mr Gasket  
into performing various stunts  
against his will and in a trance  
until finally he wakes up  
and changes his mean old ways  
and runs away with the circus  
of his own free will

[IMAGE: Hughie 5 rings]

that tour  
that summer  
was the absolute best time  
a boy can possibly have  
some hundred shows  
around the UK  
and finishing in Israel  
representing the country  
The International Festival of New  
Circus  
but we were still only really  
just a bunch of hippies  
  
follow your dreams  
everyone says  
but what happens  
when they become

## snapdragon during

rehearsals

Sowerby Bridge

13th April 1991

we were speeding up the stunt  
that had been going so well  
the whole year before  
me on the stage  
hands in straps  
rope up to a pulley  
across to a second pulley  
and down to two people  
high up in the netting  
when they jumped  
I would fly up fast  
the audience would freak  
as I hit the roof above their heads

my mate's feet were hurting  
from hitting the ground  
the rope was shortened  
no one thought it through

he would now take the weight  
on his hands  
so down he went  
his hands pulled free

I no longer had  
a counter balance  
  
I hit the rigging bar  
way too hard  
everything much too fast  
my body went horizontal  
and then time went weird  
dilated

looking at my clothes  
all blue with red bumper boots  
seemed to go on and on  
just hanging there  
all weightless  
and utterly certain  
that nothing in this world  
was going to stop me falling  
all the way way down



to that hard hard stage  
next thing I saw myself  
from over on the empty seating  
long enough to think both  
"oh, so that's what I look like"  
and  
"what the FUCK am I doing over  
here?"  
then  
the abyss  
no light anywhere  
no stars  
no world  
no body  
just a point of consciousness  
in an infinite void  
I don't have the language  
to get it across  
words like "terror" and "fear"  
just point in the right direction  
and that was only the start  
after a while it became clear  
that if I went to my right  
I would re-enter my body  
that was where all the pain was  
so I didn't want to do that

-2- then if I went to my left  
I would never again  
be back inside my body  
and just stay in that void  
alone forever  
you can't die if you have no body  
it felt like maybe twenty minutes  
I floated in that dread  
until I thought my point of aware-  
ness  
would fly apart with stress  
an arm came around me  
"come with me Hughie, it's ok"  
and it wizzed me  
through immense distances  
at bewildering speed  
and put me  
exquisitely gently  
back inside my body  
between my shoulder blades  
the single most painful moment  
of my life

[IMAGE: Mr Gasket]

## snapdragon after

they said I had 90% bruising  
and that I would be ok  
after about three months  
I rejoined the circus  
after only a fortnight  
and re-wrote my part  
removing all the physical stuff  
and focussed on acting  
and music

I was struggling to understand  
just what had happened  
things were just not right  
they did not seem real  
everyone carried on  
just like before  
apparently unaware  
of the presence of death  
like two great dark wings  
the dragon hovered silent  
and I felt my body falling  
but strangely never landing

from time to time on stage  
even while delivering lines  
I would suddenly see myself  
from behind my right shoulder  
and became increasingly confused  
about whether I had survived  
my body certainly didn't belong  
so I wasn't sure where I was  
even while taking  
the audience's applause

in zazen I found a way  
the only thing that worked  
holding awareness on the body  
allowing chaotic feelings  
and trying not to flinch

today is an anniversary  
twenty eight years  
since I was brought back  
twenty eight years  
of trying to work out why  
there has to be some reason

for such a miracle  
it can't just be  
punishment can it?  
the daily pain and exhaustion  
has been such a burden  
but it has propelled me  
on the Buddhist path

I remember asking the fates  
if they would accept me  
as an initiate  
to take the wisdom road  
so I have to take responsibility  
and accept reality  
just the way it is

at least one thing's for sure  
and that is a matter of attitude  
if I'm asking 'what love do I get?'  
then the suffering is terrible  
if I'm asking 'what love do I give?'  
then everywhere seems filled  
with ordinary magic

[IMAGE: Phil]

## the ferryman

the human body  
is not supposed to survive  
a twenty seven foot fall  
onto the back  
on a hard surface  
so the consultant said  
"you should break the skull  
and the spine and rupture  
the internal organs  
that none of these three things  
have happened  
I frankly have no explanation for  
young man!"

he looked sharply over  
half moon glasses  
he wore a three piece suit  
and I think belonged  
in the 1950s

so if I shake or cry  
or need yet another nap

don't think  
"there's something wrong with  
him"

because there isn't

it's just the fare for the ferryman  
to bring me back across  
just what Mother Nature needs  
in return  
for my life

[IMAGE: the fateful stunt]

## endarkenment

my endarkenment was total  
an absence of light  
and also of matter  
both internal and external

bodiless

I hung suspended  
in an infinite abyss

decades later  
the dread of it  
still clings about me  
but that experience  
was actually a defence  
the brainstem functioning  
to protect me  
from the savage reality  
of the impact of the fall

just like a nightmare  
recalled in the daytime  
it can still give a jolt

but it can be known  
as a strangeness  
an illusion  
unreal  
something from the beyond

so when my nervous system  
goes into the old trauma  
and everything is demanding  
to bolt like a horse  
again and again

I must reassure myself  
that it's all a false alarm  
that really there is no crisis  
that the past really has gone  
and in the present  
I am safe  
that the universe does want me  
the proof of which  
is that right now

I am here



## Romanians

my friend had a gig near me  
and invited me along  
an East European rugby squad  
was about to play England  
at Twickenham

54 - 3

– *(NB: we both remembered the score as 93-0, but google says otherwise!)*

my mate did standup comedy  
they absolutely loved it  
they were out from behind  
the iron curtain  
for the first time in their lives

at one point a deal was done  
their vodka for my dope  
a super strong charras  
you had to handle with care

the following evening  
my friend rang me  
“look at the results”  
our new friends  
had set a record  
losing

## arrested

in the mid 90s  
I had a garret room  
the landlord was away  
London  
IT  
a summer hot spell  
he asked me to water  
his grass plants  
  
before dawn  
loud banging  
at the door  
three stories below  
  
coppers in tracksuits  
demanded to be let in  
there was more of them  
round the back  
climbing over garages  
looking purposeful  
  
I was loaded into a van  
along with a dozen plants

me and a bored policeman  
took in the aroma  
until the rest of them  
were satisfied  
that there was in fact  
no drugs factory  
their tip-off  
was false  
  
they took me to the cells  
removed laces  
belt  
and left me alone  
around 5am  
  
not so different  
from zen retreat  
thought I  
and cobbled together  
a meditation cushion  
  
I assumed the position



size 16 footsteps  
along the corridor  
a slot slid open  
a pen clicked  
something ticked  
a slot slid back

footsteps louder  
the cell next to mine  
a slot slid open  
a pen clicked  
something ticked  
a slot slid back

footsteps louder still  
my cell  
a slot slid open  
“oh!”  
a slot slid back  
footsteps hurried away

muffled conversation  
then returning  
two pairs of feet  
a slot slid open  
more muffled conversation  
some surprise  
some laughter  
a slot slid back

-2- they were incredibly  
apologetic  
when they eventually  
let me go  
“It’s not exactly  
the great train robbery”  
they said  
dissappointed  
as they handed me  
my stuff  
  
[IMAGE: Eastcott]

## the golden fleece

all the gear fell out  
as I started the crux  
of the golden fleece  
at Symond's Yat

looking down the rope  
eighty odd feet or so  
all the protection  
I'd put in  
popped

my brother looked up  
helpless to help me

I could've tried reversing  
but that looked dodgy  
the headwall didn't look too hard  
being scared  
would only make a fall  
more likely

the mind  
stopped

the moves  
flowed

two minutes  
of simplicity  
of flight

of accidental  
perfection

[IMAGE: Los Rubios]

## El Naranjo de Bulnes

the picture says it all kind of	in that second picture
	you can kind of tell
there I sit on the summit	she really isn't happy
of that wondrous mountain	to be there
1989 "I ran the world" t-shirt	
wearing my boina	I thought it would be
in the majest of youth	a symbolic triumph
relaxed	for both of us
triumphant	but the effort of getting her up
an effortless smile	added to the even greater effort
	of getting her back down
even when it was being taken	sort of did for me
I knew it was both literally	
and metaphorically	our last abseil was in the dark
a high point	strangers helped us back to camp
	everything I had
fast forward twelve years	had been spent
my then wife	in helping, encouraging, cajouling
her struggles with low confidence	sometimes sheer lifting
and me	a person whose fear
my struggles with PTSD	had turned her into luggage
on the summit again	

a few days later  
back at work  
on my way back from the toilet  
between one footfall and another  
I felt a pang  
I thought it was flu  
that was the moment  
that all 'that' started  
the endless treadmill  
of ME  
the overexertion  
on top of the fall  
was something the system  
just could not abide  
the brakes went on  
and all these years later  
they simply will not  
come off

[IMAGE: El Naranjo de Bulnes  
1989]

[IMAGE: El Naranjo de Bulnes  
2001]

## leg

one snowy Christmas  
the whole family went  
to the woods  
I had a wrestle  
with my brother  
both of us  
middle-aged  
it seemed the perfect opportunity  
to spring some jiu-jitsu  
I waited for him to push  
and spun around  
for a hip throw  
the inner edge of my boot  
had caught in the snow  
leaving my foot behind  
pop pop  
and my leg was broke  
dad drove me to the hospital  
there was a long wait  
he leaned over to whisper  
see that guy?

he's come in  
to have his tie  
straightened

[IMAGE: Colm and Hughie]

## chess

the scars were deep  
all over his face  
car windscreen maybe?  
we sat down  
shook hands  
arranged the pieces  
set the clock  
and began  
the cut  
and thrust  
gradually  
the nerves subsided  
and eventually  
I set a trap  
a pawn as bait  
to tempt his queen  
once in  
she was doomed  
in three moves  
at most  
the permutations

branched out  
like broccoli  
at the end  
each flower  
was death  
I checked it  
over and over  
and made my move  
heart in mouth  
attention shifted  
to him  
his eyes brightened  
noticing  
his prey  
his spirits lifted  
as he thought it  
undefended  
I could read his mind  
on his battered face  
feel his joy rising  
as he reached out  
and took it

over the next few moves

the reality dawned

his features crumbled

his demeanour sank

his life

drained out

my guilt

lacerating

taking his queen

another cut

[IMAGE: chess]

## bucket

over the doctor's shoulder  
I hallucinated Green Tara  
ethereal light all around  
she winked at me  
and I smiled  
"yes, please yes, I'm ready"  
but I wasn't  
or she wasn't  
and the doctor found a vein  
  
later he said it was  
his personal best  
bringing someone back  
from that far gone  
I remember him telling  
the little Indian boy  
to run  
  
fast  
  
to get the list of medical things  
he'd just given him

I had started feeling sick  
just after breakfast  
and quickly lost many litres  
of body fluids  
from both ends  
I was staying in a monastery  
in Bodh Gaya  
and in my cell  
rupturing my life  
into a bucket  
  
I was trying to raise the alarm  
but then kept passing out  
this cycle  
went around and around  
for two or three hours  
before someone heard me  
  
an English doctor  
months later  
said it was most likely  
cholera  
Christ on a bike! cholera!



well

another close call I guess

from that I know

that I'm not afraid to die

it's to be alone forever

in that infinite void

that's what grips me

the utter cold panic

frozen isolation

a desolation so complete

the Queen of the Dead herself

would turn away

in fright

## sapphire

the taxi driver  
kept taking me to shops  
carpets, suits, jewellery  
all over Chennai  
it got boring  
  
one place had a glass case  
with bright lights  
and incredible sapphires  
I asked to see one  
  
the guy unlocked it  
and took out a cushion  
with the biggest glittery rock  
I'd ever seen  
a blue that sliced  
and thrilled  
  
he handed it to me  
I took it  
my hand forming the starting posi-  
tion  
for the 'French Drop'

the simplest sleight of hand  
and 'boff' it was gone  
I couldn't help it  
  
reaching over  
I pulled it out of his ear  
and gave it back  
but he'd already pressed the alarm  
  
two big heavies  
materialised out of thin air  
like genies  
and frog marched me out  
laughing  
helplessly  
  
me  
not them  
  
[IMAGE: Chennai woman laugh-  
ing]

## scattering

they had come to the island

to scatter the ashes

daughter

son-in-law

husband

about to leave Thailand

and not yet found

a fitting time and place

to fulfill

the dead woman's

last wishes

the beach she named

had turned into

a scuba resort

bars

music

hedonism

I had just come from a monastery

yells

bells

smells

a chance encounter

lead to an impromptu service

at first light

we had a little fire

we had incense

and chanting

time for people

to say their bit

to remember

to cry

it came to the part

where she poured out

grey remains powdered

a life in the surf

this daughter returned

she laughed and cried

at the same time

I felt the aching heart  
of the world  
embracing everything

[IMAGE: beach scattering]

## Grist

I had asked him  
not to leave  
his liturgy on the floor  
that's what we called  
the sheets of A4  
that had our Dharma words  
the things to say and chant  
at the start and the end  
of our weekly meditation group  
he had come for years  
but very on and off  
spending months or longer  
seriously on the piss  
  
he busked the guitar in town  
and was borderline homeless  
when he was sober  
he would go back to running  
he had represented his county  
at hurdles I think it was

something about my request  
made him proper crazy  
he jumped to his feet  
and thrust his face into mine  
"it's only a piece of paper"  
he barked  
as he flapped it hard  
on the ground once more  
  
I don't recall my response  
probably tried to be diplomatic  
what I do recall is the obituary  
a few years later  
he had chucked himself  
under a train  
  
it said he had six times  
the normally fatal dose  
of alcohol in his blood  
at the time  
  
I feel sure the two are related  
the disrespect and the death

but somehow it now feels wrong

even to speculate

except to say

I now feel

the meaning of the words

is in the manner of their handling

[IMAGE: broken guitar]

## Bott

in the IT office  
childish geeky banter  
if someone left their computer  
unwisely unlocked  
someone would jump on  
and send a message

"I love the cock!"

how we laughed

one night it snowed  
boy did it snow  
the buses were cancelled  
me and my chum  
crunched in on foot  
during the slog and sparkle  
we hatched a plan  
most dastardly

an adjacent car park  
was lower than our office  
so there we went

and side by side  
in four foot tracks  
we spelled out  
a message for our friend  
the esteemed Mr Bott  
"Bott (heart symbol) cock"

brilliant

we sniggered  
and went back to work

our esteemed colleague  
had taken a photo  
and sent it to a mate  
in fun  
someone in head office  
had overseen it  
and that afternoon  
a boss barked

"who wrote it?"

I owned up

he gave me a dressing down

I offered to take the hit

and get sacked

if he let my co-conspirator

off the hook

later still

he had the same conversation

with the other miscreant

"I'm Spartacus!"

we had both said

the snow melted

eventually away

into legend

[IMAGE: bottenator]



## levitation

there is a levitation trick  
we're not supposed to tell  
how it's done  
like most magic  
the secret  
is disappointing

returning from the bathroom  
to my brand new girlfriend's  
bedroom  
it was all bedecked  
with candles

with not a stitch on  
I realised  
the setting was perfect  
so I went into character  
walked very slowly  
seriously  
silently  
to the end of the bed

in a solemn gesture  
of finger to lips  
I asked for her quiet  
and total attention

after a dramatic pause  
I lifted  
a handwidth  
off the floor  
and floated  
for an impossible  
heartbeat

I managed to keep the mood  
dead serious  
as I took both her hands  
in mine  
and gazing into  
her big round eyes  
made her promise  
breathlessly  
that she would never tell  
a living soul

what exactly

she had just witnessed

never good at deadpan

I must've laughed

for half an hour

so if you can keep

a secret

well

so can I

[IMAGE: joker]

## shine

dreaming of my grandma  
and mam  
baking in the kitchen

I asked where brother number 4  
was  
"he's taking number 2 swimming"  
said my mam

"but how can the younger one  
take the older one?"  
I asked

"haven't you heard?  
the families turned  
upside down  
now the younger  
looks after the older"

"but I'm the youngest  
how can I look after  
everyone?"

grandma looks up  
and says  
"all you have to do  
is shine!"

[IMAGE: Grandma Carroll]

song 'shine' on album Mantras-  
phere

## Gaumin Si

outside the Chan hall  
at Gaumin Si  
we discussed and stretched  
after De Lin's Dharma talk  
I told John I thought  
one of the best bits  
was when he said  
"the silence of silent illumination  
is not the silence of no thoughts  
it's the silence of no reaction"  
John poked me in the forehead  
  
"don't  
  
you  
  
forget it!"

[IMAGE: Gaumin Si]

## Tiananmen Square

Tiananmen square

just leaving

a pair of synchronised soldiers

in high camp paraded

super quick right past us

I think they were wearing

actual makeup

John said "not like

in the British army"

I said "by the left

MINCE!"

and we wiggled our

bums and flounced

right under the nose

of a very cross looking

bulldog of a guard

I think I actually injured

some intercostal muscles

we laughed so hard

Ah John

zen master clowning

that's what I salute

[IMAGE: Tiananmen Square]

## lynch mob

how hard is it  
to make a music video?  
I was thinking  
doing an experiment  
stepping very slowly  
meditatively  
towards the main drag  
holding my phone  
up by my chest  
  
I'd speed it up  
so the walking was normal  
everyone else very fast  
  
if I hadn't stopped filming  
I could've shown you  
the woman running up  
the red face  
the spit flying out  
the jabbing finger  
the volume

"IT'S ILLEGAL TO FILM CHILDREN!"  
she shrieked  
I looked around  
but saw no one  
turning back  
I said "wh?"  
but she was off again  
  
"YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED!"  
"IT'S DISGRACEFUL!"  
and so forth  
she power marched away  
I fled into a shop  
to buy a sandwich  
and to wait for my heart  
to slow down  
  
as I got back  
to where I was working  
I heard a banging on windows  
there she was again  
on a passing bus

accusing finger

pointing right at me

surrounded by a mob of blokes

lots of tattoos

not much hair

happy shoppers

become

lynch mob

[IMAGE: Murray John]

## mist

flying my blue motorbike  
over that big old bridge to Wales  
into an enfoldment of mist

nearly blind  
I slowed to a near stall

over the hump  
descending  
a lorry came up behind  
flashing lights  
honking

lifting the helmet's visor  
I saw that the cloud  
was left behind  
except for a little bubble  
all mine

[IMAGE: Severn Bridge]



## models

the lorry arrived  
one thousand CDs  
my album  
was here  
  
a bunch of us  
ran down the stairs  
the guy rolled up a shutter  
hefted out one of the boxes  
one hundred copies  
  
excitement built up  
negotiating cardboard  
flaps and folds  
then there it was  
Mantrasphere

[IMAGE: Mantrasphere cover]  
{.img-half}

the printing looked ok  
there was fiddly cellophane  
and everything

an actual real album  
at last  
  
the first copy  
I gave to the driver  
a sort of good luck ritual  
he accepted with a sniff  
made me sign a form  
and got gone  
  
there was a party  
a few weeks later  
a programmer friend  
turned fashion photographer  
had a bunch of models  
over for a house party  
  
it snowed  
I skidded  
mostly sideways  
grimly determined to make it  
whatever the damage  
after all

you never knew

we might get snowed in

and now I was

a genuine

bona fide

recording artist

it might have a Buddhist theme

but I aint

no monk

[IMAGE: Lex, Gestalta, Hughie, x,

Madame Bink, Rebecca Tun]

[Mantrasphere](#) album

## finger ring

wedding gig

doing magic

for the bridesmaids

"this is a finger ring

good isn't it!?

do you like that?

everyone likes

a good finger ring

don't they?!"

the kind of naughty line

that has to be handled carefully

on this occasion

a guy was about to swallow

a mouthful of champagne

and managed to snort it

we all watched

transfixed

as he heroically struggled

to not let it

explode out of his nose

when at last he swallowed

tears down his cheeks

everyone jumped to their feet

for a standing ovation

[IMAGE: wedding magic]

## Paul Daniels

a tweet offered a place  
a Paul Daniels Master Class  
twelve would-be magicians  
to spend a day  
at his house  
I answered and got it  
the last place  
the last minute

he answered the door  
a beautiful house  
near a village  
called Wargrave  
I looked down  
he really was  
that small

Debbie McGee made coffee  
I was filled with a sense  
of the surreal  
we waited for the others  
with a tongue tied guy

paralysed with nerves  
they rang to say  
they had broken down  
so the three of us  
started without them  
they never did  
show up

before she left us  
Debbie warned us  
he could talk forever  
when we had had enough  
we had to say so

there were two big white rabbits  
in an enormous cage  
and bizarre magical paraphernalia  
in every corner

in the toilet there were photos  
of the great man posing  
with all the political figures  
I detested

he started with all business  
how to make a living  
all the tricks  
of making money  
he told us of his poverty  
claiming he was eleven  
when he saw his first tree  
the industrial North East  
sounded like Mordor  
it started to make sense  
his allegiance  
to those who charm and trick  
so the rich get richer  
bugger the rest  
  
he was hilarious  
and brilliant  
amazing us  
every few minutes  
our silent partner  
leaving the conversation  
to just me  
and the grandee  
  
there was an endless stream  
of incredible anecdotes  
he had known  
anyone famous  
for over fifty years  
my favourite

-2-  
was about the Prince of Dubai  
who he had entertained  
without props or preparation  
when the hired magician  
another famous name  
had managed to offend  
Paul had disappeared  
everything off the banquet table  
piece  
by piece  
  
after the third racist joke  
1970s style  
and vile  
he said  
“you can’t tell jokes like that any-  
more”  
I said  
“there’s a reason for that Paul”  
there was a frosty silence  
but he forgave me  
and pointed towards his neigh-  
bour’s house  
around the bend of the river  
it belonged to the spoon bender  
Uri Geller  
Paul said the river  
used to be straight

he challenged me  
to vanish something  
I used his own method  
slightly ashamed  
to ingratiate  
  
he gave up his secrets  
in such a sweet way  
I could tell that he liked me  
he told a story  
of someone offering hundreds of  
pounds  
waving the cash around  
for a trick  
but he didn't give it up  
because he didn't like him  
he then went on to show me  
I felt blessed  
  
at one point I asked him  
about the Mrs Merton joke  
she had asked Debbie McGee  
"what first attracted you  
to millionaire Paul Daniels?"  
a crack that has lasted  
the one everyone seems to re-  
member  
he was clearly wounded  
and said that the irony  
was that it was Debbie

who was the rich one  
when they first met  
  
some months later  
we went to his show  
at the Wyvern Theatre  
at the meet and greet  
afterwards  
he recognised me  
we smiled  
so complicated  
that acknowledgement  
I liked him  
not a lot  
but I liked him  
  
it was among  
his last few shows  
shortly afterwards  
he disappeared

[IMAGE: Paul Daniels and me]

## scroll

I'd been asked  
to talk on Chan  
at the Ashmolean  
there was a calligrapher there  
Bing Nan Li  
he had no English

a group milled about  
I decided to begin  
and called their attention  
with a bell  
and chanting

when I sang  
the ancient tunes  
the three refuges  
the four great vows  
the traditional Chinese  
he came close and sat  
I sensed his emotion  
in his demeanour

after my talk  
a noise  
about silence  
the translator  
came to tell me  
the man had decided  
to give me a scroll  
the Heart Sutra  
she was  
consternated  
saying the artifact  
was precious  
not feeling worthy  
I put that aside  
and accepted  
whatever the gesture meant  
to him  
was a mystery  
not to be  
evaluated

[IMAGE: Bing Nan Li-Ashmolean]

[IMAGE: Heart Sutra scroll]

[Heart Sutra wikipedia](#)



## airborne

all the stories my dad told  
about his time down the mines  
the "coal tattoo" behind his ear  
from when he was knocked  
unconscious

when my new father in law  
at the head of the table  
declared "of course everyone  
was behind Thatcher,  
unless you were a miner, haha"  
my blood boiled  
as it must

a few minutes later  
my new mother in law  
Cruella  
sprang to her cloven hooves  
and shaking a finger  
right in my face  
pretty much yelled  
"African countries are poor

because they are LAZY!"

I'm glad I lost my temper  
slamming my fist on the table  
"I'M NOT HAVING IT!"  
all the crockery  
was just for a moment

airborne

[IMAGE: Colm at the pithead]

## rain

floundering through the labyrinth  
the hostile environment  
after months  
the benefits interview  
arrived

a hollow laugh  
at the cliché

[IMAGE: rainy street]

Pic by [Mike Barr](#)

the lady was nice enough  
but the grilling  
was gruelling  
my disabilities laid bare

each question  
uncovering  
exposing  
unpleasant truths

my brave face slipped off  
as I left  
rain lashed down  
diagonal drenching  
the nadir  
all mixed  
with tears