Poetry Series

John Garth Raubenheimer

- 82 poems -

Publication Date:

July 2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

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John Garth Raubenheimer (21/12/1947)

Queen Vic, Johannesburg, breech birth. I still have scars in my groin area and under my arms where the skin tore when they pulled me out. First of five children, I grew up under apartheid on a poultry farm run by my mother. My dad was an inventor. I remember our servants with love, particularly the three women who looked after us, first Sannah, then Rosie, then Maria Chauke, carrying us on their backs when we were infants. We lived in a fertile valley next door to a Portuguese market gardener who ploughed his fields with oxen. Drums beat all weekend, accompanied by singing. I saw police raids, young khaki-uniformed policemen chasing and beating Africans with their truncheons. I saw one drag a woman along by her hair - the first time I'd seen long hair on a black person. One night I watched stars colliding and making odd patterns over the horizon. Maybe these were hallucinations caused by the schizophrenia from which I suffered more and more later in life. We had brave friends who fought apartheid and went to prison or were listed as communists. They live in my heart. Impossible to write much more down here. I lived a life under apartheid. Was called up to serve in the army. Married. Divorced. Spent years as a mental patient, but when I got work I kept it. Found my feet literally when I began to walk everywhere in Joburg. Voted ANC and for the Women's Party in our first democratic election in 1994. Married again and joined my English wife in Yorkshire. She died in 2000. I have become a Christian. I work here as a carer.

*Please Come In

This poem is your house.
The man who built it, who once lived in it,
has moved away.

What was sordid in him
went into the cement -
but none of that matters.

There aren't any messages
left lying around,
only the hope you'll feel peaceful here,
that you'll feel close to yourself,
quiet,
left alone.

Put your favourite paintings on the walls,
play your own music.

Let your real life continue.
You're welcome,
but if it doesn't suit you, please feel free to go.

John Garth Raubenheimer

A Joburger in Yorkshire

Where I live, rocks perched on the garden walls
replace Victorian railings, melted to make bombs.
Most of them were broken out of limestone pavement,
a water-sculpted stone, much used for rockeries in gardens
because the bits are so strange, intricate and individual.
These soldierly chunks have come up with a surprise,
after a time you start to see things in them.
Dogs, horses, a whale coming up to sound.
The vision appears out of a finger of stone,
then disappears as you walk past clop clop clop
the noise of your heels resonating between houses
plain, modest, built also of gray stone.
Ours indeed is a stone world. I've learned the loveliness
of stone. It's as changeable and vision-bringing as cloud.
Every place, I've noticed, has its belonging stone
from the pink, or red sandstone, up north
to the chalk of the south, 'the white cliffs'.
Ours is ash-grey, with embers in it at sunset - or
when autumn leaves latch into notches in the walls.
It's black in winter, green in the spring;
remarked all year by bird-splashings, lichen -
near bus-stops, knobs of dry chewing gum.
(It's May now. This was your favourite month.
'This is when everything that was hidden starts to show
itself and grow. The snowdrops, daffodils, crocusses
cracked the ice. But all of this was waiting.'
You said, 'Don't cast a clout till May is out! ')
People here tell you, 'It's not writ in stone'.
They mean, Don't worry, the plan can be changed.
Boer maak 'n plan, as Afrikaners say -
meaning, approximately, A farmer makes a plan.
We all have to learn how to improvise
where earth and stone are a rolling sea.
Look about here at the height of these waves,
cattle are munching over the rooftops. School-
kids, mothers, farmers, shopkeepers: We're
fish discovering how to be sailors. When I first came
to 'God's own country' with my wife, Biffy
- in loving memory of whom I am carving this
bench, with it's heroic view across borders -
I had trouble deciding where to land my eyes.
Barns and farmhouses riding swells - slung with dry-
stone walls like nets, or reins resisting green horses -
had to be crewed, more than seen. Vision Requiring
Skill Versatility Ability To Tie Knots Swarm Up Ladders
ran the ad under EYES WANTED. What I did want
was to make my home at the root of the waves,
near the start of the tongue. But Yorkshire -
I am a son of those yellow mine-dumps...
it was years, before I felt you, as a poet.
Well... vision appears out of a finger of stone.
In loving memory, we sit on our bench - or boat,

while a Beloved's name keeps us afloat.

John Garth Raubenheimer

A Lesson From The Master

'So you're from South Africa - '

Wolves discipled into lambs,
the carver's hands
- fingernails clipped short and square as chisels -
browse, off duty. Froth settles in his beer.
Relaxed in his well-travelled armchair,
he reminds you of your first school headmaster.
Eyes humerous, humoured, clear sky-bright.
'Then you must know a thing or two.'

He winks.
'Now then.'
He blows a strong puff, clearing the dust from a treasure.
'Nice grapes hmm?
But see the grain. Or if you like, don't see,
like the student who carved - or plucked -
this bunch. I'm not saying who he was.'
The fingers scan. His eyes horizon forty years.

'You need to start with the grain, because
the grain is the life of the wood.'
You nod to show you've understood.
'These grapes have everything...
but they don't have life. '

He puts down the piece,
picks up another. His eyes glow softly.
'When we follow the grain - '

Stroking a pensive woman's face.
Glory of curls around knots in the wood.
'We free a mystery.

Our Jean carved this before she died.
She'd lost all her hair.
So, did life know what was wanted here? '

John Garth Raubenheimer

A Song For The Night

Well the night is only night
And a star is just a star
And near is only near
And far is only far
And your life is just a life
And a flame is just a flame
And the wind is only wind
And a name is just a name

And all of us are brave
And all of us are strong
When the worst becomes the least
And the least becomes a song

For God is always God
In the waters running clear
And all pain is only pain
The word forever just a tear
And my song is just a song
And I sing it soft and clear
Baby let it ease the hurt
Let it wash away your fear

All the horrors we have fought
Were just our shadows on the wall
Past the spectre of your guilt
Any fall is just a fall

And all of us are brave
And all of us are strong
When the worst becomes the least
And the least becomes a song

Well my song is just a song
And I sing it soft and clear
Baby let it ease the hurt
Let it wash away your fear
Because the night is only night
And a star is just a star
And near is only near
And far is only far

John Garth Raubenheimer

All Your Wishes Will be Granted

'Where's my dog-food?
I've asked a hundred times.
Where's my can of dog-food? '
a woman demanded,
Friday
at the staff and patients' meeting.
Saturday at lunch
in the stainless-steel canteen
where we queued for our food,
with knife and fork alongside,
a tin of dog-food stood on her tray.

At Tara (mental) Hospital 1981

John Garth Raubenheimer

Appearances Are Deceptive.

In the dead garden
nick a wire of bramble:
The shock of green life.

John Garth Raubenheimer

At The Charity Shop

Here's a boy starting off in life.
He's bought an old brown wallet,
once property of someone leaving it...

John Garth Raubenheimer

Back Seat

One of my earliest memories is of my father's powerful forearm, hand on the wheel as we push through the night. His smoke webs around the cab of the car. My mother is a force next to him; their voices wrestle like friendly snakes, as lights lay eggs along the seams of the ceiling. My eyes tunnel into the dark ahead. But mostly I let the dark shovel itself into me, with its debris of lit glass, neon, red, yellow, green. I watch the robots. I try to anticipate their changes. I fix my eyes on incidental objects as they slide past. And so it is that trivia in Malvern, Germiston, Kensington, Cyrildene - a row of statues worn by the hat of a building, a plaque cut in the shape of Australia, brown as a birthmark on the cheek of another, a plaster dog with its mouth open - become shrines of mystery and terror.

I propitiate the witch of the icy dip. I worship the totem of the traffic-light. The dog enters my dreams and I cannot distinguish between it and three dogs in a story my mother reads me, the first with eyes as big as saucers, the second with eyes like cartwheels, the third with eyes huge as windmills. This dog is the first. I know I will meet the second and the third.

(In South Africa traffic-lights are 'robots'.)

John Garth Raubenheimer

Barefoot In A Red Dress

Barefoot in a red dress, toes curled in sand
scuffed by our dancing, you threw back your head -
a toss of your blonde mane that primed the band
and sang with savage flair to wake the dead.
How long had I known you? Just for an hour.
As you tamed wild drums what happened to me?
Dazed, entranced I stood, shaken by your power,
touched to my quick by your dark turn of key.
Afterwards we talked, as the fire sank low,
watched our friends strolling down the starry beach
curving away in a glimmering bow,
the teased-for moment held just out of reach.
Till you shrugged off the dress, you ran with me
naked into the phosphorescent sea.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Between The Seconds

Between the seconds,
gardens billow. Light, delight.
He strolls for hours.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Breaking News In The South Africa Of My Childhood

A Free State farmer, Mr.
Andries
Du Toit,
was killed when his vehicle left the
road north of Bloemfontein today.

He is survived by his wife Ella
and their three children, Lucius, Jan and Katie.

Four natives were also killed.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Bus Haiku

This series of haiku were created during regular journeys on a bus.

From humming seed-pod
clung to the stem of the road,
I free your haiku.

After winter rains
see those flakes of sky
in the puzzle of landscape.

Small town grey as ash.
To the east clouds part,
windows like embers ignite.

Poet and neighbour
Cara, I hear that you've died.
The shopping-aisle reels.

Reservoirs low as
the hearts of the supplicants.
A soft rain sifts down.

In a bright arcade
cobbled with conversation,
eggs, bacon, coffee.

Young buck jolts away.
Bluebells ghost the forest floor.
And you're here. You too.

Memory graces
his exile; he sees
loved faces in strange faces.

With its hot, damp streets
Taipei's a cellar.
Umbrellas push like mushrooms.

Raw February
wind slips onto my fingers
gloves, woven from ice.

Two pianists, facing
each other, and Poulenc's score,
descend duelling.

A cloud-army in retreat.
Crisscross vapour trails...
Zorro of the skies.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Childhood At Crystal Waters

Bums in the bones of the river,
its sculptured rock a slide.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Cleaning For Mrs L.

I'd see you crouching down by your front door:
your pastel colours through the frosted glass.
All ready to spring on me with a roar
- old women do roar - the instant I'd pass
that one bright red rose on the garden wall.
'Just going by my door, I saw you turn, '
you'd cry, beckoning me into the hall,
the door flung open, on your cheeks the burn
of guilt and pleasure: company at last.
Pretext was the cleaning. I'd carry on
polishing, dusting the black-and-white past,
while you prepared a cup of tea, a scone.
Then we'd sit down, the excuse fell away.
You talked, I listened for my cleaner's pay.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Consummation

York - in a swallow-tailed May.
Opalescent clouds kept infinity at bay
but not the sun. Stippled vapour trails,
fleecy, fleeting, hung in the bowl of milk
- upside-down yet miraculously unspilt -
like straws for terrestrial gods to suck.
We were invited to lunch on a tablecloth of air
which, if it was stained with a petulance of smoke,
bore the intransigent chimneys no grudge.
No grudge. We could have shouted love;
you nestled seedlings in yogurt pots
salvaged from the bin, sliced-up egg cartons -
kneecaps cartilaged with compost;
I combed the past for curses, I found none.
Came the fragilest of evenings, I said,
'that was one of the loveliest - '
'Days, yes, ' you said, 'it was.'

John Garth Raubenheimer

Crow

An oil slick on legs,
he struts in my path.
Bad luck giving me the eye.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Don't Be Angry If I Go Away, Love

Don't be angry if I go away, love
away for a little
into the empty spaces behind my eyes.

I have gone fishing
in the dark spaces,
in the quiet places where the quick stars swim.

But I will be back, love,
I will soon be back,
with a shining salmon to light your house,
with my hands golden with comet-dust,
brimming with the bread of suns.

I will be back, love, I will soon be back.
Don't be angry, love, I will soon be back.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Father, Son.

The boy watched the ghosts
on the far side of the valley.
There under the black hill. He
stood by the farm gate and
watched. He was his father's
son, a brave boy. But his
courage failed. He thought
about his father who he
revered. What would he do?
Should he tell his father?
There are ghosts. I've seen
them. They flicker and dance

about down there - and I am
so scared. His father had told
him: I believe what I can see
and touch, in what others proved
by bravery, by hard work.

Hard work. And so this was
hard; to go down there in
the dark, down to the river, under
the black hill. The boy set off.
A last look at the house where
his mother read him stories,
where his father ruled the roost
with his clear sight. It rode like
a ship in the night. He headed

for those shifting lights, chill in
the dark, stumbling over clods,
pants soaked by the drag of
lucerne. I can see him still.
When he got to the pigs, heard
them rooting, snuffling - content
in their sty - he almost turned.
He pushed on though, on trembling
legs, heart pounding fast enough
to die. And so he came to where
the ghosts danced - in triumph
ruled. They triumphed round him,

this clear-eyed son. He looked
around. A mile away cars swung
out at the junction, their sweeping
lights touching river mist. Joy.
He could go home. He could go
home, holding his dad's hand.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Flowers

Cards, music
books.

One day he brought
to her in
her hospital bed,
a handful of snow.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Flowers And Flames

Fell asleep listening to
Radio Three.
I was vaguely aware of
jazz
being played.
My dreams started playing
with the squealy music
just like a kid
plays with water out of a hose,
holding his thumb over
the twisting pressure.
I was aware - took
control of it myself...
I took control of my dreams.

Rolling about half-awake...
Flashing flowers, flames...

John Garth Raubenheimer

For My Therapist

In this plain room where hearts unscroll
their manuscripts of pain,
two comfortable chairs;
you've forgotten the creamer again;
we'll drink from the bitter cup.
It's your hopeful gift,
sharp sting of the seed
round which pearls are grown.
I curl like an ear round my shame
or like a rose,
lifted, by a grace.
As God holds to his ear
the booming dark shell of the world.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Glutton

He has
licked away
the seconds
swallowed
the hours
gulped down
the days
gobbled up
the years

today
is a bone
stuck in his throat

by tomorrow
he will have
completely
lost
his appetite

John Garth Raubenheimer

Government Adviser

Knucklebaum sits on the bones of history.
He feels the way they cut into his ar*e
like a devotee reading the I-Ching.

Tossing his cheroot into the flowers -
for he, Knucklebaum, is in paradise;
can he see? does he know? - he pronounces

it to be a good day for a bombing.
In the mellifluous voice we all know
and love, to this group of illustrious souls...

Though not in so many words... Knucklebaum
shifting on his rump, says it's 'auspicious':
this perfect spring day... Well, figure it out!

John Garth Raubenheimer

Harry

To your small repertoire of tricks, high jinks
- diving into the neighbour's place to ransack his fridge;
hiding the keys of the house where no-one could find them;
smile like the lid coming off a can of beans;
the relentless demand for coffee, random cries;
words you baffled us with, three, or four, accomplished over forty years -
you have added dying, death.

Through our tears we are amazed.
How did you manage the big one, Harry?

Sometimes a sly look in your eyes, like a person who holds the cards that will pivot the game
(those eyes usually friendly, questing, blue) .
Coat hanging off your shoulders like folded wings,
as you hurtled for your seat on the bus.
The grooves you made in the track of the last day hold few clues.

Breathless we wait for an encore.

Will you visit us in our dreams?
Rummaging like a badger through our cupboards,
hiding the keys to all our secrets.

We knew you, Harry. How will you know us?

John Garth Raubenheimer

He Was Born Feet First

He was born feet first.
A great man, walked on his hands.
Married a circus.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Hiroshima

Mother oh Mother
our bark has blistered
our bones weep fire
our branches melt
Mother our eyes
are burning birds
the sun hangs bleeding
beneath our lids
Mother our earth
sucks back its foliage
Mother our sky
is split with pain
in every stone
our fire weeps
in every eye
your children burn
Mother Mother
I am a weeping hand
your breasts
are bone

John Garth Raubenheimer

His Final Wish

My grandfather lay dying on his hospital bed.
A sour smell came off him.
He kept pointing at his mouth.
What awful thing was he trying to tell me?

My aunt Irene bustled past me,
simultaneously reaching for the water jug.
'Can't you see he's thirsty? '

John Garth Raubenheimer

I Am Still A Child In Amanzimtoti

I am a child in Amanzimtoti,
my hand in my mother's hand.

A tiny-headed man with a mouth like a beak,
an unauthorized, yanking body,
blares towards us, 'Gaah gaah GAAH! '
I tug at my mother.
He tugs at the sea, crying like a gull.
The sea leaps.

I am afraid of the waves
I am afraid of the person I don't know.
I am still a child in Amanzimtoti,
a long way from the remote, black rocks

where white waters break and foam.

From the man I will be on that far promontory.
My mother - and father - long gone.

Silhouetted by the sea, unfathomable, wild,

under the sun, the fury of the stars.
Feet on the Rock,
both my feet on the Rock.
struck in a fisherman's pose
tugging at the sea

crying, 'Gaah gaah gaah
gaah gaah! '

John Garth Raubenheimer

I Caught An Old Woman Of 104

It happened
in the home
where I worked
for a while.
I noticed her wobbling on
her feet. She toppled over
backwards. I leapt

John Garth Raubenheimer

I Went Down To The Dam

I went down to the dam, and
lay in the wet grass.

Now, I thought,
I'm going to make a symbol.
I curled up under the gleaming stars,
curved my spine, tucked up my feet,
and waited.

Star-child, I murmered, Star-child...

I tugged at the cord that joined me to the sky.

And I felt the peace flow in,
into my belly, I felt the shining
silence
pulsing in my veins.

When I'm dying
- the thought like a softly flaring supernova -

This is what I want to remember.

John Garth Raubenheimer

I'm Writing This To Cheer You Up

A swallow dies in Siberia.
Vast frozen land, a tiny clot of feathers.
That's the sad part of this story.

It's found by a political prisoner
who happens to be an ornithologist.

Mighty Russia topples.
The prisoners are released.
'Dear comrades in South Africa'
the free man writes,
'Congratulations on your new democracy.
With this note please find
your ring taken from a swallow
which flew all the way here from Cape Town.
I've kept it on a string round my neck
since I found the little bird
frozen in ice five years ago.

I believe it has brought me luck
but I'm sorry I've kept you waiting.
It's only now that I can post it.'

Mystery of the swallows, of their awesome journey.
Mystery of the light the darkest
darkness can't put out.
Mystery of the heart
for whom the tiny death was hope.

John Garth Raubenheimer

In A White Room

Communication isn't always with words...

No vestige of cinema on the walls,
Yet light and shadow play those holy games
By which remembrance stands or falls -
Fine magic prompting the naming of names.
No exits or entrances; still ordained
By the flicker of his lids, hatching fire,
Here a galaxy of bright creatures reigned,
Pageantry of longing and desire.
Catch these if you still can, entire sir,
You're not yet beaten, finished up, or dead;
In this at least let you and I concur,
You love those dreams that whirl around your head.
Old man, with your memories in white room:
Your heart unspools, embarrassing the gloom.

John Garth Raubenheimer

In The Home

'He was with me at the funeral, Alan was.'
Nobody has the heart to tell her
that what she remembers is a dream.
In a relentless fever she works the seam,
'I don't know what I would have done
without him there. He's a good son.
Jack was ever so proud of him.'
To those coming on shift at handover time:
'She thinks it was her husband who died,
not her son Alan in that car smash.
Her husband Jack died years ago.
Best go along with her, at least for now.
Be careful lifting her, she cracked three ribs
in the fall she had the night she heard.'

John Garth Raubenheimer

In Vondelpark, Amsterdam 1970

Most people stayed under
the bridge
where it was dry,

strumming guitars, murmuring
tired nothings, or

singing.
I chose quiet,
a patch of grass
on my own.

Middle of the night I felt a tug
on my arm.
A girl said, 'Roll over!
Roll over! '
What was THIS?
I obediently rolled. She
produced scissors,
hacked off half my plastic cover.

It rained and it rained.

I was starving.
My money almost gone.

A van would roll up
every evening.
Chips. With mayonnaise. Still
my favourite.
A speaker on it used to play music -
where I first heard Joni
Mitchell's 'Blue'.

I smoked some hashish with some
friendly guys.
I don't know much about illegal drugs
(not that drugs were illegal in Amsterdam) .
It looked like a twist
of black tobacco.

I noticed
and continued noticing
a swan taking off
out of water.
It's wing beats were solid.
.....climb.
.....could
.....you
.....steps
Like

Suddenly I remembered me.
Fear - a childhood fear - drenched me.
I tore up and ate the grass.
'Help, ' I said to my friends.
They grabbed up their stuff and ran.

'I'm dying.'
I told everyone.
I ran up to a girl and
kissed her.
Her boyfriend stepped back in shock.

Two men in kind uniforms
took me to a clinic.
Someone gave me an injection.

Then they took me home to the park.

Hear Joni Mitchell sing 'Blue' on You-tube...
it's very apt.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Its Lunch Hour Come At Last

A 'bakkie' is a light truck. 'Tannie' is Afrikaans for 'Aunty'.

This poem was written a few years before the release of Nelson Mandela.

My friend J. whose halo has slipped
To surround his face
(I mean he's bearded, extremely kind)
Has left his job to write, and think
And happy surprise
From some arbitary clerk
Bureaucracy's answer to the careless and arbitary
(I mean brilliance like J's)

Between minute bites at a thin sliced sandwich
Precisely trimmed for the trim and precise
Smeared with a plasma, technology's answer
To the cow, the farm and good farm butter
Tap tap tapping, locating, hmmmm
'A thousand bucks! ' J of course delighted
'And just when I could use it! '

The clerk was neither delighted nor surprised

Another dear friend (her story private)
Her life as smashed as if a giant foot, big
As an office block with raking claws
Had crashed down right in the middle of it
Bleak, hair tangled, puffed leaky eyes
Distracts herself, and me, afraid I'm bored
Perhaps, by her 'ridiculous' going on
By telling a story about a teacher who just
Disappeared '... a line in The Sowetan
Not his wife... his family... '

The clerk was neither delighted nor surprised

And what rough beast, with self-correcting slouch
Printed circuits and uncomplaining meat
Complaining metal, fingers and probes
Delicate as the trunk of an elephant
For a pin among needles, to find just so
The appropriate amount, leave pay, pension fund
As the claws rake down, or delicately pick
At the pimple on the jaw of the jowelled leader
Preparing to give the thing a face

The clerk was neither delighted nor

But is this its face on the scrambled screen
Packed like a sandwich between commercials, glossy soaps
Coke ads, deodorants, roll-on global war
Tough bakkies, Freestate tannies, sophisticated

Farm-proud, extolling the virtues of this or that whatever

The clerk was neither

If this is... can it now sincerely answer
Renouncing the aid of scriptwriters, ad-men
Those faces sniffed out, snuffed out who
Before they blew away posed
By bread and blood and making

The clerk was neither delighted nor

By bread and blood and making

The clerk was neither delighted nor

By delight and blood and making

The clerk was bloody delighted making

By bread surprised and baking
The beast begins to turn?

John Garth Raubenheimer

Just As It Was Told To Me

He had his little ways,
her husband;
he trod on her feet
when he was displeased,
crunching the tiny bones.

Her coat hung on my door.
Her clothes were on
my floor.
'I feel like I'm using you.'
I spoke in fear.
'We're using each other, '
she whispered in my ear,
'Don't stop! Don't stop now! '

'What will you tell him? '
'That I was with my mother.'
'But your mother's dead.'
'I sleep on her grave.'

I called the night to a halt.
I said, 'This is wrong'.
And that was how it ended.

Two years later
I heard her husband had died.

At a restaurant
one day,
I
spotted her
with her family,
friends - five, six children.
She, the matriarch at
the table.

I sat counting my blessings.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Me And Jack

Living with a mental illness
is like living with a religious fanatic,
some kind of deeply-flawed fundamentalist.
No respecter of life
of family or community.
I call him Jack.
This tormented wretch would pack
bombs into cars, if he thought it would
further his big dream.

He has no grasp of irony...
I live in continuous dread
wondering what he will think up next.
Once he got a fixation
on a poor, cracked girl
(I wasn't wise to him then...)
decided he and she were predestined...
He (yes - and I) followed her to Port Elizabeth,
arrived at her door
just as she was preparing for her wedding.

Oh his loud grief.
Never mind that she was frightened,
devastated and hurt,
worried about what her groom might think.
All his claims to love are dubious.

Right now he is plotting to save the world
- an old obsession:
he will be the chief, a great leader,
cross between Winston Churchill and Gandhi.
Having conquered Christianity
he is ripe for Buddhism, would make a good Muslim...
He thinks he is influencing the weather...

It's so hard to accept we're jacked together.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Merciful Muggers

One Saturday morning in Berea
I was surrounded by a gang.
I let go, let them have their way.
After they had emptied my pockets
they seemed uncertain what to do.
Suddenly they all broke into smiles.
'Shame boss! ' said the leader, who
had my wallet in his hand.
He took five rand out of it
and stuffed it into my shirt.
They went off shouting with laughter.

Another time I was thrown on the pavement.
I fought back and got through a door
into the Carlton Centre shopping mall.
People bustled round me...
Shaking with humiliation and relief
I checked the pockets of my coat
and found every one had been slit.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Muh And The Moon

In the high blue sky
a crescent widening into a grin.
I shot into the house.

'The moon's falling down.'

'Muh was gutting chickens.
She said, 'Let's go and see.'

The crescent looked ragged.
'It's a vapour-trail, ' said Muh,
'Being blown by the wind.
From a plane, look. Very high up.'

I saw the tiny dart,
it's trailled feather.
Muh wiped her hands on her apron.

I thought it was Duh
who put our feet on the world.
Now I see that it was Muh.

As the earth yaws,
as planets threaten to collide,
I remember Muh -
my mother - and the moon.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Murder

Murder has worn a bangle
Murder has worn a brace
Murder has worn a collar and tie
And a smile upon its face

Murder has blossomed in petticoats
Murder has come out in lace
Murder has togged up in rags and filth
From the midden to the market place

Murder has cavorted with idiots
Murder has flourished among fools
Murder has cultivated genius
Murder makes and breaks all the rules

Murder has blasted from a cannon
Murder has fired from a gun
Murder has been delivered with rapier and sword
With a nod or a wink or a pun

Murder has come wrapped in parcels
Murder has arrived in the post
Murder has been swallowed with cheese and wine
Murder has been served on toast

Murder has been committed by proxy
Murder has been agreed on by vote
Murder has been sent with roses
Ribbons kisses and a note

Murder has been done in a fit of rage
On the main street in broad daylight
Murder has been done with an icy calm
In the middle of the night

Murder has been done for money
Murder has been done for a fix
Murder has been done for good reason
Murder has been done for kicks

Murder feels safe in large numbers
Murder feels good on a hill
Murder likes a uniform and big heavy boots
A patriot's license to kill

Murder has worn a dog-collar
Murder has carried a book
Murder has worn solemn words and phrases
A sanctimonious look

Murder is fond of information
And has a tape-recorder handy to tell

Murder likes statements made in confinement
Murder wants a signature as well

Murder has clubbed with a feather
Murder can stab with a pen
Murder comes to all from curved keyboards
Caressed by good family men

Murder has often been whitewashed
Murder has been painted black
Murder hired this morning
Has already been given the sack

John Garth Raubenheimer

My First Poem - 1968

communication
mutters the sage

he nods to himself to himself to himself

as Coolhand Luke
doomed by
his own
individuality
calls to the clown
who runs on stage

what we got here
is simply
a lack of communication

and the clown
laughing for his audience
weeping
behind his mask
paints a silent poem into their mirth
what we got here

mutters
Luke
as blood pours from his shattered neck
is a failure to communicate

he nods to himself to himself to

infinity
a thousand clowns
roll in the aisles
the audience stands alone on stage

John Garth Raubenheimer

My Two Thefts

First was from my granny.
No, worse. From my granny's church.
I was nine years old.
The cash was on her table.
It was the old currency,
pounds, shillings and pence,
collection from that morning
stacked neatly in piles.
I wanted a boat ride down at the lagoon.
You can imagine the rest.
I hid my loot in my towel
where my mom found it.
'Did you pinch this from granny? '
she asked with horror in her face..
I knew the right answer,
'No, I took it from your handbag.'

The second was Blake's Collected Poems.
I was at Exclusive Books
with the book in my hand,
when the power failed.
The music stopped,
all the lights went out.
You can imagine the rest.
I was severely punished
 - by my conscience, of course.
It was years before I could read Blake.

John Garth Raubenheimer

New Ambulance Man Receives a Blessing

When we found you at the Jesuit hostel in Booysens
You could still talk.
You said, 'The voices were so loud last night
I took fifteen stelazenes.

I've eaten nothing all weekend.'

You had your first fit in the ambulance.
I turned you on your side
And pounded your back to free your tongue.
The air went in in a sucking gasp.

The doctor at South Rand, a busy man
In Casualty,
Left you with me.
Our driver was chatting up the nurses.

I noticed how shallow your breathing was
Before a fit.
'Charles, ' I said, 'Breathe deeply,
Soften your body, pretend you're going to sleep.'
I wasn't sure whether you heard me
But your breathing seemed better then
Your body more relaxed.
'Breathe deeply',
I said it again and again,
'Soften your body...'
The fits still came but they seemed
Less severe (I still had to free
Your tongue) .

An hour passed.
No sign of the doctor
Two hours...
I was getting tired.

Finally a message came.
We were to take you back to
Sterkfontein.

You heard.
You opened your eyes.
You said, 'I don't want to go back there.'
'Why not, Charles? '

'They shout at you there.'

It was a long, hard ride to Sterkfontein.
Once you took my scissors out of my pocket.
I prized them gently out of your
Fingers
And gave you my pen instead.

You made stabbing movements with it
Prodding at your chest.

As we got nearer you grew
Quiet. The fits stopped. I had time to
Study you:
A sparse beard. Tattoos. On one shoulder two
Lovers. On the other a
Child praying.

We arrived.
'I'm very cross with you, '
Said the ward-guard.
I thought of what you'd said,
'They shout at you'.

You looked at me, your eyes were clear.
'They don't trust me now.
They'll put me in a locked ward.'
'You'll be all right, Charles.'

You looked at me a long time. Your eyes were
Clear, clear.
'You've been with me all day.'
I nodded.
'I'll never forget you.'
'I'll never forget you, Charles.'

'You taught me how to breathe.'

John Garth Raubenheimer

Night Of The Jogger

In South Africa, a donga is a gulley caused by erosion.

And now the jogger sets out
Kisses his children, one, two, three
On the tops of their heads
Kisses his wife, four, on the top of hers
And on each delicate, shadowed lid
Feeling the living orb, a captive bird
With electric wings, flickering silky flesh
Thin as the skim of milk
Jogs out rhythmically, muscles flexing, releasing
Stomach slightly sagging, breath beginning to catch
Bow touched across his heartstrings
Drawing a chord through each oxygenated cell

It's six o'clock, time for the beating
Promised at two by the harrowed mothers
Working half-day, who yelled between smacks
And the frenzy of dobermans tied to run in circles
Packing welts of leather round the one small tree
In each sealed-off, blocked-off garden
'Just you wait till your pa gets home'
Time again, in each tight-strung box
For the Box, for the flickering images
Of release and dream, dream and release
But homework first, time for the furtive
Close-cropped son, to steal away, in some
Shadowed corner, furtively sob
Time for blows and release from blows
For the wife to tell the shadow wife
'You can finish now Lettie'

On jogs the jogger
Sunset, bursts of vermilion
His heart a throbbing violin
His breathing easier, his lengthening shadow
Taking him away
Leaving the country of purloined visions
Of prowling fences, of electrified dogs
Incredible myth unfolding
As he jogs out of the country of joggers

And into Africa, darkest, fractured
The sky folding in vermilion waves
As he hurdles the dongas
Heroic silhouette, legs like scissoring
Tentpoles pulling up the pegs
Folding away his children, one, two, three
Tucking them away, 'sweet dreams', lips
Brushing the place, vulnerable damp
He tastes in his thought the fragile salt
Of each damp-framed temple turning towards sleep

'Sleep, love', four, feeling her hump away
In the big-frame bed
His hand for a while between hip and ribs
Tucking up the blankets sheets rough with stars
Smelling of khakibos and veld
Around her shoulders, under her chin
Vulnerable, softening
He kisses her
Before jogging through the mirror
Through the frame of himself
And everything it ever framed

And the night flows on
Broken circles, broken hearthstones
Broken faces, do they reach for him
Across the shadowed moon, a shadow
Cast a billion years before
Prediction of himself
His heart a broken violin

His heart a burning violin
The jogger flows on
Morning, triumphant, feels across his chest
The horison's tape
Release release release release
In a dazzle of stars he
Disappears

Behind him unfolding
Vermilion waves

The jogger jogs out

John Garth Raubenheimer

No Shipboard Romance

Broke up with Jill,
took ship for England;

RMS Edinburgh Castle.

A sailor heard me strumming my guitar,
said, 'D'you want to join
our band? ':

We had a skiffle group
somewhere in the bow,

rising... maybe fifty feet...
falling... rising...
falling.

You left the hotel part,
went through the guts of the ship;
pipes, wiring;
I saw the mighty engines.

What else do I recall?

Flying fish
(a pack of needles
from the palm of a wave,
stitching bright air to sea) .

Staring at the wake of the ship.
Mile after mile.

Dolphins racing alongside.

A hat party;
(we each had to make
a fancy hat.
Mine was an apartheid joke.
Out of wire hangers, shoe-boxes
and loo paper rolls,
I constructed two
toilets - the one over my left ear
labelled 'BLANKES ALLEENLIK',
over my right ear, 'NIE-BLANKES'
Each had a drainpipe
joining behind my back,
with a note
'It all goes down the same way.'

The captain was not amused,
'Which one do you use? ')

Arrival at Madeira

(half the island was in sun
half in a storm
joined by a bright rainbow.
Hundreds of small boats
came out to us over the chop,
souvenir sellers swarmed up ladders.

I'd left my camera in the cabin...
Took a photograph with my mind) .

A disco in the Bay of Biscay
(As the ship rolled
so we all slid, swept across the floor
to end up in a heap,
while strobes flickered.)

But no shipboard romance
to make up for Jill.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Nursery School God

Our school was in a churchyard.
Mrs Woodruff ran it.
She wore horn-rimmed spectacles
and crimped, flowering dresses;
bright but a little dull.
Her voice was very... nice
and made you want to please her;
'See if you can do this, John':
so I tapped pegs through holes
in a toy bench, with a mallet;
pleasing her was easy. Her
assistant was Theresa.
Theresa was a bright spark.
Dungarees, quick hands.
She found me a train to play with.

She took us down to Rhodes Park,
all of us in a crocodile.
'Look right, left, right again.'
We went wild in the park.
It was a lesson in order, chaos.
Theresa had to be everywhere.
I made my first school friend.
Noel. He had black Brylcreamed hair.
We drove our swings into the air.

I liked the round, white tower
with its foot in our sunny space;
didn't like the dark inside.
We pushed open a heavy door.
'Shhh, ' Theresa told us, 'shhh'.
God spoke in a huge voice
like furniture. We only went in once.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Pigeons Catching Light

Pigeons catching light -
spilling on the sky's blue cloth
pepper turning salt.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Power

As the rain came whispering down
they whisper up and up.
A profligate god fills the sky with flimsy wings.
They flow in a stream into the night
from a hole in the ground,
and I am a giant swotting them down
with a slat torn off an apple box.
I am nine years old
and smacking down the flying ants is a joy
akin to playing with water.
My shadow elongates under the stoep light
confirming that I am ten yards tall.
Ruthlessly I swing my weapon.
The air is rich with the smell of watered dust.
The lawn is seething with their wingless bodies.
Fifty years on it is too late for pity.
They are giving their lives to make me happy.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Problem Child

You leave your mother in the poky room,
the one that makes you think of the dentist.
You go into the bright room. Paints, crayons,
sheets of creamy white paper wait for you.
'How would you like to make yourself at home? '
Then the smily person is gone. You're glad.
Your mother's sad voice murmurs up and down
while you draw a tree. You make it real,
painting light-yellow for the trunk and roots
and branches where you feel the dry sun strikes.
You don't do leaves. You don't draw any birds.
You just paint bare yellow, with brown and black,
your gnarled branches casting little shade.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Road To Umtata

In the taxi
on the road to
Umtata I
sat on a
woman's lap,
my head banged
the ceiling on
every bump.
The road unwound.
The taxi swayed:
there was a choir
crushed into
its bouncing space.
Music was infinite.
We sang all
the way.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Rodney

Bearded with black hair
with a good physique
Rodney looked like a young
Tom Cruise.
I later learned he
was a paedophile.
I'd been blabbing
about all the amazing things

God was teaching me
every day

- as I
thought He was then.
Rodney looked at me.
It was a straight look,
he said, 'Is there anything,
do you think, God
can't forgive? '
'God forgives everything, '
I blabbed triumphantly.

It was years before I
saw him again.
I'd gone to 'Sterkies'
to get some medicine.
This fat, balding man
I hardly recognised,
said, 'I'm sorry I don't

know who you are.
They've given me an op
to help me with my problem.'
I saw the crude wires
in his scalp.
'I'm living in hope,
I say this to everyone.
I'm beginning to feel more
positive
about myself.'

'Rodney' is well-disguised.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Sannah's Magic, An Early Memory

Barefoot,

wearing her blue uniform,
white doek,
Sannah laughs at my brother
and me.

We're in a garden
sumptuous with sunlight
sprawled in the
shadow of a hedge.

'Look, ' she says.
Plucking a leaf from the hedge
she pops it in her mouth.
Chews, chews.

Then she sticks out her tongue
- like Einstein
in that famous photo.

We're expecting a mush of
leaf and spit.

But along the pink highway,
between the portals of her teeth,
under her laughing eyes,

a green spider
wobbles into the world.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Shena

So kind you were to me
Shena, so kind. Sipping the tired air
while the television roared -
were you deaf or was I?
You said I was your best friend,
or did you say, only? I do
remember I helped you through
an asthma attack. Shena it
was so close for you, so close,
I think you could have died.
Yes I remember that. I remember
your two cats, like a stuffed
pair of owls. Why do I say
that? They were content with you,
and I was too, eating your meals
and watching the adverts slide. I
lied. No I won't be away long,
I said into my beard. Just a
few weeks Shena. Someone I met.
You said, Oh good, I've grown used
to having you here and the children
never come. You played it down.
In England I tried to remember your
address. I sent a postcard with a
map. But did you ever get it
Shena? Did you get me? My
absurd ways. You loved me, now I
know. And I loved you, but not the same.
I see you in my dreams, sipping the flat air,
remember your gift of life,
remember it with the deepest shame.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Shine Fortunate Becoming

Spoken By The Muse Before Conception

Go down, go down, little formless one,
enter the majesty of the body.
You will be its keeper for the Risen Lord,
for whom it is His temple. Loved
you will be, as yet unnamed person,
blessed by His grace with life, sex, gender,
touched by His cross. A mystery
is yours, the world with all its secrets
humbled.

He will call you through the beauty
of the waterfall.
Through a swallow swerved in flight.
Through the soft fall, the soft fall
of night.
Horrors will fall away, and demons you
embraced
thinking they must be friends... the Light
will shine softly,
set on the lamp-stand of your sight.

Now join in the sacrament of bread and wine...
Shine fortunate becoming, shine!

John Garth Raubenheimer

Singing God's light

I was a witness, day by day.
Park bench only for a white man's ar*e
Singing God's light, people carried away.

Black man beaten in an alleyway.
Fingers twined round a police-van's bars.
I was a witness, day by day.

At Sharpeville bleeding bodies lay,
shot in the back for not carrying a pass.
Singing God's light, people carried away.

'He slipped on a bar of soap, ' police say.
The coroner's tale also reads like farce.
I was a witness, day by day.

He fell five floors - on the pavement lay.
'He wasn't pushed. It was in his stars.'
Singing God's light, people carried away.

People everywhere have feet of clay,
'Will you fly off that cross? ' the scoffers ask.
I'll be His witness day by day,
singing God's light till we're carried away.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Something I Don't Want To Think Too Much About

For Bernard Levinson - poet, psychiatrist...
The Vaal is the Vaal River in South Africa.

Once, as an adolescent, I tried to swim across the Vaal.

Halfway back I panicked
and began to thrash about.
A quiet young girl had to save me from drowning.

How many poets,
swimming effortlessly in their natural element,
the quiet waters of the Universe
gleaming through their wounds,

have suddenly taken fright,
begun to thrash about...?

If it happens,
if it happens to me,
will you swim out to save me, Bernard?

I hear the rustle of your shirtsleeves,
your voice,
so still and quiet I can't make out the words,

but the tone is trust... trust.

(1981)

John Garth Raubenheimer

Song Of The Shwale

I sing the song of the sad shark-whale,
whose tender eggs roll softly in the foam,
as nostalgic turtles sip the nectar from her fins
and dawn soothes the waters with a fiery comb.

The silver crabs who night-long serenade
her tearful splendour with vibrating glands,
with pale lanterns in their claws go scuttling away
to extinguish themselves in the ash-grey sands.

Morning is broken and the sea in flower
blooms around her belly, smiling porpoises bow,
in the meadow of the ocean she dreams and wallows,
lazy in the sunlight, vast forgetful cow.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Spark

H.J. who has MS,
when I offer to light his cigarette
says,
struggling with his lighter -

more chance you think
he'll snap those frail fingers into flame,
'If I can't light it
I can't have it'.

Click click click click,
up frizzes a pallid shoot.
He's won,
with one stuttering arm.
'Use it or lose it'.

'Tell me one of your stories.'
Bird-like in the hoist,
now snug,
he's asking for a nightcap.

Memory.
Use it or lose it.
I will
that spark to jump the synapses.

'My father invented a self-puffing pipe, '
I start...

(And he did! It had a little bellows in the stem, next to the bowl, which fanned the tobacco when you worked a piston with your finger; you could keep the pipe going, when you wern't smoking... My father was renowned for his inventions, but the self-puffing pipe never went beyond it's prototype.)

John Garth Raubenheimer

Storm

'You could, ' said Dr Pippin, judging me,
'keep holding him if you want'. Caliban
was purring full throttle, claws in my knee.
From the needle-tip oblivion ran
while the vet steadied himself, 'Stay like that'.
He eased closer, pinched up a roll of fur,
slid it in while I stroked our noble cat,
who stopped; claws and recriminating purr.
Could I have died so simply? He lay warm,
limp. Face congealing into the blanched grin
generic to dead cats. I'd touched a storm;
while the needle hovered we'd become kin,
what if its grey load had slipped into me?
I stood, and let him slide down off my knee.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Storm Drain

No bridge over the junction's spinning lanes?
I slipped under the rumble into dark.
Cursing myself, what do I have for brains?
Crazy coming down here without a spark.
A short cut? Much more likely a short life,
dying down here where no-one will find me,
surer than a bullet or a cold knife.

Blind, I felt forward for my history.
If I just had a stick to poke this floor -
where floods could empty in a further drain
or well. Black place to fall or drown. My store
of anxious, foolish courage on the wane.
Ahead a blur of what could be bones. I
turned back, choosing some other place to die.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Stray Dog, Chinese New Year

Trot trot trotting through the streets
of Tao Yuan.
A shopkeeper hurls a handful of crackers -
crack crack CRACKLE -
shreds of red paper lie like petals.
Blue smoke rises, tang of gunpowder.
You trot trot trot a little faster,
tail tucked in, looking left and right

as scooters carrying whole families, swerve.

Past the betel-nut girl under her neon display,
past applause of frying,

snout
lifted in the air.

Past the seafood restaurant
and drainage smells,
past the pet shop where fashion items
yap yap yap.

You pause to sniff at some peelings
in the gutter.
Lift your leg against a convenient Kymco.

On a kinder pavement a mirroring bowl.
I watch you lap lap lap, eyes starting.

Kymco: a popular make of scooter.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Tell It to the Bees

At the top of this hill
there was a cable drum
like a huge cotton reel.

Bees had a hive in the hub.
I put my shoulder to the wheel
(I was twelve years old.
Does that exonerate me?)
and gave a shove
and the hive went bounding
unreeling a buzzing snake
all the way down to
the forestry station (which
my uncle ran) . It whacked
into the gatepost where it
lodged.

I am not proud of this.
I tell you this story
feeling rather ashamed...

When I got married
the second time
a woman friend of the bride
acted as 'best man'.
The day before
she went and told the bees -
apparently an English custom.
We had a happy marriage.

I used to be allergic
to bees' stings.
If I got stung on the foot
my head would swell up.
But that ended in childhood.

Today I miss the bees
There don't seem to be any
around...
though you see the odd
bumble bee
fumbling among the flowers.
I love eating honey...

I miss them, as I say.
Bees have been good to me.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Thank You My Baas

I flip some money into his palm, which is seamed but
smooth, paler than the road of his voice, flowing dry and
cracked towards a mountain. His face is a bag on the shoulder
of an old man trudging, sloping away along the road to the
mountain on cracked shoes... A sack with a hole in it,
from which his voice leaks, 'Tankie my baas'.

John Garth Raubenheimer

The Battle For The Playground

Look the bully squarely in the eye,
don't let him steal the playground:

my first lesson, not from chalk,
but scratched into the packed red earth
where I'd crawled blubbering, bleeding yellow,
eyes like arrows stuck in every pore
behind the sneering wheelbarrow.
'He ran, chicken, chicken,
look at him hiding, come back here! '

And I learned, oh how much much worse
than the clawing voices and the packed faces
was the bully of my fear.
Never, I swore, I clawed
my nails, cursed that pussing ground,
Never will I let him take me again.

from then on I found the circle friendly.
The jeering voices, the hitting hands
- 'hit him, hit him, hit him again' -
were kind, brotherhood of an honest mercy.
Nothing cute about the day-old chicks
in the brooders of my childhood, who
in a warm, cheeping yellow salad
full of pawpaw, black-pip eyes,
trampled to a paste the sick and weak
to dry into a crust under the hammer lamps,
a crust with claws.

Theirs was for food, for heat and space,
ours was for the sun of courage.

But I was a solitary boy.
Spent more time under the moon than a young boy should.
Those shadows burnt me harder than any honest hammer
ringing on our screeching anvil could.
Playground songs, games, dreams, circles:
shattered by an angry ball
that hit my forehead, disguised as love, as a lovely girl.
Meryl, Sally. Courage fled
I could not help myself I bled
yellow - and the bully stole our playground.

John Garth Raubenheimer

The Beauty And Comedy Of Madness

I believed I could create a Light Ship
by getting
two electrons in my mind to buzz.
The Light Ship would be in the shape
of a Nautilus shell
so that everybody would know
that it came from Earth, our water planet.

And the energy of doing that
would kill my mind.
I would walk around
- a useful person -
telling everyone what it's like
being dead.

The Light Ship was as expansive as
Noah's
Ark.
The favoured ones would leave in it for galaxies
far away.
As sanity slowly claimed me I
trailed it behind me
like a lost balloon.

John Garth Raubenheimer

The Beggar

Sky gives him nothing
The pavements give him nothing
And so he sits
Hands cupped
Towards the fickle element that
Flows between

John Garth Raubenheimer

The Dying God

I am the treasurer of broken dreams,
my heart a lost mine, a-knock with heroes,
terrible and wild, who crouch in darkness,
tapping a last message through veins and seams.
I was their champion, they bore my light
to distant corners of the Universe.
Hearing my bright song millions worshipped me,
they flew my standard like a holy kite.
Now I am forgotten, save by these few
heroes - in my heart - who'll perish with me.
We'll take our last knocks on some lonely street,
maybe shuffling in a soup-kitchen queue.
Who'd have thought that I was ordinary,
that old age would end my epiphany.

John Garth Raubenheimer

The Forgotten Words

Ribs clamped back,
a good, workable incision.

Now, take a petal,
rose is best
or cosmos - it's the season -

slice open the heart.
There!
You see! A scalpel would have
shown you
only muscle, a hard-working
pump. Now gently,
gently
- you've forgotten to close your eyes -

gently. Have you found it?
There, warm under your index
under your ring
finger,
a dark, pulsing point
- or place -
spreading into something rather like,
rather
like
braille, yes?
And you can read it too!

Do the charactors make sense?
No? You've forgotten the language.

Most of us have.
Relax your lids, just a little.
Don't open them.
Just let the dark behind them
brighten a bit
till it's the same,
the same warm dark
as beneath your fingers.
There!
Now.

You can understand.
Only three words
pulsing over and over
and not as you've ever heard them.
Don't speak them yet.
Don't
speak them.
Everybody does and
never in the right way.

Here's the right way,
here -
it's a sea-shell,
Hold it to your ear...

John Garth Raubenheimer

The Hopeling

You won't see it in my eyes
I'm wearing dark glasses
But every day from down here in my gut
From the grit and soil and junkfood
Metamorphosing in
Here I grow this perfect
Flower
Something like a lily but with
Petals more delicate

Did I plant that seed
Or do I just discover it every morning
Halo it with rainbows
Sprinkle it with hopeful signs
With little waterfalls of
Optimism
But HUP two three four
Strong roots go thumping down
With every sprung step pop
The caps right off my toes

Green
Shoots
Wire
My wrists
HUP HUP HUP HUP
Pump the heart-
Line bump the lifeline
Swirl the whorls fill the
Palps of my reacting
Fingertips

And the petals
Uncurl
Lift and unfurl in the spaces of
My braincase
Fill my nose with a fragrance
A little like Chanel
A little like peach-blossoms
A little like laughing gas

FOUR three two three
I step back Oh
Cross my thumbs for good weather
Kick myself for smiling
Smile at myself for kicking myself
At the audacity of it
At this slightly ridiculous precociousness

But I look at my flower mostly with
Awe
Beg it to forgive the soil

I have to ask it to suck
Life from
Watch with dismay
The petal flicking flicking
Like a fastidious kittens paw
To shake off that tell-tale
Stain

And I declare my garden now to be
A nuclear-free zone
And I whisper its new name
Eden
And I banish the Four Horsemen
Who ride upside-down through my sleep
With names difficult tantalizing forbidden

Who ride every night through my sleep
As my flower cut from its
Stem by these
Mailed and
Studded delinquents
Riding every which way
On their dangerous penny-farthings
Drifts calm
On the waters

Perfect white a lily embalmed
Or splinters into crystal shards
Reflecting
Roots writhing
Cutworms cut by the spade
Bits of moon of upturned bone

John Garth Raubenheimer

The House

People have left their sounds here.
In these empty rooms
many ghosts flower.

John Garth Raubenheimer

The Men

Years ago
in the land of apartheid
a horse fell into a ditch.

It was my brother's horse,
Peter my foster-brother was
riding it
when it reared, spooked by a lorry.

Peter chucked himself off
to avoid being crushed,
Vision lay panting,
an object of pity in the deep
hole.

What could we do?
Nothing.
Could we not at least get her onto
her feet?
Three black men in smart suits,
on their way to a church meeting
in the veld,
flowers in their button-holes,
polished shoes,
laughed at our situation.

'Hau baas! ' one of them said
flashing his teeth.
The three of them consulted.
A crowd was around by now,
murmuring and shifting.
What could anyone do?

Throwing off their jackets,
picking off their shoes and socks,
rolling up their trousers.
All the time bantering,
hurling loud laughter
at each other,
the men jumped down into the mud.

The crowd nodded approval.
In the land of apartheid
this is what black men do,
is it not?

One of them stroked Clear Vision's neck
talking to her quietly.
We held our breath.
The men locked arms under her,
grunting,
heaving.

And she rose,
whinnying softly.

I'm telling you this
as I remember it,
brothers and sisters.
Our horse was saved.

After that, praise God,
it was a job for the firemen.

John Garth Raubenheimer

The Owl Story

'You're a love-letter, written by God, '
she told him,
'from Himself to Herself',
and other things, beautiful, blasphemous things
only a poet could say
without harm to the words.
'I love you more than birds! '
She did love birds.
It was a bird brought them together
he would never forget -
an owl struck by the high cab
of an onrushing truck. He saw it flung
to the side of the road, and stopped
walking. Breathed; studied the hedge
till he saw where it hung, snowy.
Its neck broken but no blood;
pinioned by the twigs.
A car pulled up and there she was,
he knew even then.
'Our owl, ' she was later to say,
'You saved our owl.'
For it was his idea to have it mounted
on a branch, with its wings outspread
as if about to fly off in the wind.
As she finally did... 'I'll love you forever.'
he told his pillow,
night after night. The owl remained
faithful, ghost above his head.
He hung pinioned, waiting.

John Garth Raubenheimer

The Red Staircase

She lives in the windy house of my head
Sleeps in a four-poster bed
I thought might please her

And she smiles for me sometimes
But still I'm uneasy
Doesn't she get lonely there all by herself?
Wouldn't she like to go out
To go shopping
Maybe look up a friend
Get her hair fixed
Get a job?

Isn't it time she had a name?

I think of her as I climb the red staircase
Wasn't she a little girl once?
When I'm not looking
And a brown light fills the room
Does she take out old photographs?
Does she take out a face and try it on?

What does she dream when the mirrors fold
When comets blaze across the bony ceiling
When petals of electricity stain the horizon
Of my closed and flickering lids?

1987

John Garth Raubenheimer

Their Old Enemy

Thunder in the ceiling,

'Like a herd of elephants, '
said Gran,
who lived with us then,
'How does such a
nimble creature make
so much noise? '

Johannes showed me a
nest-full
of their pink, blind babies,
before throwing them into the
fire
where they continued
to squeak.

I've seen them running along
telephone wires
along the tops of fences
along the beams and rafters of
the chicken-houses.
They ate our eggs
They tore holes in the
feed sacks.

Dad set poison.

Once I cornered one.
I raised my stick.
He growled like a dog.
I saw his crooked teeth.

He jumped at me.
The rat.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Things My Father Said

These rockspiders are scum
said one of my brothers
of a certain group of
people.
He was copying something he had heard at school.
My dad leapt up. Never let me hear you say
anything like that again.
No person is scum.
We know nothing when we're born. We have to learn everything.
We deserve respect for
our trials
and for the struggles we have.
My father spoke passionately and with a tear in his eye.
Nobody is a rockspider,
and nobody is scum.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Though I Shoulder This Rain

Though I shoulder this rain like a pack,
I know a part of me will always be
in Johannesburg Transvaal, in Bellevue,
near the vagrant root of a flowering tree.

I know that part of me will always be
where purple jacarandas wash over the street -
with my brother feeding the pigeons, who with fencing wings
strut and bobble about his sandalled feet.

Where purple jacarandas wash over the street:
tender report of the popping flowers,
pressed by wheelers and walkers, the shouters, talkers
who pass under his balcony at all hours.

Tender report of the popping flowers.
Clickbang of lightning: my memories persist
vivid as the storm through England's drizzle.
They will stay with me as long as I exist.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Typhoon, Taiwan

Sky furrowed with clouds.
Mountains like blades of the plough.
Stalks of lightning grow.

John Garth Raubenheimer

Vuvuzela! Car Radio World Cup News (Yorkshire)

Lightning carves the sky,
the loaves of clouds.
A jig-jag of walls
through yellow meadows,
Snake of road
patched and shadowed.
Thrumble of our wheels.

And a ball bounces
across our path,
bounces across our path
with the whine of angry
bees.
Kissing its shadow
it bounces, rolls.
Thundering of buttercups.

'Come home! ' say the bees
to my guilty conscience.
'Come home and face
the music! '

John Garth Raubenheimer

Warning - Tao Yuan

Be careful when you walk on Tiger Mountain...
where dusty snakes coil on the hissing paths.

John Garth Raubenheimer

What Does She Think I'm Doing?

One wall separates me from my
neighbour,
Felicity.
Sometimes she plays the piano. I
like that.
She plays Beethoven.
She's an accomplished pianist.
I listen to her rejuvenate Chopin.
My mother used to play Chopin.
I listen to her with a candle burning,
with my lights turned off.
My only regret
is that she doesn't play for long.
She tapers off into comic chords
before giving up altogether.
My guess is that she once dreamed
of playing Beethoven and Chopin
in concert.

That's the big joy of our one-wall
division.
But there's a sorry side to it,
I
wish I
didn't have to tell you. Felicity has
a cough.
A racking mither of a smoker's cough.
The only thing is, I don't think she smokes.
So why does she go on and on
coughing?
Is it nerves? Is it being alone? It
hurts me. I hate it.
I can't stop worrying about her.
I want to stop her in the street where she
never coughs
and shake her.
And demand, What's wrong? Felicity!
WHAT'S WRONG?

John Garth Raubenheimer

Whatever Ungentle War

And this my darling if poetry
Is confusion to which passion grants illusion
Order must be for you my love
My final poem
I love you I know it now
Knew it finally and forever watching you
In a garden blue with smoke and sunlight
Pigeons floating pale over grey wisteria
We underneath
And the pale talk slack and floating
Blue friends floating or drifting snagged together
In shadowed sunlit talk

I love you oh my darling
This is my first and final true love poem
You touched me sitting there I watched you
I could not take my eyes off you
Could not believe I had so nearly
Lost you
Nearly a month of madness and only your brave refusal
To take me on any other terms
Than none at all no quarter given or taken
I know I could have lost you

And now this moment is fixed forever
You under the bare blue tracery of vines
Me watching you fixing you there
Touched by you
Waiting to get up
To say you are beautiful
Hurt by your strength by the signs of courage
A soft woman forcing herself hard
Eyes avoiding mine insisting I read nonchalance
In the cocked cigarette I saw it tremble
In the green and khaki terrorism of your jacket

But darling this wasn't lewd
I stripped it off you no one could see
I saw the gentle globes touched your white skin
Caressed the lovely marble felt it flush pink
Saw you rise marble lovely from the bath my eyes were giving you

And at last got up
Walked over
Took your head Held it like a chalice
In my hands Your golden hair
Pressed my lips down hard

Grateful proud we both were
Knowing you had won
And so therefore had I
You smiled

Perhaps I did too
In the confusion which allows this to be a poem

I touched your red scarf
said it was pretty
You knew without me saying it
I meant you are too
And that by pretty I meant beautiful

I love you my darling who have so bravely taught me
How love without restraint is saltless
How honesty is the salt of love
Courage its rising bread

I love you know gladly now that we
You being woman I man
While we hope for peace
Should pray our war stays gentle

So forgive me for making whatever ungentle war
From me proudly humble this however final poem

John Garth Raubenheimer

Who Was Driving?

Once I drove a car with my eyes shut.
I thought God was guiding me.
Turn right... turn left... you're doing fine...
I heard a huge bang as the car
bounced the curb.
In my memory I was alone,
but a friend says my
son
was in the back:
I dedicate this to him, with an apology.

John Garth Raubenheimer