

## Poetry Series

# John Garth Raubenheimer

- 84 poems -

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### **John Garth Raubenheimer (21/12/1947)**

Queen Vic, Johannesburg, breech birth. First of five children, I grew up under apartheid on a poultry farm run by my mother. My father was an inventor. He was BIG John, I was little John. He was a formidable man (See my poems 'Muh And The Moon' and 'Father, Son') My father and mother started off their life together as teachers, she of English, he of Maths and Science. They were rationalist humanists. One day I walked into the local chemist - I was about 15 - and heard one of my aunts gossiping. 'It's a scandal, ' she was saying. 'That Lydia! She's never told her kids they're Jewish. ' (I slid out. A signal moment. I felt protective of our 'Muh' - our name for her when we were little...)

I remember our servants with love, particularly the three women who looked after us, first Sannah, ('Sannah's Magic: An Early Memory') then Rosie, then Maria Chauke, carrying us on their backs when we were infants. A male servant, Alfred, polished our shoes, another, Daniel, rode one of my brothers and me to school on the farm bike. Johannes, who of 'the boys' - he was a man in his thirties - perhaps I loved most, was 'mother for chickens'. ('Their Old Enemy') These people shared their lives with us, treating us with extreme kindness. I regret that, except for Maria, I don't know their surnames. Our farm was in a fertile valley... Our neighbour, a Portuguese market gardener, ploughed his fields with oxen. Drums beat all weekend, accompanied by singing. I saw police raids, young khaki- or dark blue? - uniformed policemen chasing and beating Africans with their batons. 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 (I thought God had chosen me for a special destiny, was incarcerated at Valkenberg Psychiatric Hospital Cape Town, Tara Hospital near Johannesburg, among other places... 'Let Me Take You Dancing' 'The Beauty And Comedy Of Madness' 'All Your Wishes Will Be Granted')

We had brave friends who fought apartheid and went to prison or were listed as communists. They live in my heart... Except for two years in Europe ('No Shipboard Romance' 'In Vondelpark, Amsterdam 1970') I lived a life under apartheid. ('The Men' 'Singing God's Light') After leaving school early - school was a bit of a disaster - I did compulsory army service. Married. Was present at my son's birth. Did a hundred jobs I was useless at, like selling office machines and newspaper advertising space. ('New Ambulance Man Receives A blessing'...) Divorced. Was a psychiatric outpatient for a long time, years, with a sinecure at Tara ('The Malletjies Of Hillbrow') but when

I got real work I kept it. Found my feet literally when I began to walk everywhere in Jo'burg. ('Merciful Muggers' 'Storm Drain')

Read poems with other poets and friends at various Johannesburg venues, sharing platforms with Martin Smit, Gary Cummiskey and Sinclair Beiles among others: eternal thanks to playwright and DJ Martin, and journalist Alexandra Smit-Stachowski, for believing in me and organizing events. Lauren-Joy (Fig) , Paul, Jony, I will never forget your friendship. In a very real way, you saved my life. Voted ANC and for the Women's Party in our first democratic election in 1994. Married again and joined my English wife, Biffy, in Yorkshire. ('Consummation' 'A Lesson From The Master' 'John Err At Sea') I work here with some people with a learning disability. Biffy died in 2000. I have become a Christian. ('Shine Fortunate Becoming'.) I had my last breakdown in 2001. The simple care of the people round me saved me... as did love from - and for - my growing family.

There are so many others to whom I am just as grateful whose names don't appear in this brief summary of my life.

Works:

THE VOYAGE FROM ME TO YOU: A Life In Poetry, is me reading my poems on behalf of @CharitySANE, which supports people having mental or emotional difficulties. See my fundraising page on <http://www.justgiving.com/John-Raubenheimer>

### **\*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 Lesson From The Master

'So you're from South Africa - '

Wolves disciplined 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.  
Dizzy Gillespie, I think...  
My dreams started playing  
with the squeally 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 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

## For Rebecca Scarberry... Author Of Messages From Henry

I can't find my copy  
of de Saint Exupery's 'Wind, Sand, and Stars'  
(perhaps I gave it to our church) .

So - as a fellow-writer you'll appreciate -  
I've done a little research.  
Well... I googled it, okay.

It's his story of three Saharan Moors  
who were flown to the French Alps  
and led by their guide  
up to a tremendous waterfall.

They stood transfixed.  
Back home they'd march for days  
to find a muddy pool of water  
mixed with camel urine, to drink.

'That's all there is to see, '  
their guide said,  
'Come.'  
'We must wait.'  
'Wait for what? '  
'The end.'

When - they were wondering -  
would God grow weary of His madness?

I have a picture of these men -  
squatting; sitting down  
finally  
to observe cross-legged  
the perpetual miracle;

their guide faltering  
into helplessness,  
suffering the earth-bound quandary of  
all guides  
whose plans for their charges have gone wrong.

And I have a picture of you,  
Rebecca  
- one perhaps singular to me,  
as I contemplate the shuttering of my twitter-feed:  
sitting with your three cats

- lulled into sleepy cat-delight...

draped over the blanket  
you have draped across your knees



to shield them from the thin, March wind...

close to the impasse-annihilating spray  
of your waterfall  
your mind excited, charged,  
happy;

engrossed  
with  
the miracle, unfolding on your page.

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 the 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 murmured, 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

## **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 crash.  
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 arbitrary clerk  
Bureaucracy's answer to the careless and arbitrary  
(I mean brilliance like J's)

Between minute bites at a thin sliced sandwich  
Precisely trimmed for the trim and precise  
Smear'd with a plasma, technology's answer  
To the cow, the farm and good farm butter  
Tap tap tapping, locating, hmmm  
'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 jewelled 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



## John Err At Sea\*

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 -  
leaning on the deck of our good ship: Settle\*\* ...  
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

## **Let Me Take You Dancing\***

Let me take you dancing through this space I've won  
where the Mormon meets the Masters of the Quantum Jump

Where parallel lines meet

Where Einstein walks humbly in the footsteps of Christ  
Where Jesus breaks the bread of  $e=mc^2$

Where parallel lines meet

Where Christ, Buddha, Krishna, all the angels and saints  
Sip in a circle from a cup of light

Where parallel lines meet

Where from their upturned graves, the children leap  
Who scabbled for bread, for stones, for guns  
Laughter flying as they fly sweet love  
To a billion billion billion suns

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 trailed 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 Booyens  
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 than  
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

## Pub Tale

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

## **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, 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  
(we were all mad  
in that place; except me  
of course  
and apparently Rodney) .  
He 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.'

John Garth Raubenheimer

## **Sana's Magic, An Early Memory**

Barefoot,

wearing her blue uniform,  
white doek,  
Sana 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,  
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 B L - 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, B?

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 weren'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 then, 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 an Argonaut 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 characters 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 No 5  
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 Malletjies Of Hillbrow

We were the malletjies\* of Hillbrow  
according to Jill  
who, along with Peter W,  
I remember best.  
A laugh in her voice,  
a tic of her pretty mouth.

'We share everything, '  
she stated our manifesto.  
'Coffee, tea, cigarettes...'

'Heard about Buzzie? '  
'In his bath - '  
'Mariana, just the other day  
off her balcony on the eighteenth floor...'  
'She done it to spite me.'

Each morning we met  
at The Golden Egg.  
Coffee, tea, cigarettes...

I remember a soldier  
back mad from the war,  
brandishing weaponry.  
How we all cowered.  
But in that bright, brash place  
with its red, yellow tables,  
when danger was past  
we crept out of our shells.

Shaking fingers...  
Tales of the medication...  
Peter W reciting,  
'Peter, Peter, Largactil eater...'

Who broke our cracked circle?  
Who was the betrayer?  
It was me on two circles,  
the wheels of my bike:  
Took me flying away.

John Garth Raubenheimer

## The Men

Years ago  
in the land of Apart-hate  
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.  
Yes that was how it was.  
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 Apart-hate  
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 just 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

## **To The World With Hope**

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.'

John Garth Raubenheimer

## **Tweet Tweet**

These are my tweets both sweet and bitter.  
Rhyiming couplets (mostly, collected from Twitter) .

Tomorrow the sun rises in the west.  
Birds fly backwards. Think I'll wear a vest.

Stung by a butterfly, knocked down by a bee.  
GM has done such lovely things for me...

The war behaved just as Spielberg wanted.  
All the wishes of this story-loving fool (myself) were granted.  
(Film 'War Horse')

Tired and down. I have done my best.  
But what I've done feels wrong. Going to have a rest.

I always heard money grew on trees.  
Been trying to grow one. I'm down on my knees.

'Black Butterflies' glimmering  
Ingrid Jonker shimmering.  
(Film 'Black Butterflies' about one of South Africa's greatest poets.)

From one insignificant speck to another,  
today, see me as a brother.

Feeling rather flat?  
Talk to a cat.

A beautiful marble in the velvet of space.  
Looking down from up high, a serene astronaut's face.

Film 'Bee Season': a wrong word, kind?  
Kaleidoscopic splinters, find?  
Fragility, yet power of Mind...

I love my bed it should be said.  
The books I've read, the dreams I've shed...  
I love my bed, my pillowed head.

So much to teach, so little time  
to build a church, to share a rhyme...

Hugs are healing - but I'm on my own...  
Could do with a hug - well I'll hug me alone!

It's true! That's just what keeps me tweeting -  
having fun... and central heating.

Feeding your story into flames in the dark...  
How you killed a man near 'Paranoid Park'.

(Film 'Paranoid Park)

Hello London, beautiful city...  
Matchless, awesome, the tenderness... the pity...

Sam needs all the courage of a Buster Keaton  
to love mentally-ill Joon: artist, unbeaten.  
(Film 'Benny & Joon)

My dad was an inventor with many good ideas,  
but to realize some of them took years.

Seize the day, trust the future...  
To the past apply a suture?

Pilot of a drone in Pakistan...  
while sipping his morning coffee he killed a man.

Intimate fabric of a writer's world,  
from such humble workings universes hurled!

Cool crunch of the forest floor under my naked feet.  
A poet's words fall in maverick rhythms over my heartbeat...

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

## 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