#### **Classic Poetry Series**

# Peter Bakowski - poems -

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#### Peter Bakowski(15 October 1954 -)

Peter Bakowski is an Australian poet. His poems often use deceptively simple words and images, reminiscent at times of words in a child's picture book, but with some stylistic similarities to the work of writers such as <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/charles-simic/">Charles Simic.</a> or Vítezslav Nezval.

#### <b>Biography</b>

Born in Melbourne, to Polish-German immigrants. Bakowski was born premature, with a hole in the heart, he has survived two heart operations. His parents ran a delicatessen, and after completing his secondary schooling he worked in a series of low-paying jobs before opening his own record shop in the early 1980s.

He commenced writing poetry while travelling through Texas in 1983. His early works, including his first book Thunder Road, Thunder Heart (1988), show the influence of American Beat writers such as <a

href="http://www.poemhunter.com/jack-kerouac/">Jack Kerouac</a>, <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/allen-ginsberg/">Allen Ginsberg</a>, <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/charles-bukowski">Charles Bukowski</a>. His poems have appeared in over one hundred literary magazines worldwide, predominantly in English but also in Arabic, German, Japanese, Polish, Spanish and French. He has lived in Melbourne and London, and travelled widely throughout Australia, Europe, North America and Africa, occasionally as an artist-in-residence. In 2007 he became an artist in residence at the University of Macau. He has been writer-in-residence at the B.R. Whiting Library in Rome; the Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris; the University of Macau; Soochow University, Jiangsu Province, China; the Katherine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in Greenmount, Western Australia; the Hobart Writer's Cottage in Battery Point, Tasmania; the Arthur Boyd Estate of "Bundanon" near Nowra, New South Wales; the Broken Hill Poetry Festival, New South Wales.

His travels have provided a wide range of material for his work; his fifth collection Days That We Couldn't Rehearse contains poems set in Paris, Transylvania, the Upper Volga, Uzbekistan and Sarajevo.

Raised a Catholic, in 1994 he married Helen Bourke, an Irish-Australian seamstress. They live in Melbourne with their son Walter.

His book In The Human Night won the 1996 Victorian Premier's Award, the C. J.

book beneath our Armour.		

Dennis Prize for Poetry. In 2010 he was shortlisted for the same award, for his

#### A Cup Of Water, Suzhou, October 1945

The cup of water accepts rain the wind a leaf leaving its mother.

It has heard husbands and generals give orders, grandparents talk of gods and ancestors, children conversing with a friend or sorcerer whom no adult can see.

Set
on bench or table
it hears
the swish of a broom,
a cat scratching at a closed door,

the clock complaining that it's only a clock, a button torn from a lover's robe roll across a bedroom floor.

The cup of water is raised to the lips of a monk, a fisherman, a fortune teller, an orphan.

The cup of water waits to be refilled, to be of use or forgotten.

It waits for footsteps, the nearness of a hand.

## A Writing Tip Of Mine

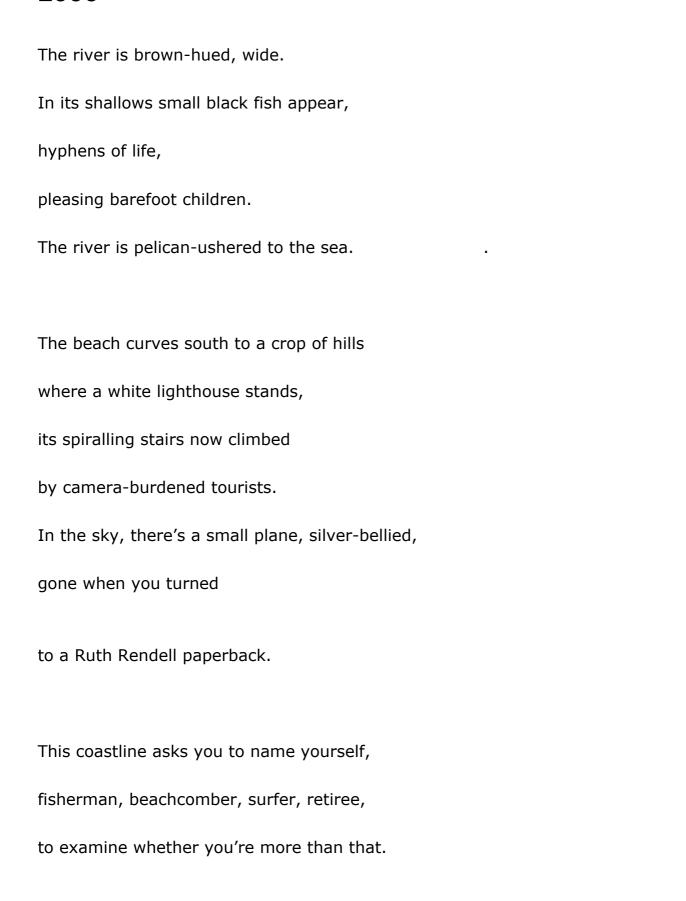
When placing words

your way,

don't leave any

in the way.

# At Brunswick Heads, New South Wales, September 2006



A gull,

eases from rock to sky,

becomes a speck and miracle

to a small boy, a sandcastle lord,

standing sandy-kneed, squinting.

The wind, the waves, play their games of give and take,

the horizon searches its deep pockets

for the makings of tomorrow's weather.

(from Beneath Our Armour)

## Away From Such Vanity

When a man grows a moustache, his eyebrows want to hide in his ears.

### **Choose Your Moment**

Before you lecture a thirsty person,

give them water.

### **Consider This**

You can rest

in the shade of a tree,

but not

in the shade of an axe.

### Don'T Join The Inflexible

If you're rigid in your thinking, you're not really thinking.

## Inertia

When all the things you need to do remain all the things you need to do.

## Instructions To Horsemen, Krakow, Poland, 1241

Your journey will be long,
dangers certain.
From clouds snakes will fall.
These can be killed only
by those amongst you
who have eaten wolf.
Don't drink from pond or stream
in which black reeds grow.
One mouthful will turn you to stone.
Sleep with an eagle feather
clasped in your fist.
This keeps away lightning.
Find my son,
carried off by Tartars.
He has a crescent-shaped scar
on his left cheek.
By this you will know him.
One hundred fine horses

for his safe return. I'm too old to ride with you. Be my eyes, vigilant in every village and forest. Put an end to my nightmares in which two Tartars whip my blindfolded son towards the edge of a cliff. (from Beneath Our Armour) Peter Bakowski

#### Jose Anok, Former Prisoner Of War, Hong Kong

Two Japanese soldiers tied me to the lamppost with rope. Their commanding officer had a small mole on his right cheek. He showed me the knife. When he began I fainted. Thirst. Dizziness. Buzzing flies. My hand moved up to my right ear. A hole. Congealed blood. I fainted again. In the prison camp I begged a fellow prisoner to slash my throat. "Not for a double ration of rice," he said. His name was Wang, He and I became master rat-catchers, cooked them on the blade of a shovel, sucked each bone clean. When the Japanese surrendered, Wang returned to the mainland, I remained in Hong Kong,

laboured unloading cargo

down on the waterfront. Bought a gun off a seaman. Many times I've stood in front of the hotel mirror, the muzzle of the gun in my mouth. Opium allows me to briefly float free of my ribs. I've written to my father, told him I've met a kind woman, been promoted to foreman. The crafting of these lies finds me opening the hotel drawer, lifting out the gun again. Last week, I threw a brick through the window

I wait for the knock on the door.

of another Japanese restaurant.

I imagine the one handcuffing me,
a rookie,
the war, pages in a history book
he studied at high school.
In the cell,
I'll look at
the walls,
the initials and dates
scratched there.
(from Beneath Our Armour)
Peter Bakowski

#### Macau, City Of Exiles

Wen stares into the bathroom mirror, touches lightly his graying hair,

the black eye patch that covers the hollow made by a Japanese sniper's bullet in the Manchurian winter of 1939.

Blood-stained tufts of grass.

Strong hands lifting him from the mud, being strapped to the back of a horse, how swiftly the ground moved beneath them.

The inside of a tent.

A face, a doctor in a bloody gown,

who apologized for the field hospital's

lack of morphine.

The doctor looked down at the dirt floor,

then at Wen,

"As well as your right eye,

you lost a finger to frostbite."

After the war Wen worked his way south. Cut hair near the railway station in Tianjin, repaired bicycles in Wuhan, sold medicinal herbs in Guangzhou, paid to have himself smuggled into Macau on a fishing boat. Wen sometimes plays cards with his widow neighbour, Mrs Cheng. They talk about the best place in Macau to sample eel, their favourite Fado singers, how strong and sweet they like their coffee. They talk of the past working in the fields alongside a parent or ox, the first time either of them saw an aeroplane,

Mrs Cheng and Wen talk about the Shanghai actress, Lotus Chang, who owed five hundred masks, her sailor lover who threw himself into the mouth of a Javanese volcano. The afternoon brings a cooling breeze. Mrs Cheng offers Wen a second piece of Madeira cake. He pats his stomach in protest, then accepts. Both are quiet for a while, each thinking of which card to play next. (from Beneath Our Armour) Peter Bakowski

the proverbs a grandfather repeated.

#### Men

Some worry about going bald, others go bald from worrying.

#### Missing In Action

Although she's mopping the kitchen floor, Ella is crying.

Words come out of her husband's mouth. Some variation of "Stop now, Ella." Ed's a good man, keeps his lawn trimmed, stays away from liquor and the racetrack.

Neighbours bring meals.
Roast chicken, gumbo, lasagna.
Ella remembers her father saying,
"Food is love, the only way some folks can speak."

Roland's room.
Ella stands at its threshold,
looks again at the wall poster of Sly Stone
wearing a rainbow-coloured cap,
on stage at Woodstock,
once a hit-maker,
once a hero.

Evenings, after dinner, sometimes Ed moves towards the record player, then shakes his head, knows Ella isn't ready, tells himself that the quiet, after an eight hour shift at the brewery, is good.

Ella removes the candlestick holder from the dining-room table, to work further on her quilt, the story of her sharecropper parents told in panels, told in thread and stitches, their days of work and prayer sewn into a field of cloth.

In the quilt trees appear.

Trees in which a girl could hide, pretend she was a bird, flying away from her home of plank and tin, flying away from the South, following the moon-lit railway tracks all the way to Chicago.

From his armchair,
Ed looks up from the book he's reading.
He cannot see words
only Roland,
lying in mud,
flies crawling his face.

Ed closes his eyes until the image leaves him.

There is Ella, still at the dining-room table, working on her quilt.

Ed watches the threaded needle dive and resurface, guided by his wife's steady hand.

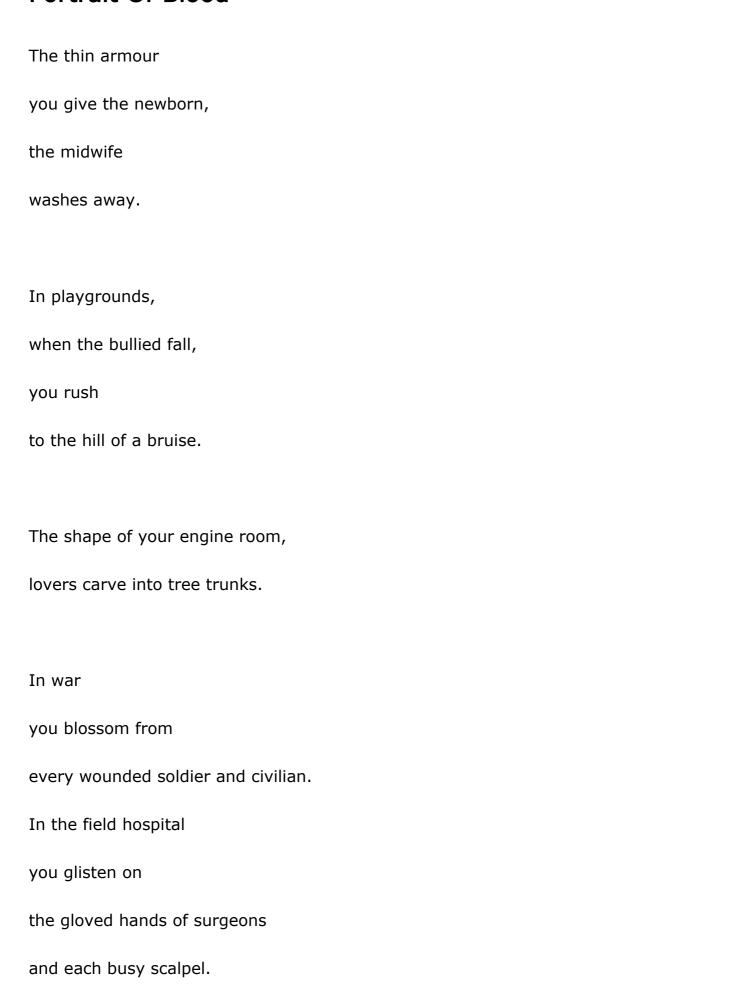
## My Zen Answer

You get a grip when you let go.

#### **Nature Does What Nature Does**

Either tortoises live long lives because they don't hurry or they don't hurry because they live long lives.

#### **Portrait Of Blood**



You're not to be trusted,
rummaging in the attic of our skulls,
studying the blueprints of our veins,
deciding where to place
your quick assassins,
clot and haemorrhage.

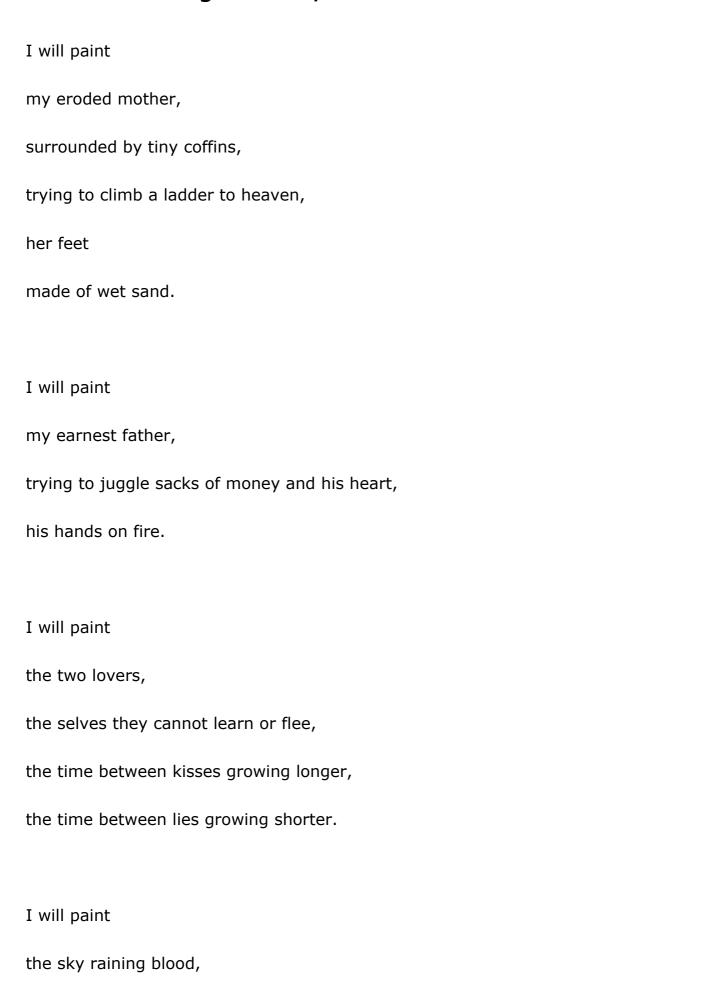
I hold my breath,

check my pulse,

as you make your rounds.

(from Beneath Our Armour)

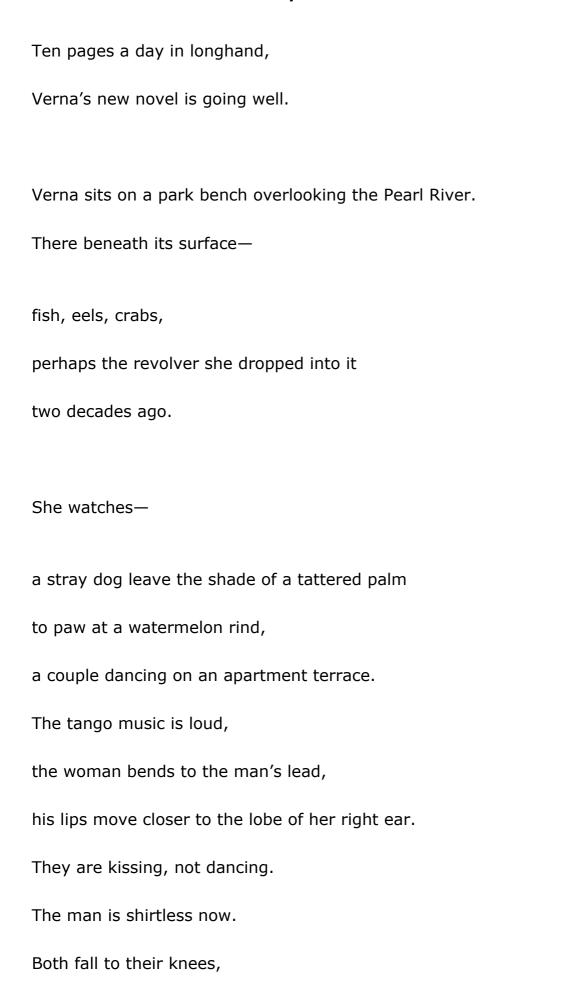
#### Portrait Of Diego Rivera, December 1955



villagers anxious beneath it, some wiping the blood from their children's foreheads with shreds of the Mexican flag, others trying to catch every dropp in soup bowls. I will paint what Spain, Paris, Detroit, California, New York City, Mexico, each sampled woman, grain and fruit, have meant to me, king of gluttony, seated at table, reaching for knife and fork as a skeleton waiter whisks away my unfinished heart.

(from Beneath Our Armour)

#### Portrait Of Verna Yan, Crime Fiction Writer



roll away from view. Verna returns to her apartment, to re-reading What We Talk About When We Talk About Love by Raymond Carver, stories about feelings expressed haltingly, violently or too late. Verna looks at herself in the mirror, sees againthat upper tooth chipped when she fell down the apartment stairs on another blurred morning dedicated to drinking gin, a woman who shot her cheating husband in a Coloane apartment twenty years ago. Two bullets in his lying face a mess for the maid to find when she came for more than the cleaning each Wednesday. Verna moves towards her bedroom,

gets into bed,

thinking about the new character

who will appear in the next chapter.

She's decided his name

and whom he'll kill first.

(from Beneath Our Armour)

## **Regarding Telepathy**

I'm in more than two minds about it.

#### Remote

When you channel surf

take care that your mind

doesn't drown.

#### Someone Will Have To Go

Portrait of Leonard Drysdale, clerk, Birmingham, England, 1946

Ever punctual I stride,
past doors of frosted glass and stencilled names,
the expected sounds of typing.
A morning nod to Mrs Flegg in reception,
then along to my office,
closing its door to sigh at the overflowing in-tray.

Some use of dictaphone and telephone, issuing curt instructions while examining the state of my fingernails.

Straighten my tie, trot down the corridor to pretend excitement or dismay over the latest regional sales report in the office of pencil-tapping Mr Codling who dispenses, as always, a terse 'Could be better.'

Sandwiches for lunch and a three-sugared cup of tea, set down by Mrs Wilkins, a limp in her left leg, but quite a dancer before the war. Four trophies on her mantelpiece at home, how they must gleam.

In conference with Mr Pettiwood.
Having looked at the quarterly figures, he says
that someone will have to go.
It's Weems, a bit of a gambler, a bit of a tippler,
whose eyes stray from sales charts and balance sheets
to ankles and the racing form.

I watch Weems pack his things, the framed photo of his wife. Weems shakes each proffered hand, I wish him luck and mean it.

The weekend, a dutiful visit to father in Coventry.

The sitting room with a fox hunting print on the wall,

after forty years at the foundry.

Some talk, some quiet, the sharing of a pie and three bottles of ale.

I watch my father climb the stairs to the bedroom, know the chair on which he'll drape his shirt and braces.

this sagging house he finally owns

Sunday night, I catch the train back to Birmingham, my attic room and downstairs landlady who tolerates the jazz records I play.

Sidney Bechet and more Sidney Bechet, trying to imagine New Orleans as I polish my shoes for Monday morning.

Arthur Marsden working on a sculpture of the writer Edgar Bowers

I'm working on his nose, it's the nose of a hardened drinker. Still, he's written his books. A dozen of them, translated into twenty languages.

He's full of stories, jail and madhouse stories, times with the rich and famous in villas in Spain and France.

It's his wife who's paying for the sculpture.
I'm a big fan of her paintings. Can't afford one myself.
She sure understands the natural world.
Her paintings of deserts and skies, they're unequalled, make me glad that I'm not a painter.

I love stone, working it, the sound of the hammer against the chisel, chipping away, the form appearing. I forget the clock, forget to eat. I'm a pair of eyes, looking, absorbing, deciding.

Never wanted to be anything else. At twelve, I was hauling up boulders from the beach in Dad's wheelbarrow, began sculpting seagulls and cormorants.

The garage workshop and the back garden were covered with them.

At fourteen, I did my first sculpture of a person, my Mum,

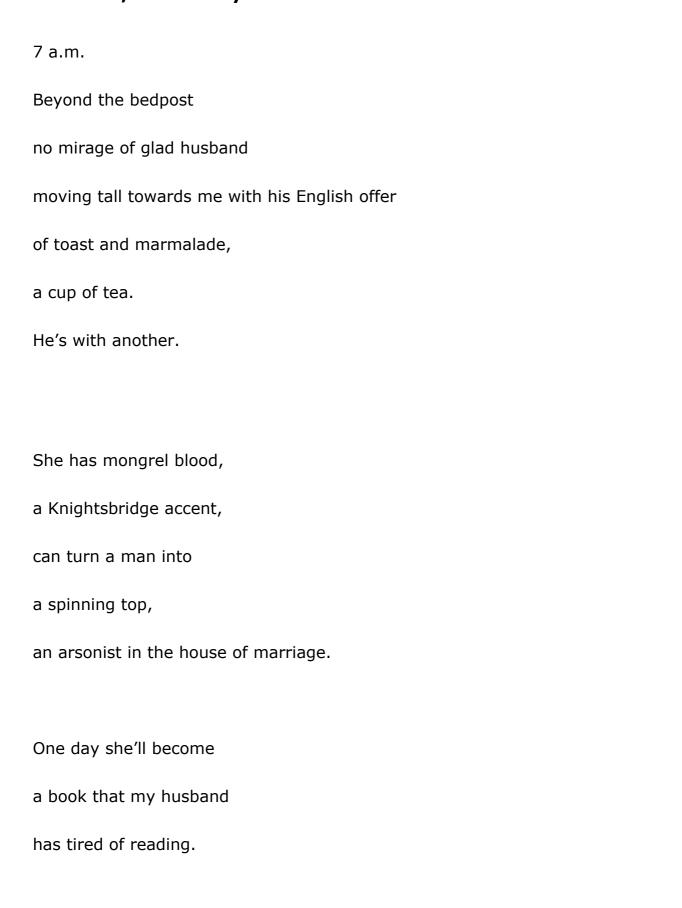
done from photographs and talking to Dad about her.

At the age of fifty,
all I know is that my heart is a boat,
its destination threatened
by foul inner weather lasting for days,
that leaves its captain unsure of his mind,
his face in the cabin mirror,
half purple, half yellow,
lacking a mouth.

But I wake on this studio floor, remember that I have a loving wife, others who believe in me and I rise knowing exactly how my latest sculpture must proceed.

I take up my hammer and chisel, sing an old Irish sea shanty as the stone chips fly and fall.

# Sylvia Plath Writing In Her Journal, 23 Fitzroy Road, London, February 1963



I'll go soon, far from
Massachusetts, Devon, London,
the zoo where my selves are caged,
venomous snake,
sacrificial lamb,
sleepless monkey examining its fleas.
Outside snowflakes fall,
drafts of a poem torn to bits.
In the night sky
I see the Zoo-keeper.
From his starlit belt
important keys hang.
He moves towards me,
I towards him.
We'll embrace
where it's black.
Peter Bakowski

## The Geometry At Parties

Sometimes you're cornered

by a square.

#### The Making Of Fletcher

(for Lawrence Block)
Some close calls,
a few bullets removed by bent doctors
for the right amount of hush money,
but never dealt
that bad hand,
capture, sentence, jail.

Thirty-five unbroken years of being a hired killer.

Looking into the shaving mirror,
Fletcher didn't see a monster,
only a bald, fifty-eight years old Caucasian man
of medium height
who lived alone,
didn't smoke,
could cook a variety
of pasta dishes.

There'd been women in his life but each one, whether feisty, exploratory or optimistic, never reached below his surface.

Fletcher's parents died in a car accident when he was three.

The next fifteen years
Fletcher was shunted back and forth
between reluctant relatives.
Home was something that belonged
to other people.

Eighteen when he hit New York City, Fletcher looked older.

He hung round bars,
ran errands,
listened all the while,
slept under pool tables,
in all-night moviehouses,
one rainy night,
in a phone booth.
Mario, an older guy,
already with a nickel's worth of prison
up his sleeve,
taught Fletcher all about guns,
in an abandoned warehouse
full of
empty wine barrels
and rats' droppings.

One night,
walking back from their weekly target practise,
Mario said to Fletcher,
'It's tears that are expensive,
bullets and lives ain't.'

Six days later
Mario died,
victim of a hit and run
in a Coney Island backstreet at 4 a.m.,
far from his home turf,
far from his roominghouse,
its single bed,
Playboy calendar still showing Miss January

though now it was March.

Three years,
a thousand days and nights
plus some change.
Fletcher spent them
in gyms,
in bar-rooms paupered of sunlight,

where the sullen and bragging gathered, got their elbows and racing forms beer wet, or alone in the abandoned warehouse, aiming steady at human outlines that he'd chalked on the brick walls.

Fletcher felt himself ready to be in on an armed robbery.

The bank was upstate, the town should have been called Sleepyville the lone guard was good at trembling, had retirement not heroics foremost in his mind.

The getaway was smooth, the cabin, back off the Interstate, didn't draw any heat, only the gossip of summer flies, a curious deer.

Even with a three way split there was ten grand each, which went a long way in 1968.

Fletcher checked the impulse to kill his partners, then torch their corpses in the cabin. Instead he watched them play poker, heard their sandcastle plans of doubling their money in Vegas then hitting half the whorehouses in New Orleans.

The end of the third week in the cabin, they talked it out, agreed that the bank job was now a dead-end file.
They could move.

Fletcher let the two others have the car, walked the fifteen miles to the nearest Greyhound station.
The agent yawned selling him the ticket.

Fletcher got out at Port Authority, found a hotel room.

The next day
F1etcher walked the streets of Queens,
inspected a quiet front room,
stopped the landlady's volley of questions
by paying a year's rent in advance,
told her he was workins on
The Great American Novel.

At night
F1etcher trawled the bars,
bought drinks for the thirsty,
told certain players
that he was looking for solo work,
possessed a cool head,
a steady hand, a strong stomach
and during and after a job,

One night in Ferguson's Willie Seven came up to Fletcher's left ear whispered, 'Lady, I'd like you to meet, she's sitting over in the back booth, nearest the kitchen door.'

F1etcher went over, introduced himself, sat down opposite the woman who called herself A1ice Long.

Pale skin, probably Irish, not quite forty, Alice laid it out.

sealed lips.

'I'm a broker,
I get calls from other brokers
who have clients.

These clients want the professional I hire

to rid their world of a certain person.

Sometimes there's a time frame, sometimes the death needs to appear accidental, sometimes the death needs to make a real impression in the press and on the street, serve as a lesson to others.

The client's needs, the status of the target, the difficulty of the hit all are factored into the price, set or negotiated by me.'

Alice removed a large, thick envelope from her shoulder bag.
'In the envelope,

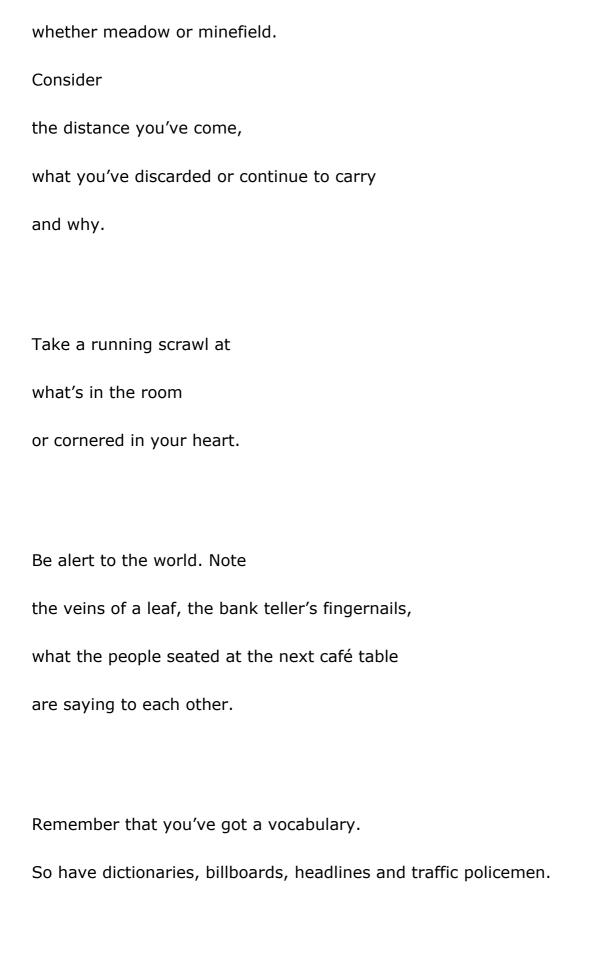
\_ there's a return airline ticket to Clearwater, Florida, a black and white head and shoulders photo of the target, their name and current residential address on the back and ten thousand dollars in used hundreds, another ten thousand to come once the client's satisfied. The time frame is two weeks.

If you want the job pick up the envelope, contact Willie Seven when you get back, he'll know how to reach me.'

Fletcher picked up the envelope, walked out of Ferguson's, hurried towards the subway, first drops of October rain hitting his broad shoulders.

#### The Next Time You'Ve Got Writer's Block

Go back to your childhood and adolescence,



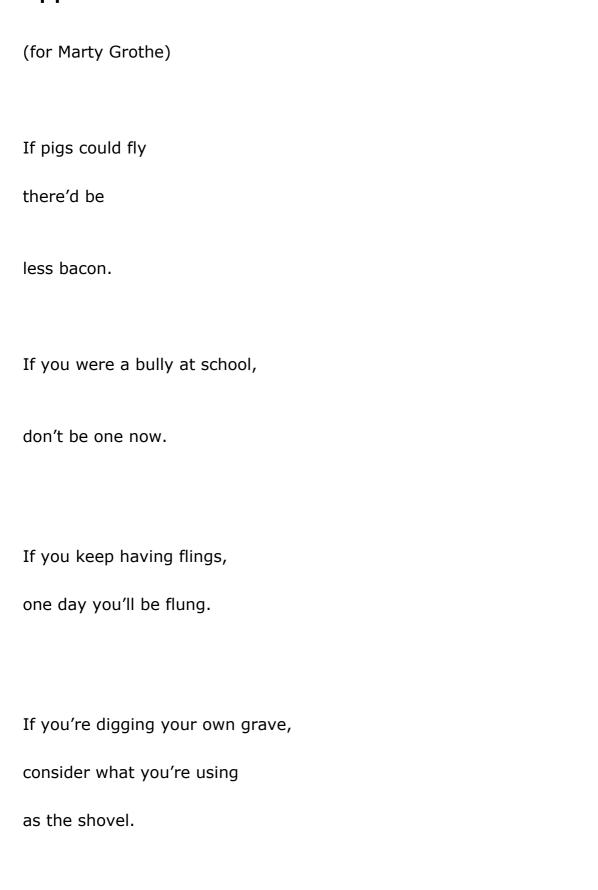
Words are everywhere. Let a few wander onto a black page. See whether they react to each other. If not audition some more. Words are building blocks which can be toppled, rearranged, reassembled. Throw some over your shoulder, see how they land. Return to the circus arena of being playful and precise, balancing words on the tip of your nose as you jump through flaming hoops in rehearsal for opening night in a new town, far from where you've written before.

## The Weather Inside

Sometimes your thinking can make you cry,

sometimes your crying can make you think.

# The Word 'If' Is A Seesaw Waiting For You To Approach It



If God exists

we must appal him sometimes.

If time is money

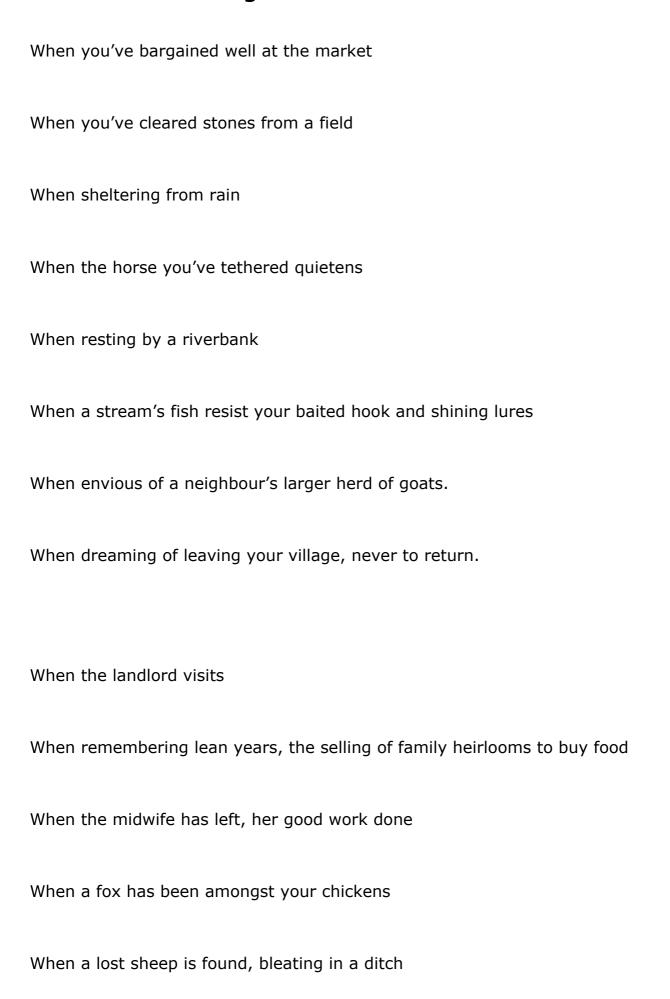
some of us

will end up short-changed.

If you think you know everything,

try writing poems.

#### Times For Drinking Tea In China



When you've repaired your bicycle, brushed the dirt from your knees
When you're the only one awake in the dormitory
When far from home.
When thinking about what your parents taught you
When thinking about what you're had to learn for yourself
When you've paid off a debt
When trying to understand a relative
When you've paced the room for too long
When discussing the afterlife
When the fog lifts from the path you've taken
When your tea canister is almost empty.
(from Beneath Our Armour)
Peter Bakowski

## **To Progress**

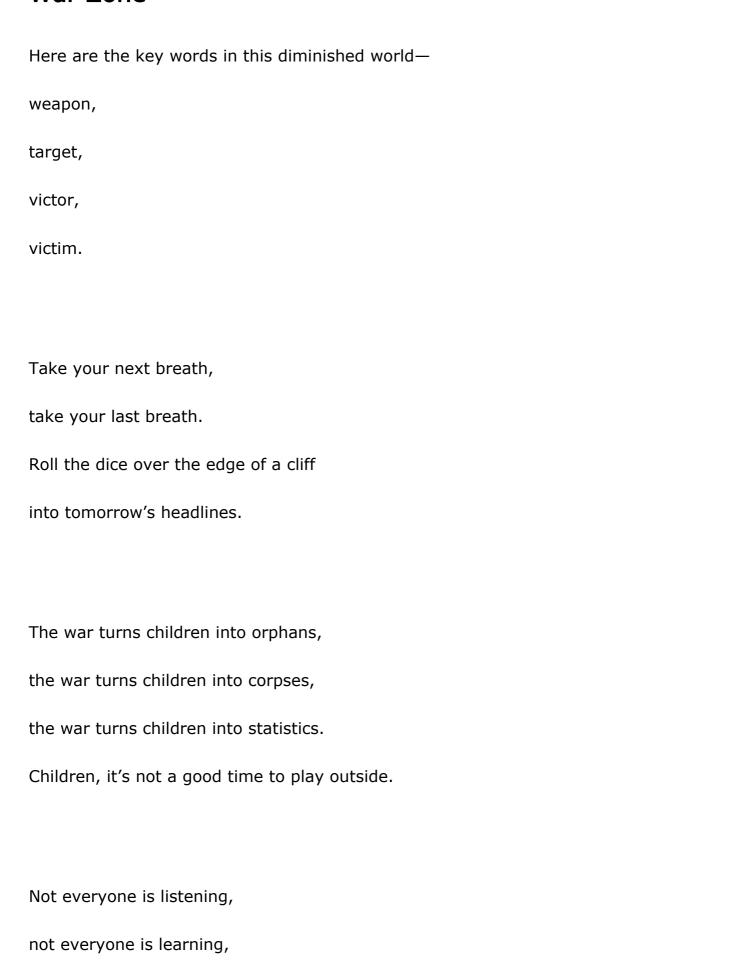
Chip away

at a wall

until it becomes

a stepping stone.

#### War Zone



not every human is humane.

This is an angry poem.

Anger is a shovel blade

striking buried skull and rib,

slowly unearthing

another mass grave.

### Wealth

Having the time

to watch a snail

do a U-turn.

## When you channel surf

When you channel surf

take care that your mind

doesn't drown.

### Where Words Take Us

(for Adam Ford and Dennis Wild)
I write poetry—
because it puts windows where there were walls
because today is a mountain
I'd like to reduce to a few stanzas
because now is the time to write it.
I write poetry, hoping to astound myself.
I write poetry because I enjoy
coaxing words
out of the corral of my ribs,
letting them graze
upon the blank page
under the shade of an adverb.

I try to write poetry clearly, use words sparingly, each word, a small cog or spring needed

Don't want to fog or flood

to make the poem tick.

any readers proceeding to the end of my poem,

where they may rest

in the quiet clearing

just beyond

the last full stop.