

Gael Turnbull (1928-2004) was born in Edinburgh, but grew up in Jarrow and in Blackpool, before emigrating to Winnipeg at the outbreak of the war with his father and mother, respectively a Scottish Baptist Minister and an American of Swedish descent. He returned to England in 1944 to complete his schooling and then to study Natural Sciences at Cambridge University. After rejoining his family in North America, he studied for an MD at the University of Pennsylvania and then, in 1952, became a GP and anaesthetist at Iroquois Falls Hospital in northern Ontario as well as providing medical assistance at logging camps in the area. There followed a short stay in London (1955-56), and a position as anaesthetist at Ronkswood Hospital in Worcester until 1958, followed by a similar position at the Ventura County hospital in California. He returned to Worcester in 1964, to avoid the possibility of being sent to Vietnam as a medical orderly. He was to work as a general practitioner and anaesthetist until his retirement in 1989, whereupon he returned to live in Edinburgh.

An independent figure, he was central to the early transatlantic poetic contacts which were to have a transforming effect on many poets in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. Frequently collected and anthologised, his own poetry was deeply personal and owed little to any particular school, although it is fair to say that his admiration for the work of William Carlos Williams, another poet-doctor, never left him and was an early driving force behind the discovery, and the maturing, of his own poetic voice.

## Also by Gael Turnbull

- Trio* (Contact Press, Montreal, 1954)  
*The Knot in the Wood & fifteen other poems* (Revision Press, London, 1955)  
*Bjarni Spike-Helgi's Son and other poems* (Origin Press, Ashland, Mass., 1956)  
*A Libation* (The Poet, Glasgow, 1957)  
*With Hey, Ho . . .* (Migrant Press, Ventura & Worcester, 1961)  
*To You, I Write* (Migrant Press, 1963)  
*A Very Particular Hill* (Wild Hawthorn Press, Edinburgh, 1963)  
*Twenty Words, Twenty Days* (Migrant Press, Birmingham, 1966)  
*Briefly* (Tarasque Press, Nottingham, 1967)  
*A Trampoline* (Cape Goliard Press, London, 1968)  
*I, Maksoud* (Exeter Books N° 19, Exeter, 1969)  
*Scantlings* (Cape Goliard Press, 1970)  
*Finger Cymbals* (Satis, Edinburgh, 1971)  
*A Random Sapling* (Pig Press, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1974)  
*Wulstan* (Blue Tunnel, Bradford, 1975)  
*Residues: Down the Sluice of Time* (Grosseteste Press, Pensnett, 1976)  
*Thronging the Heart* (Aggie Weston's, Belper, 1976)  
*What Makes the Weeds Grow Tall* (Five Seasons Press, Hereford, 1978)  
*If a Glance Could Be Enough* (Satis, 1978)  
*Rain in Wales* (Satis, 1981)  
*Nine Intersections* (Circle Press, London, 1982)  
*Traces* (Circle Press, 1983)  
*A Gathering of Poems 1950-1980* (Anvil Press Poetry, London, 1983)  
*From the Language of the Heart* (Mariscat Press, Glasgow, 1983,  
Gnomon Press, Frankfort, KY, 1985)  
*Circus* (Five Seasons Press, 1984)  
*A Year and a Day* (Mariscat Press, 1985)  
*Spaces* (Satis, 1986)  
*Coelacanth* (Coelacanth Press, Dublin, 1986)  
*A Winter Journey* (Pig Press, Durham, 1987)  
*As From a Fleece* (Circle Press, 1990)  
*While Breath Persist* (The Porcupine's Quill, Erin, Ontario, 1992)  
*To the Tune of Annie Laurie* (Akros Publications, Kirkcaldy, 1995)  
*For Whose Delight* (Mariscat Press, 1995)  
*A Rattle of Scree* (Akros Publications, 1997)  
*Transmutations* (Shoestring Press, Nottingham, 1997)  
*Etruscan Reader 1* (with Helen Macdonald and Nicholas Johnson)  
(Etruscan Books, Buckfastleigh, 1997)  
*Traces* (Objectif Press, London, 1998)  
*Amorous Greetings* (Vennel Press, Staines, 1998)  
*More Amorous Greetings* (Longhouse, Green River, VT, 1999)  
*Might a Shape of Words* (Mariscat Press, 2000)  
*Dividings* (Mariscat Press, Edinburgh, 2004)

**GAEL TURNBULL**

*There are Words*

**Collected Poems**

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### **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

Sorting out the papers of someone close who has recently died arouses, as might easily be imagined, a mixture of emotions – great loss and sadness, but also the pleasure of happy memories and, in my case, a voyage of discovery. Gael had lived over two-thirds of his life before we met, so I had not shared his early writing and publishing, nor the literary friendships which were so important to him, although he had, of course, talked about them. Since his death I have catalogued over a thousand books from his poetry library, ranging from small fragile booklets from the fifties and sixties to the glossier publications of today's up-and-coming young poets. Among them was the book given to him by William Carlos Williams, whom Gael greatly admired, to commemorate their only meeting. By then an old man, Williams had written in it, in a shaky hand, and tucked into it was a letter from his wife Florence, saying how much they had enjoyed the visit. Even in the week he died, a letter arrived for Gael from a little-known young poet whose work he had just discovered, and whom he had visited a couple of weeks before. It was truly a life-long passion.

A few lines in a diary from 1966 sum up how Gael felt about poetry: 'my real work is that of finding some way to write a few poems – all else is incidental'. That does not mean that he did not wholeheartedly fulfil his roles as a family man, doctor and friend, but writing was of immense importance to him from the age of about fifteen and continued to be so until he died. He kept commonplace books throughout his life and wrote to poets whose work he enjoyed, often long before their poetry was recognised by others, establishing life long friendships. He was a keen correspondent and kept all the letters he received, from poets as diverse as Basil Bunting and Ian Hamilton Finlay, Cid Corman and Robert Creeley, amongst many others. He sent new poems to friends for their comments and had a remarkable ability to be honest about the work of others without offending them.

It has been my enjoyable task to gather up Gael's poems from the wide variety of magazines and pamphlets stashed in his study, for this volume. There were mimeographed sheets stapled together, like *Contact* and *Combustion*, published in Toronto in the 1950s. In one a Gael Turnbull poem is sandwiched between poems by Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. There were piles of Scottish publications containing his recent work, and there was everything in between. Having published a

little magazine himself, he believed in encouraging others. I am happy that his letters, papers and most of his poetry library are now housed in a Special Collection in the National Library of Scotland.

I have also been in a position to check the various published versions of his work, so that the latest revision is the one which appears here. Gael often referred to himself as a 're-arranger of words' and sometimes he went on re-arranging them long after a poem was published, if he wasn't entirely happy with it. He was always exploring new forms, sometimes going back to an earlier idea which he had put in his 'compost heap' having been unable to find the right way to use it at the time.

Gael's wish was that his poetry should speak for itself – he saw no need for his photograph on a cover or a biographical note, although he agreed to go along with the convention. He used to say that poetry should be published anonymously so that the poem could be judged for itself and not the name associated with it. That is not how the world works, but I hope, as he would, that these collected poems will indeed speak for themselves.

Jill Turnbull  
March, 2006

### **Publisher's Note**

There are two obvious ways to approach the compilation of a *Collected Poems* such as this: order the poems chronologically, or place them in the context of their original publication, thus making a 'Collected Books'. Dates for Gael Turnbull's poems are often impossible to ascertain and, in any event, as Jill Turnbull observes in her Introduction, Gael was an inveterate reviser of his own work, which tends to distort the chronology. In view of this, we opted for a 'Collected Books' approach, but with one major difference: the most recent revised version of each poem would be used, albeit placed in the order of its original publication. Where the original text has been replaced by a later revision, sources have been given in the Notes at the end of the book. We have thus outlined Gael Turnbull's publishing career through a large number of small-press publications and a few more substantial volumes. The few exclusions from this survey are: (a)

private publications – small editions of the author’s own work, intended largely for circulation amongst friends; (b) the late *Amorous Greetings* chapbooks which, although delightful, seem more at home in their original environment; (c) translations, including *Dividings*, which was published posthumously and was still in print at the time this *Collected* was published; and (d) one significant volume – *A Winter Journey* (1987) – which has been excluded in accordance with the author’s wishes, although six poems from that volume have been preserved: one which had already appeared in a previous collection, and five which the author subsequently collected in *While Breath Persist* and *Etruscan Reader 1*. The prose journal *A Year and a Day* (1985) was also considered to lie outside the natural bounds of this compilation.

Uncollected poems have been assigned to the decade of their composition, in so far as this could be safely ascertained, and have been placed after the last publication from that decade: thus the uncollected poems from the 1950s appear after *A Libation*. Approximately 70-80 pages of uncollected work have been left out of the final volume, where we felt that the poems did not merit inclusion in a major retrospective such as this, or where their function (performance pieces, for instance, or occasional poems) seemed to make them unsuited to the book. It remains possible that some of this work will see the light of day in other forms. The spelling in poems that originally appeared in North American publications has been anglicised for this edition; obvious spelling errors in the original editions have also been corrected.

The contents of this volume have been assembled with the advice of Jill Turnbull – who was able to provide photocopies, typescripts and obscure publications, as well as variants of many of the poems – and of Hamish Whyte at Mariscat Press, who published several collections of the author’s work and knew the author well. It needs also to be said that some of the poems included here had been intended by the author for a volume called *Time is a Fisherman*, a large Selected Poems that had been scheduled for publication in 2005 by Etruscan Books. Letters to, and notes for, Nicholas Johnson – Etruscan’s publisher – have helped clarify several issues in the compilation of this much larger volume.

Tony Frazer  
March, 2006



## **Lines for a Bookmark**

You who read . . .  
May you seek  
As you look;  
May you keep  
What you need;  
May you care  
What you choose;  
And know here  
In this book  
Something strange,  
Something sure,  
That will change  
You and be yours.

## **Try Again**

“Poetry New York” it said  
On the mail box and ahead  
Up three half-lit flights I groped  
To the farthest door and hoped  
That in New York at last I’d found  
Poetry; but at the sound  
Of each knock I gave, there came  
Echoes only back, the same  
Appropriately hollow rhyme  
Answering me every time.

## **To the Point for Once**

I made one cry of terror  
That day upon the lake  
And it had an earnest sound,  
When I was no longer able  
And thought that I must drown.  
O that was an honest shout  
When the dark came up beneath me  
And I saw the light go out:  
O I loved the sunshine dearly  
When the water bubbled close about my mouth.



## Post-Mortem

Death is easy and without regret,  
Laid out here on a marble table.  
The limbs relaxed in a formal pattern  
And the eyeballs upward in a vulgar stare.

Here lie the tools and the map of the battle,  
The ditches dug, the abandoned weapons –  
After the confusion and bewildered exile,  
Ridiculously drowning in a single tear.

Here were trumpets, and a penny whistle.  
A cathedral organ with the stops full out  
The drum of boredom, and the foolish giggle,  
The weeping lover, and the coward's shout.

Her world contracted in simple stages:  
Friends, then family; several, then one;  
A home, then house; a room, then walls;  
And a last yellow curtain to obscure the sun.

Between two sheets she measured her body,  
A desperate journey in the sweat of her bed,  
Exploring the kingdom that she took for granted,  
Memorising sorrow while the nurses chattered.

Time became a zig-zag on a hidden chart,  
Framing each gesture as she tried to explain,  
Making weary debate in a hospital bed  
Without a jury on recurrent questions  
Of the doctor's hope and the body's clamour.

Death is simple and the ultimate joke,  
Like a faded wise-crack in that gaping mouth  
That swallows all answers. Oh, death is the clown  
That covers our face with our photograph.

## **Socrates**

His stubborn decision  
to drink the poison  
may have shown the extent  
of his intellect  
but is not my notion  
of what is human  
and shows the defect  
of disinterest

and though his attempt  
to be quite detached  
may have helped the logic  
and been heroic,  
it shows contempt  
for the man attacked  
and takes most of the point  
from the argument.

## **Bjarni Spike-Helgi's Son**

The man who bred me,  
breeds me yet.

That father whom I scarcely knew  
but as an overbearing ox  
who begrudged even the sky  
above his neighbour's head,  
who stirred mean quarrels,  
killed and then was killed –

while I went in peace,  
well loved by all who knew me,

wishing no part  
with what I was already part.

★

We all went to the court, and I named Geitir as my father's slayer,  
and Geitir named himself and asked for atonement, not ashamed,  
but as a just man who wished a just outcome.

And the atonement was paid, one hundred of silver according to the  
law, and another thirty for the ambush.

And we swore oaths together, in the sight of all men, to keep our  
trust.

★

It was my mother brought them –

she  
who bleeds in secret

and gives birth in blood,  
gave me my blood,  
binds us  
by blood –

in a shut room,  
snow over the windows,  
the hearth stoked, incandescent –

reproach  
thrust upon me,  
a bundle of torn clothes,  
twisted together concealing  
something like charred pitch  
caked in the weave,  
something dark,  
his,  
my father's . . .

★

O Geitir, I have kept my trust.  
Although you fell beneath my axe,  
I did not strike,  
and not at you.

Your head upon my knee.  
Your question  
(I will always hear,  
though you never spoke),  
“Who killed me?”

Whom you killed,  
killed you,  
killed me.

★

That night I walked alone.

No man saw the face I hid.

In night I walk.

No man sees the man I hide.

## **I, Maksoud**

I, Maksoud  
of Kashan, a slave  
to splendour,  
wove this pattern  
and these words  
(each thread,  
tied with a knot –  
four hundred,  
less a score,  
width of a thumb –  
for the sum  
of the lifespan of a man)  
till it was done  
as garment  
to no ordinary floor  
beneath the eye  
and tread of God,  
here, where you kneel.

## **A sea-stone**

A sea-stone – by the tide  
(grip-sized, with carapace  
of shards: a tooth,  
polished, eroded, carious  
from the jaw of time)  
spat up, once only – held  
and then dropped back.

## For a Jazz Pianist

Seen (through  
fogged goggles?)  
submerged against  
a cellar wall  
(of museum dust?  
of lumpy porridge?)  
where we congest  
and thicken (compost  
air? scrapyard  
breath?) to hear  
few bubbled  
gritty noises  
(patterned?)  
from a black  
and polished upright  
slotted box  
(a camel's coffin?)  
you (a swaddled  
clockwork torso?)  
sit before  
and prod.

## Riel

Perhaps I railed.

Is the truth  
insanity?  
Can we live on muskeg?  
blackflies? air?  
Even our mothers' words  
cast out?

To break us, break  
all trust, by promises.  
Till murder was.

You must swing, Riel!

Like a silver bell?  
Or a beast, to bellow  
till the rope jerks?  
Better, a vial  
in God's grip,  
poured or kept.

Where I have not been,  
north of the trees,  
the Indians tell  
of how the caribou still come  
from nowhere, suddenly  
a host, uncountable –  
and go.

And no man stays  
to winter  
on the Barrens.



## John Bunyan: of Grace

mere foolishness  
to those not knowing  
the cogitations, torments  
sometimes headlong  
scattered, groping  
amid tombs  
bewildered, numb  
with often glimmers  
longings and breakings  
sometimes pleasing  
but stumbling ever  
the very sinews  
knotted in me  
cankered, scurvy  
bound in chains  
upon a ladder  
rope at neck  
head in a bag  
stopped at the throat  
what guilt is  
felt the smart  
when broke upon me  
seemed to spangle  
'is sufficient'  
not my will  
'not cast out'  
cling to that  
relief and shelter  
burden from me  
sweetness in it  
drops of honey  
ease to speak  
O now I know  
such overflowing

THERE IS a visitation of summer, most potent in northern countries, which comes when September is ending, a trembling of the light, a transparence of the air, which can drop without warning into the bed-sitting room of a maiden old lady without surviving family living on the most meagre of pensions

to awaken memories of a dangerous kind, set the imagination to work, undo a lifetime of resolve, and against which even such a veteran of the impossible can find herself helpless and weeping as she has not done since her first day at school.

“WHY IS the sky dark at night?” an astronomer asked, years ago, for if the universe was infinite and unchanging and the stars shining undiminished, by now the sky should be so choked with light that we would be dazzled, as he was by the question,

while today we are told that the universe is finite but expanding, so that the increasing emptiness dissipates the radiance, and thus we are also overwhelmed, but by the answer, that it is only by the stars receding at such unimaginable speeds that there is darkness enough for us to see them.

*(with homage to Heinrich Olbers)*

BURNING JUNIPER on the fire and, as the scent fills the room, there's the presence of a time not now and a place not here

so immediate that it's as if the answer to some first and final question had been revealed and was to be found only in what is lost at every moment.

THEY ARE EVERYWHERE that man is to be found, though skilled in camouflage and evasion. If easy targets when spotted and vulnerable to hostile conditions, the platitudes have never been threatened by extinction for they recover quickly and exterminated in one place soon reappear in another.

Yet don't despise them. They have their place in the natural order and in bad times, or when you are old, you may be glad of their company, their willingness to please, even what brief sustenance they can offer.

NOT ONLY as achieved objects but as functional practicalities, perhaps certain writings like favourite shoes, the most comfortable since worn the longest, may be repaired as needed, first the soles and then the uppers, changing colour, stitching, style of laces, certainly shape

so that in the end only the feet that fit into them appear – but only appear to be – the same.

A VERY INGENIOUS MECHANISM, keeping time to within half a second a week, the limit of such device when not running in a vacuum: the hands driven by an electric motor which raises a gravity arm which in turn falls to drive a pendulum, which, by its position, determines that period of swing during which the motor is made to run faster so that over the whole period the rate is most precisely varied,

and thus, though pendulum and movement are never actually connected, yet the latter drives the former and the former controls the latter.

*(with homage to Alexander Steuart and the Royal Museum of Scotland)*

A SPARROW has found a crust and a crow is after it, harrying the smaller bird which dodges neatly, until the larger bird gives up or appears to, perching on a branch, pretending it doesn't care, far enough away to hope to persuade the sparrow to relax but still near enough to pounce,

while the sparrow takes its time, enjoying the crust, fluffing its feathers, flicking its tail, making a show, also pretending, as if the crow weren't there.

IT'S A STUBBORN BEAST, crouches, shows a yellow tooth, won't be hurried, shies at sudden approach, poking with a stick is no good, a titbit in front of its nose may help, other ploys

but it's mostly patience, expectation, sometimes pretending to turn your back, for the mind has its own necessities, and above all: will start when it's ready.

THIS FEAR, not of oblivion but of the ever-approaching nearness of, with always less time and for all that's yet unfinished and undone, as if there ever could be that much time

until there isn't so much time, as if there ever was that much, and then with almost no time left, scarce time enough for anything, and then just not.

ESTUARIES, neither lakes nor seas, rivers or bays, they receive and open out, subside and fill, are shallow, deep, cluttered then cleansed, predictable yet shifting, never quite afresh or quite relinquished,

and in the consistency of their insistence upon change, while alien to monotony, threaten no surprise.

AS A STONE SKITTERING across a pond, as sounding into a well, as a whet for honing, as carved and kept as charm or set as monument, or with others, found or cut, assembled as boundary, barrier, shelter against the sticks and stones of . . .

or to strike as with iron from, or stand with back against, or rest our head upon, or be as ballast, as foundation, corner, cap, head, or mill, or inscribed upon, even to be cast as a first, as a last, or to get blood from, having the look of, a heart of, a face of, to be turned into, to be raised up, to be remaining, to be unturned.

STARTED . . . and so begun, have already said too much to guess where this may lead, as if a knotted cord I wind into my hand and follow into a maze, finding amazement, what is meant, as meaning,

and yet tensed in my intention, not pretending or dissembling, listening to the words, assembled, gathered, understanding what may stand, may not go back or falter, but go forward in due sequence to arrive, from where it started . . . as this does, and has.

THIS CRAVING to save – something at least, though it be the least, of what is sensed so intently here as present in each moment, all that's given only as what's shed, what's gone yet we would grasp:

now hereafter as a net of words cast over and around what is, by its insistence, once perceived, an absence – how strong it is.