

Mid Life

Also by Michael Haslam

various ragged fringes

The Fair Set in The Green

Son Son of Mother

Continual Song

Sothfastness

Four Poems

A Whole Bauble

The Music Laid Her Songs in Language

A Sinner Saved by Grace

MICHAEL HASLAM

Mid Life

Poetry 1980-2000

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Mid Life: In Preface

Attempting coherence by hindsight, the plot of my writing seems clear enough, as a three-part venture. First, what I might call various ragged poetries (1963-1979) which I don't seek to suppress or censor, but which I can neither commend nor make cohere. The contradiction here was between inspiring Modernist ideas, of spontaneity ("first words, best words"), the "break with the pentameter", and the free placing of words in the space of the page, and, in contrast, a practice which, from early on was using re-writing, over-writing, transformation, on an iambic pulse. In this context, eccentric word-placings (I came to think) were merely making precious something that was as run-of-the-mill as flowing water.

Around the time the Conservatives and the Monetarists were beginning to reshape political Britain, I began to try to pull myself together. *Mid Life* might be a period between, say, 1979 and 1999, or, in publication terms between *Continual Song* (1986) and *A Whole Bauble* (1995).

Composing 'Continual Song' was a matter of gathering, rewriting, transforming all that I'd written to date, that might have been located nowhere, in language, in myth, or out on the coasts of tourist vacation. What I wanted to do was, bring as much as possible into the place I lived, the Upper Calder Valley. The conceit that the book might be read back-to-front was based on the fact that the front parts were the most over-written, the back parts the newest, and more spontaneous. I thought that reading back to front might constitute a journey from freshness into the Rewriting Revelations. I'm not sure, now, that this works. And though I do remember the mechanical procedures, I can't, but for rare instances, detect what the rewriting might have been rewritten from. When all I was rewriting was 'Continual Song', the book came to feel complete.

The Open Township marriage years (1985-90) were the hardest. Trying to be a publisher, and a Creative Writing teacher, didn't aid writing, but the hardest thing was that, as the marriage deteriorated, the wife took to seeking out, and finding slurs against herself, in any scribble I might be engaged in, and these became the foci for furious rows. I'd plead innocence and

abstraction, but since I'd theoretically accept responsibility for anything that might be read into my words, my case was weak. The result was that my scribble became something secret, hidden even from myself. When the end was in sight, I gathered this scribble together, and published 'Aleethia', a sad farewell to poetry, and the last act of Open Township.

The trouble with this sad conclusion was that it proved not to be true. Free open scribbling resumed. The next work, which has had several titles, but is here called *Something's Recrudescence through to its Effulgence* began with 'three simultaneous poems'. I attempted to write the same poem in three quite different versions, out of unhappiness, in hope that I might cheer up somewhat. That hope was requited. In fact, I went over the top into the joyful daftness, the over-effulgence of 'A Fourth'. Meanwhile I was able to rewrite 'Aleethia' (as 'The New Aleethia') to remove the untruth that it had been a dead end.

It will be clear from this that the plots of sexual relationships have been a prime source for the generation of poetic plot, but also clear that the poet has not proved a satisfactory husband or lover, on the whole. I attribute to my Lancashire background the ambition for the Poet to be, above all, a Comedian. For a stock comic character, the Laughable Lover is pure gift, and it's part of the humour that the foolish boyfriend cannot always see the joke. 'A Fourth' came in time to give me problems, to seem to be merely bad and silly poetry. The three (I felt) needed a fourth, but the fourth was unconscionably foolish. I produced mangled and awkward revisions of it for The (sound) Archive of the Now (2005), and for my website (2006). It was only this month (November 2006) that I came to believe that the poem knew what it was doing, and knew that it was only me who had been the fool all along; that it's a successful satire, but that I, in my person, am its butt. What had led me to reject it was a joke that I was failing to laugh at. The love affair that 'A Fourth' celebrates came to collapse in the bizarre and farcical parody of a drama of the 1970s, touched on, in previous form, in *Continual Song*, and involving a variation on some of the same characters: The Lady takes up with The Poet's male friend. You have to laugh.

Though I was quickly embarrassed by 'A Fourth', I was still in a mode of effulgent composition when the invitation came from

Carcanet to produce a *Collected*. In no mood to objectively edit old work, I resolved to rewrite almost everything (CS excepted). I excluded much of the various ragged poetries, but included some re-writings of pre-*Continual Song* things. Some of these were so rewritten that their origins were unrecognisable, and they became new poems, though placed to the front of the book. Other pieces (of a developing Image Phantasmagoria) were placed towards the back. I had an idea of the grand Bauble structure I was building. It's unlikely that a reader would grasp what I was at.

Here, as by default, the order of inclusions follows that of *A Whole Bauble*. It could be otherwise. Excluded are a couple of sets I called 'Vacations', in which I'd, rather hurriedly, against deadline, tried to rewrite various ragged fringes and some other stuff. I made a mess that I can only consign to the recycle bin of ragged poetries.

After *The Bauble* I worked upon a long poem of humourless agony. I've managed to forget its title. My ruling Comedian judged, rightly, that it must be suppressed, buried, lost.

The current project, which I call *Music*, with Arc Publications, began at the turn of the millennium when, over fifty, I realised that I wasn't young, and that, if I am to live long enough, I should prepare for the poetry of old age. It therefore lies beyond the scope of *Mid Life*.

from
Continual Song
(1986)

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'In one of the Icelandic sagas we have a strange story of a man standing at his house-door, and seeing the souls go by in the air, and among the souls was his own. He told the tale, and died.'

– S. Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle-Ages*.

'Tri Dyfal Gyfangen oedh gynt in amser y Brytanniet: Bangwr, a Chaer Gariadawg, ag Ynys Widrin. yn Sasonaec Continuale Songe . . .'

– Rachel Bromwich (ed.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*.

'I like to describe this in Ovidian terms, as a carmen perpetuum, a continuous song in which the fragmented subject matter is only apparently disconnected. Ovid's words are:

*to tell of bodies
transformed
into new shapes
you gods, whose power
worked all transformations,
help the poet's breathing,
lead my continuous song
from the beginning to the present world.'*

– Robin Blaser, *The Fire*.

'Some of these songs . . . cannot be sung.'

– Charles Ives, *Postface to 114 Songs*.

WINGS

in a blank white shining room
 blind me so I blanch and finch
 and blink still at the white
 of walls and floor.

Wings of The Idea
 of the Advance of Being
 Human, sprouting from a Sphere.

A zephyr rushing
 to the visible from the invisible
 and filling lungs.

A falcon falling out upon the wind –
 the vocal remnant of illumination so sustained
 until it disappears inaudibly.

Here, take these token wings,
 an interruption to an argument,
 a stop upon an outrage and an anger;
 may they carry you through areas
 of Spiritual Danger –

the infernal haunt that hurts internally,
 and funnily enough I must be blanked with wings
 of wishing prayer, *'May the Planet
 be washed also with these wheeling winds.'*

My growth in all its senses springs
 of sharing in the sex of an inheritance;
 an intercourse whose being is
 in shouts and silence.

At the entrance to the spring
 there is an atmosphere
 of streaming rising wings;
 a Figure pointing forward through election
 to the threat of war;
 a shining wind across a reservoir;

freaking airs about the court
 of a transparent palace.

I place my dumb cross in the deaf booth;
 exhale waste which empties in the shrill,
 cold in the ears. A silver wind
 makes for a silver wake. I hear

how hollow freedom sounds through broken flats –
 the agents boarding up with nails
 the broken windows. See
 the soul slip on her steps of stone.
 A hunted look spread fast across her face.
 The sound of helpers yelping after
 helpless madness fighting off remote control.
Stop there upon the stair-well! I can hear
 her shouting echo through a hollow hole.

Orient Pearl. The rising glow electing glaze
 of blue, and colouring accumulates, tinting
 spectacles of light. Wild rose growth springs
 out from the arch over the waterfall.

An apparition on the bridge, a stranger
 in the pure white clouding of the sun, a figure
 in all innocence sways in his silence, when
 the limping Spirit of Impatience, keen
 to close the daylight gate of dawn, pronounces:
'Now the day has come, your daze is done!'

A ringing gong. The light is decorate
 with azure and gold strings.

Clouds curdle, clown and tumble over down
 and silken green, crowding the bridge to blur
 the blue-er pasture.

Key-ring dangling from impatient fingers.
 One more look, I'll follow on
 the homing drone through crazy static –
 let's not talk, but look there
 outlined like an angel
 is the sparrowhawk
 over the brook.
'OK. Let's walk!'
 into clear tone,

a small town in the early Sunday morning.

Aquila in the rainbow. *Angel* strangely
 indicating an oblivion. The way
 the car stopped at the crossing, with the coffin
 running through the doors. The coughing stopped.
 The ghost came to the window where
 the terrace steps were overgrown.

The hoofbeat of a deer in wild Old Caledonia.
 A tolling off a tidal islet – Belling shapes
 of spectral light across the sand. *Aquila*
 at the key-points of a life's romantic thriller.
 Secret agent caught communicating notes between
 the car horn and The Golden One. The crucial
 Figure, of a Shepherd or a Gardener
 who keeps his flock of flowers. Park-keeper who
 minds the cemetery by the ring road, while the
 blue blasts of exhausts perfume the air.

These keys. A film of scenes. A burst of beer
 and laughter from The Seaman's Hall. Street-fighting
 glazes as I pass through quiet breaks. The fighting
 on the steps recurs. And there's

Alanna, *Angel*, or *Alauna*! as I call her –
 Passing by she shakes her hair and nothing more.

Was I to greet her or to warn her? but her
 laughter left me sitting on the jetty after, waiting
 for the island bell to tell my time again.

Flapping, on the wake's cold frontier, who we were –
 Souls in Adventure, children bound to colours
 of allegiance, in their own religious thriller
 pleading at a barrier to be let pass.

'The wine is red!' – 'Aye, red as blood!'

Like cliché sneaks or latches into dream.

For a beginner, there were agents through
 the false door shouting, *'Who
 are you working for?'*

I seek the peace, a prince who settled like a bird
 upon a beach. A bleached white page –
 blue shadow of my fingers, curling a pen
 along a line. Bright sand. A sound of beauty,
 but they make that noise to drown us out.
 Either it thunders
 or they bang their pans in din.

I concentrate my mind and hands to scrape into
 wet sand. My nails strike slate. I enter shimmer
 of some summer. Mummy calling, *'Come on in
 for dinner!'*

I fear the world is wheeling backwards to a shallow
 moral shadow. Leaden sky, a flash,
 an autograph, the shadow of detention.

The historical romance is in ascension, when
 the flute goes up a scale again, dissenting
 trooper trailing voices cross the moor and march
 disconsolately on into the atmosphere, and vanish
 absolutely on a whistle. *'Run along!'*

On the Avenue to the Aurora, Fortune may turn glamour blue and sunny in succession. I confide in echo: I have horse's ears. I thrive on fear. I want unconfidence to thrill me senseless faith. I drift to the Romantic Shores and camp upon the pagan version, of transliteration: baffled in a haze by all the doors I face in trepidation, shaking in my pants.

Doing building work I learned to fake: to point and render blank; to make a show of coping like a proper man, and flash exceptionally with the genius of common sense. But one bad job, a bodge, cemented in a muddle, wakens infantile incompetence. I come to consciousness of the pretence I'd solved the riddle in my drift, and left a clean and clear defence of moral vagrancy, exhibiting a state of sheer complexity and deep transparency; I had sealed the roof in a perplexity of rhyme, a work made proof against the weathering of Time.

Natural initiation presupposes soul or substance, something like bituminous solution I neglected to apply. Suppose I die upon the avenue to the aurora, having no more faith than I was born with in responding to a human face? Deep subject with his echo cooing; cloud and uncloud, smile or cry; in or out of love. Feeling disgrace and pride and hope to goodness, *Goodness Knows*, not knowing what the heck I think I'm doing –

Fortune turns to Mark whose Glamour chooses.

excerpts from
Bauble (Burble)

Poems written for A Whole Bauble
(1994, with revisions up to 2006)

A Lubrick Loosed

It's like a sly evasive wit. It's like a shy reflection on a set of cellar steps. It's like saliva on the lips. It's like a highlight to the eye; it's like a lubrick or a trick. It twists the tongue into itself as it escapes.

I should have loved to lure its source of likeness in, to organise the making of a threnody for when it's gone. I could have thrilled to sense it shiver as it takes the bait. But as it spilled its reputation surreptitiously it left a trace, a blank, a tip, a bit of luck. It gave the slip.

I read it once and swallowed my acceptance of the verdict and the sentence: To be taken down by hollow lingual alleys and be bound to serve a term of time in dispute and in disrespect, then to be smothered in expiry in the matrix muff of nothing minus happiness, and any skin thrown in the lake of dreary slime that's drying to a bed of crusted flakes.

A shadow in the shedding light that slowly showed descending stone, I sniffed the fungal passage must effect arising from the trap for soil and waste below the cellar steps. It must affect it to be dead. It should be buried. As obsequy, let it be said:

How lavish of its offices it offered silken thread, and yet how tacitly and well it kept the spell of secrecy alive within the cell, not letting any ghoul of imputation or the ghost of a suspicion ever touch or taint a hair — if it had any — of its silver head — but put a subtle finger to the lips, blinked as an imp, emitted squeaks, and with a crooked limb it shut its lid.

Spriggan Fair

I.

Up to a shriek and yielding, the excess gave let
to bleating at the throat. The field was rank.
You knew it needed to be mowed. I had a spriggan
threatening to run amok. I'm not conceding
what was owed. Expressly it was being booked
for being bloody cropped. It shot that shout
so loud that the machinery had stopped.

Expanding crowns up to a loaf of steam
and bottoms out. A spell explodes in bleeps
and bits of soundless broken flak. I had been
suffering exacerbated bitterness, remanufacturing
my fractured wing, the gripping throttle —
you'll excuse me as I crack the bottle, but the pain
came as I saw them waddle out across the lea
with all their fine mud-flinging tackle, spreading
what-is-it, the freight of their fertility
until they're spent up on the thwaites —
I count to three.

The cloud is held up on the pass.
The cost of reaping drops.
The shining watercourses weeping
cannot stop.

Again, with cattle on the aftermath, let's say
I heard a song about a snake who ate an apple
on a bale of hay. Okay, I take it I can happen
wait for what'll ripen in the latter days with
ruddy globes of wicken and the sanguine may.

2.

A sleeper's leaping double takes
a folk-shape of the spirit outing
to the fields of fair reality.

All readily an early gaggle clamp
and couple scaffolding to raise a catafalque
and plank for the performers.

Tonal blenders to the tonic test
and practise feeling pitches. Other men
are stringing canvas bloats
into a steady ripple, airing hopes
for the acoustics and a mellow day.

There's a double with standing
in strands of gourds and trinkets
when a rosebush of a sudden gust has let
her petals flood across the flags.

Later on there's a misunderstanding
as trouble is raised in among the people
to be reaped and cut and dropped
for Ancient Dobbin to clop off with in a box.

Abated at a tap in washing up
I had felt for my partner being taken
in feeling, joshed and doffed.

I'll say I love
and do not scorn to josh the dolly
while the boggart's cleared off.

3.

The bush cropped at the neck. The pouch back-pocketed. Hold
on the grip while sobbing ebbs.
Then cut and rob the dead.

It eases as you had it off. With one more squeeze
the lid was flipped, the tufted duck took flight,
the laughing stopped, and stiff and white
the corpse had rattled off an audit of
remaining numbness as another crossed
the pass in smoke between the strands
of ghostly ash.

The toff had spoken
with an aspen trepidation: You have caught me
in a sense in some perplexity for cash.
This is my holiday. Let long debts pass.

You kept a bottle up your skirt and hit him
such a smash as hurt and left him landed
in a lake of liquid spirit, bits of rock
and broken glass.

Folk are mocking his deceased demand
for better service in the courting of his class:
the sporting ring, the country interest at last.
One clash. Dead fright. Too loud. All over.

Vibration can't reflect nor shine increase it
in its passage out in shape in pandemonics
touching once upon the time to come,
and there's his knocking from inside the coffin.

4.

We're in the book, a double bill to top
at The Pavilion. When the rubber men have scratched,
outstretched, squealed off to pop,
and all the mummers' props despatched,
we're on.

Tugged by a fan of strings, a hand delivers each
a spriggan to a bunch of imps.
Another hand digs in a pouch to fetch
up change. Eyes speak assent. A crescent brow. Let go
in one long derepressant hiss,

I'm missing you.

The big one from the crown dividing
into filaments of inexplicable division,
multiplicities of never-fine-enough
to fill a pinhole.

So decided we must say no blether
but to say together *Spirit Deecided*
in the rout in twine: the one to shadow blight
of loathing foiled; the other grew revolting
in advance and shrank fastidious
into a nicer neat recoil. So though
we came to scorn enjoyment of
enjoined performance, this was not before
we claimed the making of a new thesaurus:

I speak of a fervent performance,
and a certain spirit form.

*What did you spend such time in Celtic Folklore
and The Fairies for?*

Called Spriggan Fair.

Schooling

Trauma Bell

Bristle at a shrill pea-whistle, an alarming warning to beware of The Invisible as buzzing swarms coil belling out through an embrasure, thrilling to a boil. I'm learning, *Thistle, Rose and Thorn*. I wrote my way through school in fervent scrolls of plume. One day the forks have snagged me, had me sagging at the knees. Bonnet beset by bees. It was a fraught and fractious morning when I brought a tray of teas onto the sands. I had been rattled out of doors with flying saucers coming at me from the hall.

Calm down to school. I had forgot my work. But then I'd run up to a railing where I can't recall. A cold silver spoon down the back of the neck, and it stops. How old are you? The bell is for your close.

Weak fingers touching on a noose. A Crow. A Carrion. A Crown of stars pops up out of my heart's bestartlement. Some something had been carried off, but in a bustle and the crowd frequency was turning blue. An infant faints in the regard profound. Unkindly spirits of the waste-ground ring to watch it drown.

I just bobbed up with this bill for duck and I'm off back down. I got but bruised afflight. My curls are frizzling now on yonder brazier. I got lumps in the throat and burns down there. I got an oar full on the ear, one on the bonce and shat my pantaloons. It's one right merry-go-round down there. A fair carousal. Now I'm much in need of fresh apparel and appraisal.

Was it fake arousal of The Saviour? But it's getting late. They only let me out on good behaviour.

A Suicide

A suicide, before she viewed me bleakly as a shading to the prospect of her dark success took me aside, and showed me these: her *Steps*, her *Rope*, her *Trap*. She thought we might be sharing these, but I was horrified. The shawl was ripped. The flood run wide.

I cast us off as she was lifting with the tide and soon she died.

The rest is sadly flapping flannel. These are slides she showed one of me coldly stealing from the pool. The stole was ripped off incidentally, a stoat caught in its net. You see she drowned, but something floats, and licks itself mid-channel, silver wet.

Like a great lapse orb the engine globes up close to sense. Let glitter quell out on an even ebb, with petals blown into the meant immense.

But, use some gumption, Goodness Knows, the winter snows are almost burying the heather. You are in some foul distemper since you had to swear on oath you never ever drew even a single sliver off the figure of her dancing in the mirror. All her corpse was drawn out on the banks of one great living river, moony, limp and damp, and enveloped in slime.

Let her go then protesting, aquatic as ever, gone and flown, wherever and with all her younglings grown. At home I run a tub and sink into it my unbending knees. My knees my own, but me unknown, who steeps in mottled light regarding steam. Who can unknot a subtle gut and briefly nod through this one's own oblation to the drain, then double up, pull up the plug, and glibly quit, like file the dream.

A Hawk, A Horn, A Stranding Bay

A hawk, a horn, a stranding bay, a daylight shriek
and one night-landing. One right raucous aura
smoking from the pool. Stock still
 white hands and face
betray no breath. She couldn't waft a petal
in a moonlit glass fiasco but was sundered
 in the dumb unsound.

Flying at night, and falling, in the failing light
to land on losing ground. The green glass grate,
 the glaze and scrape of tireless wheels
on flats of ice. The traps are set,
the livid pitch of pressed vice, the silken cord
unliving down in liquid dormant lies.

It was young bobbin bullied bubbled cobble-bitumen.
His arrow flared off. The gargoyle gargled and,
evacuating spat. A thing dead in a sack.
Dig it in bracken waste. Go bury it up slack.

There was a headstrong child came once to fling
a bucket full of flower, grapefruit, urine, slops
out on the ebb, who bends
 to swill the bucket out, and rattles back
up sandy shelf and steps
and disappears into a shaded door.

Pure Pause before he reappears
with knife and plate
of bloody fish-heads for appalling seagulls.

The Subject

The subject, pure and simple, missed its footing
and fell off the cliff. The King is Dead.
And all the traffic stopped on Blackburn Road.
That was King George the Last.

The subject lay off school, with 'flu, in bed.

Two minutes' silence.

There was ample time
to view the ghouls awaiting with a raft
beside the lakeside waste to draught
the corpse across the silted moss.

The subject is discovered counting off
blue usages of word abuse. The same
who came to water shining in the pines.
That moment is a point at source. I call it Elfin
Norse. Step up and ring the scales. And then
the nymph with lubricant for skin rolls up
in waterproofs, predicting storm.

But this is merely winsome whine,
a peevish wince, and then

Light split the pine
through every last particular
hypnotic shine. Sheer absolution.

At Peace Dear Heart Strange Minds
Are Draughting Out Thy Human Constitution.

Dissemble

Dissemble. The dissenting chorus lacks a quorum broad
enough to bury this consensus in. The Anglicans, for all
their clangour hang their heads
and try pretending prayer. Some solemn doctors
dock the tail that had a power to speak
and heal, to freak and to anneal with flame
and seal the perturbation.

Here you catch me prying as a sleuth into the
so-called silence; gouging with a penknife
in the sacred wood. Winking under a hood.
A predatory beauty understood.

There was a mill above the tumbling where
the brook was forced between the dark brick walls,
below great blank blanched windows.

Effluent pipes thunder on the cinder slag.
The unspoiled world stays unrevealed, the soil
unreeled, uncoiled, unravelled
as the lightning struck. The purple glows.
Discard the line that tries to save the soul.

There was a type who tried to train a tube
through to his room. That line was never used.
The fork had found out where to crack.
The glade turns mauve and blanks in the unseen.

The spirit with a tail upon the scuttle turned and spoke
such squeals of utter dullness, gruesomely
as in a vice. The very devil got my goat to bend the knee
and make more eloquent the grammar
of a stern rebuttal.

A Slow Voice

A slow voice calls the losing numbers, missing buttons,
blanks and numbness, yawning in fatigue at desks,
behind the counters. Some of these and some of this, and
this unease makes like that wasp trapped in a bottle.
There's a voice and then the throttle opened
through the epiglottis. Clocking on
and slowly longer off. That's quite a lot.

Curls of hair blow out where nothing matters.
See she sways beneath the leaves in windlessness
and doesn't breathe. Beside her laps what-is-it in
evaporated mist.

They brought me out in dripping trees.
I cannot say that in this valley we have all been
happy but *They brought me out in dripping trees.*

Flickering light. Traumatic ghoulings. Then
a line of sheds led to a lantern light, a slatestone
shield, a gang of men. Dream-trauma needs retooling.

I came up of my own unmended need.
I have been strengthening my fingers, clawing
at the wire fretting, where they caught me
wishing ill down at the waters' meetings.
Willingly I'm getting on through school.
I do find less and less attraction to the fatal pitch.

What got chokes in the throat got drawn out
on a long uncoiling rope of gut. I'd got
to be the Tossplot, emulating, showing off
the water-serpent, but awoken by two
heavy-handed slaps on the back.