



Heading North

New and selected poems

by

John Roff

Published in 2016, his 50th year.

The wild, the frontier lands, the untameable places of the earth. They call so many of us.

However suppressed it may be, I suspect there is a **yearning** in nearly every person for **wildness**. For me, this has grown into a yearning for the wild and uncontainable **mystery** in which I find all things to 'live and move and have their being'.

My most powerful and **formative** experiences of this **homecoming** to mystery began in Zimbabwe, and though I currently live in South Africa, an **untamed** part of me is always heading North, to the wild places which helped to form my **soul**.

This book is unashamedly autobiographical. Each poem represents something of the way I see the world, and what I consider **dear**, powerful and important.

And so, in the spirit of companionship, I dedicate this work to every **seeker** who will never stop 'heading North' until you find the answers to the deepest **longings** of your **heart**. And I sincerely **pray** that some of the words in this book will help you get there.

A note on turning 50

It has taken 50 years to put my life's purpose into words - I am here to Discover and Share, for Love. It has been a great thing to finally get clarity on that. Thank you.

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Some of these poems were previously published in

A sense of Wonderful, Opening the door, Travel by word, With the Earth, Observations and A pocketful of pins, all published by ShareNet, Howick, South Africa; as well as Creation's Yes!, published by A Rocha, South Africa.

The cover photograph was received by my very good friend Len de Beer, in the Soutpansberg mountains.

ISBN number

I have decided that this book doesn't have to have an ISBN number. Hey, I'm the author, and I'm 50. I can do what I want. However, in keeping with protocol, I would like to point out that the world contains

**Intriguing
Surprises
Beyond
Number**

To be honest, I often look through indexes like this one, and think “why would I read anything with such an obscure title?” Therefore, I am providing an **index** with brief **explanations**, to help you decide what may be interesting to read.

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Heading North

Lying in bed,
I tune in once again
to the familiar growling
of a distant diesel engine,
the comfortable clatter of coaches
rattling a still night's quiet.

There is something comforting
about that locomotive hauling
through the calm suburbs,
going somewhere powerful.

One thousand kilometres later
the train will surge north
through the frontier silence
of the Soutpansberg,
a leopard will pause
among the rocks above the track,
glance down with steel eyes,

a clatter of shaken sleepers
will loose the silence
for a light minute,
and evaporate in still echoes
from the red stone walls.

One way road

My eldest lost his first milk-tooth today,
grinning at me and lisping his triumph
when I got home from work.

I saw it (could I not?),
placed proudly in a bowl
over the fireplace,
a chink of ivory
as brittle as a memory.

He is the tallest of our four,
curl-headed, eager and he
thankfully is still a boy.

But that tooth is gone,
and something has been left behind;
There are six years of history in that bowl,
I cannot go back
and get them.

Collection of collectives

A chainsaw of Hadedas,

urban wake-up,
harsh throat-clearing weapon in dawn's armoury.

A prod of Aloes,

leaves like beaks,
pecking at the sky.

A fang of Baboons,

dark barks echo off the rocks,
hungry voices reach between the trees,
uncomfortably close.

A scrum of Warthogs,

heads down and
digging;
hairy grey shovels jackhammering the grass.

A spiral of Galaxies,

infinitely opening, sprawling, making space,
generously expanding into time.

An applause of Hadedas,

satisfying evening signature in quiet bush, easy on the ear,
softening and dissipating down gentle valley slopes.

Warrior poet

Sharpen the edge, word-soldier,
trim verbosity, don't
let your reader
dodge the
thrust.

Hone your truth well enough
and a hundred years
from now it will
still draw
blood.

Chameleon

A chameleon is edging
very
carefully
along a tightrope twig.

Ha!
Silly fly perched one
second too long.

Snap!
Gobble

Chomp

Who's next?

Come into the canopy

Come into the canopy, come my friends,
a sea of lichen awaits;
a forest of miniature -
grey gold and green -
in the clear and clean of blue space.

Come into the canopy, come my friends,
to a harvest of seasonal bud;
to an army of twigs half asleep in the sun
and a smear of avian crud.

Come into the canopy, come my friends,
to the gentling sway of the trees;
where the angels have trod
just a minute before
and all praise the creator of trees.

Come into the canopy, come my friends,
come up to the world in the sky
and hark to the tinkling trickle of sound
as the feathered ones squarble and cry.

Collective invertebrates

A confetti of butterflies,

paper wings skip and kiss the air,
dipping, dancing, tossed
like tissues to the sun.

A squadron of dragonflies,

jagged choreography of arrows,
stabbing the air,
intense angled precision.

A reluctance of butterflies,

coy, looking away, teasing the light;
somehow they are always departing.

A busyness of termites,

building, collecting, harvesting, tireless,
holding the whole earth together with their patient work.

A roll of dung beetles,

up to their elbows in it,
doing pushups for the sun;
sumo wrestling for victory,
escaping with the ball.

The dance of the small kitchen

There are many dances worldwide,
a veritable whirl of them,

Have you heard, for instance,
of the tarantella, a fast-paced Italian dance,
done if one is bitten by a tarantula?
You know the waltz, I'm sure,
the tango, the salsa, but
have you encountered
the dance of the small kitchen?

My patient wife is queen of a space
three hundred and thirty eight centimeters long, and
one hundred and ninety two centimetres wide,
she shares it with
a fridge, a stove, a sink, a food cupboard, a table, a
microwave, tupperware lids, onions, cutting boards,
numerous pots,
four lively children
and me.

So when I make coffee
at the same time as
she fries an egg and
a child washes a plate,
one may witness a
slow, brushing, swaying,
manoeuvring dance,
often with cutlery,
deft stepping over a forgotten dummy
and a graceful pirouette around the dog bowl.

Weight

Eleven kilograms or so
is what a bag of mealie meal weighs,
it's about the weight of a home computer, too,
or a small box of books.

I've lifted rocks in the garden that weigh as much,
hefted them about to stabilise a bank,
and have picked up animals, logs, bags of soil
and other little pieces of creation
that weighed about the same.

Last night, my baby daughter was crying in the cot;
I picked her up, then carried
eleven content kilograms to my bed,
where she is comfortably sleeping,
soft curls on a soft pillow,
tiny cool feet warming on my legs;
occupying a considerable portion of the bed,
weighing as much as a small universe.

Bird party

I spot one drongo dip
the dark kite of his body
on the river
like a skimmed black stone;
a fan of feathers sweep the air.

Now four of them
all twist and twine
with scoops and swerving forays,
boldly weaving lines of feathered light.

Perched, now,
above the water,
a single bird just tilts his head,
surveys the dance floor,
watching for a brooch
or perhaps some other little treasure.

While we sleep

While we sleep,
whole worlds of life erupt
beneath, around, above
our dreams.

Moles nose up to
pluck grubs down.

Bats weave hidden paths
among high branches.

Owls shape silence
into feathered balls
and hunch down
over fence posts.

Clouds of fireflies
shred the darkness.

And as we fold the evening's washing,
somewhere close, on a moonlit plain,
great elephants are quietly folding bark and leaves
into their soft receptive mouths.

To a rising full moon near Estcourt, late 1990's

I'm on the pivot of a thornveld see-saw
sun going down behind,
your sepia circle coming up ahead;
some brittle thorns are
scratching on the canvas of your face.

A warm breeze softly sighs...

the night is coming and
within it your electric crystal ride.
Dance the ambit of the full black sky till you
become again a ripe spanspek and
sink into the hopeful dawn horizon.

Inadequate

I could have photographed a huge *Newtonia* today,
the dark brown king within his wild garden with
light dryads and their kin for company.

But
the time it took to reach it on the
gentle measured give and sink
of the deep sand road,
the feeling that I have when I stand near it,
the bursting sounds of birds and wind in the crown,
those pink extraordinary winged seeds,
the depth of red darkness in its wood,
the vast community of which it is one part,
the strange lightness there
in that thick silence at its feet,

the greater part of the tree,
that lasts long after
its great body falls
to aging and decay,
could never be one picture.

(Newtonia hildebrandtii, or Lebombo Wattle, grows in Sand forest, a rare habitat type in Eastern South Africa.)

Full circle

As a child I hid in a huge tree,
and high among those sheltering leaves
tucked up again, again into
the sway and bend of cradling branches.

In full green youth I clambered up many
a broad or slender limb of tall brown friends,
caressing my way hand over hand
to peer into birds' nests and
find a clearer view.

On to the early twenties when I moved to rock, and
tested high ambitions on riskier stuff than gentle wood,
yet always kept a soft spot for
climbs incorporating the
warm security of a living branch
to grip, or tie a rope to.

Then later, back to earth as pilgrim
along California's granite backbone,
bowed at the feet of
Bristlecones, Sequoias, Redwoods,
time's titans, outliving almost every other mortal thing.

I still try, and I will keep on trying,
to cradle trees
within the branches of my actions,
shelter their future
in the greenness of my heart.

Library

Cool quiet corners
to drink the rain
of words on pages.

That's all

Must every poem have a hidden meaning?
I simply want to tell you
that the pearls of dew
suspended in a spider's web
are beautiful.

Tree frog

They sit tight in the lit hours,
all waking as the sun gives way
to moons and bats and unseen whistling things,
then shrill their mating calls into the wind,
and awkwardly manoeuvre, foot by foot
through all the tangled undergarden,
eagerly cruising trees for prey.
(What insect could escape the gaze
of that cool never-blinking eye?)

Bright day returns, and down they hunch,
a blob of wet amphibian-stuff clinging
to whichever branch seems right.

Once one gripped my fingers
just as though I was a tree,
with feet that flapped
the cool deliciousness
of living jelly on my eager quivering skin,
then leapt ungraciously
onto the leaf-leaden forest floor below,
sat tight.

Ceramics

Purple Amethyst calls
coy within its angled crystal showcase,

Green Malachite murmurs,
bubble-stone deep-grown under-earth,

Pale Agate draws
me into concentric circling whorls of stone,

Hole-black Jet swallows
any colour daring to be lighter than it's hunger,

Clear Diamond cleaves
the human heart as chisels cleave its own,

and Carborundum rolls
its name within my mouth like rock-hard sweets.

I tilt their cardboard cavern
and six turning pebbles gnash the air:

William Blake saw heaven in a grain of sand,
in a box of rocks, you might glimpse God.

Deeper

To get to know her
you must
dive
deep
beneath
her silky, oiled chocolate skin
and tumble
twist between the submerged
arteries of stone,
hide,
as gnashing mandibles of rooted rock
shred water into shrill white foam, then

up
from
high above
observe the river flex the quiet muscles of her power,
slowly
wish that she would
brush those rippled curves
against the bank of your imagination,
hold
her brimming substance
in your cup
of words.

Cleaning lady

Cautiously I creak the door ajar -
besides the subtle tap
of broom on pew,
the church is empty.

Underneath great soaring arches
she sweeps quietly,
great stained-glass windows
gaze in silence
at the floor.

Who is this simple servant girl?
my feet were dirty
when I came in.

Forty-something with a new pocket knife

Slipping the sharp edge
of my opinion into
one too many conversations
has been ample training
for tucking this primal comfort
of potential
just under the neat skin of my clothes.

I bought it to remind this
coiled body
that I am still strong
enough to take on danger,

as I studiously cut the picnic oranges,
and nudge a thorn
from a child's finger
with the blade's soft tip.

First night at camp

After a long and thirsty drive,
I stayed up all night drinking
silence.

Spark departing

A solid teenage boy
cradled the soft cloth
of its broken body to me
in cupped hands,
an Amethyst Sunbird,
slack eyelids slowly submitting to the inevitable,
then a sudden flailing
hard
against the homeward pull.

My own hands comforted its fading,
tiny claws gripped fingers like a child would,
just once
then, with no more scaffold for the spark
that fills and animates
all birds and every hand,
the deeper jewel
departed on its hidden eager wings.

Odes

Buying Scotch

An extended family of whiskies,
pipers on parade,
hiding their true nature
the way that only clear liquid can
conceal its treasure;

rows of bottles running down the shelves
draw up to mind the bubbling water
of their starting,
those peaty streams which catch
the North Atlantic rain
and hold but never tame that
churning wild water.

When you reach out to take that bottle
you are not buying whisky,
you are grasping Scotland's good clean air,
woven in with kilts and kings and daring,
and the bold West wind that
splashes life into your face.

Ode to the Galilean moons

Ganymede, Callisto, Io and Europa,
fair maidens of the ancient sky.
I first saw them on a poster
on a teacher's wall,
hanging there still and frozen.

Now, strung bright in my imagination
like a line of pearls,
each name becomes a portal
to their mystery,
to their sweet beguiling roundness.

Europa has the smoothest youngest face,
Io the fiery offspring of the sun
(she'd have red hair, I think),
Callisto formed of rock and ice,
with a sub-surface ocean,
Ganymede's magnetosphere
that radiates her power;

Who else is twirling 'round out there,
beyond the naming,
beyond dreaming,
beyond

Little Odes

To the terrestrial mopfish

Despite the yapping,
ankle-gnawing,
scrunched-up rug of dog
that is a Maltese Poodle,
there is a certain something
loveable about them.

To a curry

Trying a Thai restaurant
on a whim one evening;
a sudden perfume of flavours,
ten woven spices
inviting all my senses to the meal.

To the cheeks of tiny persons

Polished ebony,
smooth and glistening with fresh Vaseline.
Such soft peach-halves
must be squeezed or prodded.
Go on - tickle your nose on those light fragrant hairs,
hear the giggle,
be unmoved.

On an eclipse

How globes of such size can move, and yet be suspended,

it seems to me that they are dancing,

gradual,

majestically unstill,

precise,

glacial,

pushing perfect invisible paths through vast and silent space.

They do not have anywhere to fall,

they do not bump into each other;

gravity and my small brain do not work out there, and

part of the mind of God is somehow very loudly on display.

To a Baobab

Fissured wrinkles and age-hewn angles
would better suit a being of such patience,
yet on her pregnant coolness
she wears fresh pink skin.

Up there are folds, long scars, deep indentations,
she must have gentled many other leaning wanderers
beneath those outstretched arms.

Keep still,
perhaps you'll hear
the herds , the hunts, the heroes,
memories all woven in and held
there, just beneath that shining bark.

This tree is in the Soutpansberg mountains in Northern South Africa.

On a Mozambican pothole

One of many
giant fish with gaping mouths
surfacing for air through tar,
they swallow
first water,
then small stones,
a wallet or two,
larger stones,
rocks,
pedestrian's feet,
bicycle tyres,
car tyres,
goats,
whole pedestrians,
cranes,
ships,
an entire country.

Treadmill

Freedom sings an invitation from the sidelines;
but the institution limps
through knee-high grass,
still peering for the ball
and chain of expectation,
still heading for the tryline,
still thinking that you win by winning.

Glimpses of Sehlabathebe

Wind and water at Tarn Cave

Wind was a brute fist that night,
pummeling grass, leaves, the stone itself,
just one thin tree whistling a resistance.

Water drops struggled from the rock roof to the floor,
some pummeled upwards into vapour by the blast,
yet in that wind, at two a.m.,
the cave still cracked a sandstone smile
and softly kissed the still small line of living stars.

Sehlabathebe national park is in Lesotho.

Tarns

Bright tarns
like unblinking eyes
spend aeons gazing at
smooth blue
jagged white
soft snow
crystal frost
eland underbellies
bushmen feet
flames
change
herds
herders
me

A tarn is a small lake; this one is in the Drakensberg mountains of South Africa.

Cold invitation

There is something blunt
about a frozen stream,
the still enormity of ice
that grips the water
with its winter hands.

shhh...

the slightest trickle of a hidden flow.

Mountain stream in winter

Lean down into the blinking ice
tap through the brittle ripple.

In each cool drop,
a history of molten snow.

Relentless gardener

Rugged stone garden
hewn
sandstone
shaped
arches
gouged
gullies
chipped
handholds
ground away

all this work of the wind.

Great sailor

Trail your fingers
in this blue water Lord,
your boat sets calm
the swirling ocean of my soul.

Sitting on the cliffs at sunset

Afternoon peels towards evening,
an old memory, fading or returning.

A Fig's bold roots tug at the rock's orange bones,
branches arching for wider sky.

The patient sun slips behind
jagged curtains of cloud,
quiet and timeless.

God at home

'Your fresh body, every
nail, cell, movement, synapse,
gland, ligament, wrinkle and sneeze;

it is the holy shape I freely give and choose
for my immortal heart and mind to dwell,

to fully and completely occupy,
yet never be contained within;

your memories all live in me,
nothing is lost,
nothing can ever be lost,

my love is uncontainably uncontainable,
my capacity infinite,
you are, as I am.'

Sky

To a farmer, hope,
to a sailor, speed,
to a writer, dreamscape,
to a soldier, danger,
to a bird, freedom,
to a painter, light,
to a dancer, space,
to a pilot, playground,
to a swift, the world,
to a rocket, up
to you

Tracking

The path this morning leads off lightly through the bush,
a pale tail of sand that flicks away
through grass and shadows.

The sand remembers
feline feet that confidently printed
clean light points of occupation,

the small neat rump
that dipped and rose
with each slunk step,

a snake of a tail swishing
with its own impatience,

the warm breath of a passing presence
that simply left permission
for her footprints to remain.

Fuel stop

Beside the N3 freeway
near Durban
there's a small fall
of water tumbling
clear as rain
from a huge hillside's sandstone heart;

You will often see truck drivers there,
stopped once again beside the tiny stream,
filling up their scratched old bottles
with rivulets of free and living water.

I hold now in my hand

Blue iridescent circles ringing
around spots of white
upon a soft slate background
a fragment of origination
a piece of galaxy
a single feather dropped by a Crested Guineafowl.

When I take it
cradled
in this very notebook
hold it out
for eager children's eyes to grasp,

Oh! that it will move them then
the way it moves me now.

Time for music

In the old days, you might meet a guy
along a stretch of rural road,
and as he walked he'd pass the time by
plucking on a homemade tin guitar,
and sing away the hours.

This morning I drove past a young man
far from town, on a dusty road, and
seeing that familiar movement of hands
I hoped for music,
but he was busy strumming
dust off his new leather jacket.

In the chapel

Above me,
animated by the light,
a pair of stained glass saints
in opposite windows,
on opposite walls,

are still companions,
glass lips mouthing
an invisible discussion,
suspended over

decades of movement
in, and out,
work, and worship,
praise, and grief,
service, and silence.

their light words drift for decades
through the cool stone womb
to reach the other's stained glass ears.

There is no rush,
the saints have time.

Thankful

For soft mist blanketing raw nerves
for dry spaces under dripping trees
and sanctuaries of silence,

for the people past who walk, kneel, pray
right there in front of me
just beyond time's curtain,
and left to linger a piece of heart.

For a pigeon's cool cooing,
echoes that ring creation's bell
for the simple altar wrapped in cool cathedral walls
living warmth of wooden seats
high hollow roof ceiling spaces arched cavern quiet

I am

Feather

They are just ordinary feathers
from those very common birds;
no doubt you've walked past plenty
of such debris on the road, tossed
from the squall of squawking panic
that is a launching Hadedda.

Something about this one stopped me though,
slipped like an offering from a solitary soaring bird,
its gradual hues were speaking:
early morning's bright sweet blue,
the darker subtle blues of mourning,
coy pink and muted purple surfacing
through sculpted curve and glowing line;
an intricately iridescent petal,
turned on its stem and throwing light.

Poems in Paris

To the art gallery photographer in a hurry

You photographed a painting
walked away believing
that you'd seen
but
never made the time to
bridge
the fleeting air
between
you
turned to go too soon
and
never felt
her reaching hand.

Monet's vision

was that this art would heal
a troubled nation after the first world war,
his work goes on -
it just took one blue stroke
to smooth the wrinkles
on my crumpled heart.

Up close they're almost crude -
chalk scribblings on a fuzzy screen,
then step by step
I back off into awe
and they begin to rise I

sink, float, fly
close my seeing eyes
yet when I open
like a waterlily,
I am still there.

*Written in the Musee d'Orangerie, Paris, in front of some of Claude
Monet's finest waterlily paintings.*

On the train in Paris with Monet

To try to see the world your way
I closed my eyes, and
I was suddenly surrounded
by human waterlilies,

all these swaying individuals,
flowers, suns, stems, colour,
and
the rocking rhythmic train became
an elemental pond of people.

Surely yes to be alive is to be trained
in the intoxicating flexibility of water.

Les deux basilicas

Sacré-Coeur

Above the raucous milling of voice and coin
that is the Paris of today
she shines
a white cathedral
devoted to One heart devoted
to all of us.

Galleries Lafayette

Below the blue dome of shining sky
that frames the whole of history
it crouches
a domed gold-plated god
intent on feeding
me.

I wrote this to contrast two very different places in Paris.

Crocodile

At the calloused elbow of the river
in a gravid pool gouged deep
by the surges of a hundred thousand storms
she lingers.

Approaching too obviously I must have been seen
my quick gaze flicked to a soft swish
where a few foamed bubbles drifted,
petals on a fresh-dug grave.

Down in the comfortable darkness,
she will occasionally pluck the scum ceiling
for a breath she almost need not take,
drag down struggling slivers of light
and leave behind a petal of foam
to linger on the leather surface of the world.

To the oiled gravity of that dark pool,
where unseen eyes suck down unwariness,
I dare not even let a thought venture too close.

*Written near (not too near!) a pool in Cumberland Nature Reserve,
where there is said to be a large Crocodile.*

Voices on Palm Sunday

I am the branch,
on the uncluttered dome of blue above Jerusalem,
a curl of dark hair has just twined between my leaves
and all at once

I want to fly.

I am the stone,
millennia of pilgrim feet have trod me down,
a heavy colt just nudged me with his hoof
and suddenly

I want to sing.

*"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."
Luke 19:40*

Walls of clay

May we now pause
to contemplate the busyness of termites.
Born busy, they are;
they
inherit the rush,
as we inherit our slow suckling helplessness,
and slow tunnels of time to stroll in.
For us, it is an unforced future,
we can spend years exploring
the quiet passages of quietness,
occasionally wondering at how we make
our little movements matter in the world.

Not so a termite hatchling
squeezed into rapid
existence in one minute with
not that many minutes left one
of twenty thousand eggs laid
today just three quick weeks
before their swift hatching into
usefulness then swift oblivion leaving
grains of glued dust deposited quickly carefully

as a wall of clay,
that stands for decades,
on a bright plain in the African sun.

Days After

Stretched out,
snow lies sleek as silk
on the soft couch of the hills;
a scatter of cats
with white tums to the sun,
all fast asleep,
in no hurry to move.

Peacock

A nasal trumpet
wakened something deep in me,
slow memories of Ottoman,
Persia and Byzantium,
hints of middle eastern dreams.

I have never been there
but somehow
through the whorls of dancing mystery in its train
the peacock whisked me
to another earth.

Ecology stinks

(To a Stinkhorn fungus seen on a forest path one morning)

A red five-fingered foam volcano,
flung up briefly,
coated with a diarrhoeic sputum,
stinking like a corpse
yet indispensable, somehow,
in the greater scheme
of flies and ripe decomposition.

Early morning's work of thrusting
invitational foulness to the surface done,
the empty maw now quietly exhales
the halitosis of new life.

Stinkhorns are a group of fungi. Their bright colour and the foul smell of their spore mass attract flies, which land on the spores. These stick to the flies' feet, and are thus dispersed.

An Otter

We saw an otter in the early evening,
snuffling crabs from under stones,
temporarily distracted,
she stood high on bold back legs and muscle of a tail
to watch us for a little while,
and then slipped back
into her self,
her wet and natural home;

Oh to be otter,
a twisting, bending,
winding, braiding
flow on stone;

so unabraded
by the turn of time
and scour of sand,
welcoming it really.

Oh to be the water
invited and inviting always
into play and ripple, pool and plunge
and unadulterated utterly ottery joy.

Umgeni Valley nature reserve

The river carved itself into the soft stone of my soul,
and I have gravitated 'round this valley as
a flying ant around the sun,
a moth around the moon,
a stone in a round river pool.

And I have known this valley half my life,
we have lived, died, walked, camped, married here
got drunk, made music,
spoken great and marvellous truths,
strolled countless hours in the places of her nurture,
this place sings out the femaleness of God,
the river carved into the soft stone of my soul.

Luminous

I had not truly known the night
until this evening's subtle darkling dusk
graded to night time and
my new illumination -

Darkness is not hopelessness;
She is fertile
deep velvet,
a veiled liquid tree
with stars for seeds.

She is so much more
than the absence of light,
deep branches brimming
with questions

she cries
'explore me'
needs me
to go in beyond my comfort,
embedded
in her are the stars bright
pearls in a velvet oyster
she is a nursery for dreams.

Dreams only make sense,
resurrection begins,
in the dark.

Drought

Framed
with brown sky,
a still tree
crouching
for spring
rain.

Fountain

One night I rose
and cupped my thirsty hands
to the cool milk
of the full moon,

dabbing at her wildness
with these desperate fingers.

Hope
pulsed again,
like a warm well,
a fountain flowing
through my outstretched
heart.

Alternative last stanza

Hope welled again,
like a warm fountain overflowing
as I drank my fill.

Pandora Long

'Keeping busy?' he said, as though a yes would be a compliment.

Caution: highly contagious.

With a short incubation period, this disease spreads quickly through social networks, incubates in smartphones, tablets and connectivity, thrives on fear, dissatisfaction and consumerism. Upon hatching it enslaves infected persons into shallow, relationally dysfunctional, stressed, fragmented, unhappy, prematurely greying shadows of themselves.

Known cures include pulling out of plugs, the exercising of independence and choice, delving below the restless surface of the soul, and swimming upstream.

No, I don't want to be busy, I want time to dream, think, see friends, and talk about things with meaning and substance.

*To have time to drink tea slowly and write a poem or two.
To smell the sunrise and not worry about what I'm missing.
To be at home in my own skin.*

Full moon and Winter solstice

The moon was just so vocal in this cycle, one
soft part of the great and circled whole,
her milky voice drew my attention to the shortest day,
the longing night that also longs in me
for deepness with the deeper movements
we are made of,
woven in with all this greater movement,
all these subtle singing shifts;

Our little worlds may tremble on their axes
but the giant pulse that beats the
steady sway of deep and ancient time, keeps beating,
night after day after night after day,
the ebb and flow of seasons and of light and grace;

Time and space flung out extravagantly
sounding still the steady song,
the galaxy pulsates with billions of these solstices
at any given time in any given world,

the whole created order is a singing heart
 beating beating
beating out the rhythm
for the sweet and looping orbits,
softly swinging 'round our heads,
this very night.

*Southern Hemisphere, 21 June 2016. With thanks to Ted Hughes for
Full moon and little Frieda*

Re-sparking

Under countless piles of excuses
the wish to write lies dormant still
but there is something coming.
It is springtime;
something
calls, announces, requests,
perhaps even demands
'make way for me'
to green again
the folded leaves
of story, dream and journey;
a light,
a singing.

Mulungwane

The hills behind the place where I grew up
were somehow more than the horizon
backdrop to a crazy chaos adolescence,
the churning dangers and delights of school;

they were always there, soft knuckles
close on the horizon,
a quiet, brooding presence
kneading me
away from pressure and too many people,
to climb their clear slopes
and see the future.

Within the landscape of my soul these days
there has always been
a quiet brooding invitation,
a nudging,
to somewhere high and comforting,
beyond confusion.

*As a child growing up in the Esigodini valley in Southern Zimbabwe, I
always understood that mulungwane was the Ndebele word for
knuckles.*

The rocks return

In an easily overlooked corner of the garden
is an oak tree with a secret friendly hollow,
and in that intricacy
where delving silent roots
and reaching comfortable trunk begin
is where I placed them.

Within this house for all these years
has lived my rock collection,
gathered in the early days of living in the bush.

There I first heard the rocks call out my name,
and borrowed, labelled, named them,
researched and delved into their silent stony natures;
drew them to me, dreamed the weight of specimens,
the shape and lines and texture,
colours, feeling of each one.

They each became a bedrock of experience,
touchstones of sense,
solid returns from whence to test the world of shapes
and smells, sizes, colours, physicality,
the weighty personalities of matter,
and I think they named me back.

So as this home dissolves, and parents
moving outwards from a centre
birth unwittingly a hundred little deaths,
there is much accumulated junk in all our lives to wade
through and discard.

But that armful of gathered memories, my rocks,
are not for a landfill or recycling plant;

rocks and their movement
are the most original recycling;
this oak begins the sending back,
the slow tectonic sink to liquid stone beneath the crust,
the brewing magma of new rock,
the miracle of mashing, surging, melting, forming,
all the chemical components blurred and blended back
into the single molten heart-core of the Earth.

'Name - John Roff'

'What you want to be when you leave school - a geologist'

'Age last birthday - 9'

From a question sheet, Essexvale primary school, 1975

After dark

I came out to swim among the stars
and drink them,
to lie down beneath
until I drown,

waiting for this bright ocean
to fall
and flood
my fears in living stillness,

cool liquidity wash through me,
put out the pounding fire in the sun.

Awakening

Dawn's cool bronze
steps lightly onto leaves
that blink awake;
the trees lean into light.