



# **Observations**

**John Roff**



## Introduction

This volume contains a wide range of writing, and I hope you find something in it that you like. There are four broad categories:

**Observations** ranges from hopeful to cynical,  
**On words and writing** considers the singular delights and frustrations of the craft of writing,  
**The sheer goodness of creation** is about just that, and

**Walking the infinite distances** delves deeper into the soul and the mysteries therein.

May something good happen to you today.

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# Observations

## **Morning coffee**

Brown beans chatter in the bag,  
I scoop a spoonful  
into the grinder,  
crank my body into mind.

Initial thinking over,  
I am incomplete  
without inhaling  
the complexities released  
through pulverising every  
fixed idea;

drinking it is almost  
an afterthought.

## Creighton Cemetery

Despite the irreverent coarse gargling of crows,  
I hear a hopeful silence in this graveyard,  
where thriving termite hills grow tall  
beside the still grey stone.

Down here is an un-named plot only a metre long,  
each iron bar of its short gateless frame  
tipped with a pointed spear-blade  
that's brandished in the face of any god  
who'd dare take one so young.

Ah, then my eye picks out a bunch of daisies  
painted on a watering can  
that's balanced on a shale-heap grave,  
such a smiling tribute that it makes me smile  
and blink away the wall of spears.

Transcending time and origin,  
the common threads of love and loss  
join shale heaps with arching stone,  
and every morning  
in a planned bright ritual of hope,  
each generous grave points east  
and greets the warm and living sun.

## **Bookshelves**

I bet there is no bookshelf  
quite the same as  
any other on the earth -

Take mine for instance:

'Secrets of hair science'  
'The Hobbit'  
'Insects of Southern Africa'  
'When the darkness will not lift'  
'The Enneagram'  
'Mountain Flowers'  
'Concise Oxford dictionary',

Their exposed spines all quietly singing.

Some of us  
will seek out bookshelves  
first when visiting a home,  
as some folk are most clearly known  
to others by their books.

*Mental hospital one*

**Safe**

The man in the white coat let me in through a barrage  
of locked and armoured doors;  
I think I counted five before I reached  
the friend I came to see.

We spoke slowly, in a quiet room,  
around us were other quiet rooms,  
monastic oases for a contemplative soul like me.

Outside the concrete wall,  
with high-voltage wires  
safely strung along the top,

the world carries on:  
a nuclear disaster in Japan,  
numerous wars being fought,  
people so busy they forget their names...

The man in the white coat smiles -  
visiting hours are over.  
I go back through the doors,  
he lets me safely out.

*Mental Hospital two*

**Who defines insanity?**

Sure, some people are a danger to themselves and others,  
and might kill you just for interest, or because their  
'don't kill people' neural pathway doesn't work,  
but hopefully such neighbours are easy to distinguish  
and to love accordingly.

But consider Vincent van Gogh;  
tightroping on the jagged edge of sanity,  
in and out of institutions,  
painting up a storm  
of colour on canvas that  
still thunders and rains  
celestial cartwheels  
into the hearts of humanity a hundred years on.

He saw and spoke beauty,  
I'm sure he still does;  
maybe those blessed with  
such child-likeness are too much  
like real love personified,  
and have to be locked away  
to maintain normality  
on this side of the fence.

## **Discovering a word**

Sullen schoolboys  
sluip their way  
down the passage  
towards identity.

*(Thanks to Cal Bray for the new word.)*

## **To the miners of Anthracite on the boundary of iMfolozi game reserve**

It is not just that you have fouled the rural beauty of the homes of generations,

It is not just that you have robbed the resting place of the ancestors whose stories twined into the land,

It is not just that you ignore *hlonipa*, the respect our fathers taught us, whose very graves you cleave out from the still-warm body of the earth,

It is not just that land here is drying out before its time, down dark holes that swallow shut the water cycle,

It is not just that a thousand growling lorries bury the grass with dust, the grazing for the cattle gone, those cattle who cannot eat your money,

It is that you have stolen  
the blanket of innocence,  
the unruffled silence of millennia,  
the wilderness inheritance,  
of every South African  
even yourselves

You are stealing silence  
from the past, the present, the future,  
and we, the people, even yourselves, we all are crying.

## **No more water**

Up from the empty open space  
that some old people still call ocean,  
a stretch of sand pulls like a tongue  
retreating inland up the valley  
over jagged stones and  
lonely flats of soft, light dust.

Up the valley flows silence,  
the very centre of the channel,  
silent,

two final herons pat the heat  
and raise up puffs of  
powdered blood that run  
up clawed gashes in the red hills,  
where stones, smooth,  
with no more reason  
for their smoothness, sit.

Sticks clatter in the empty wind  
nothing is green,

a dead leaf kites the hollow sky,  
desperate for one last cloud to swim to.

## **Senior ladies embroidery group**

Patiently weaving in  
homes,  
soups,  
families,  
laundry,  
simple soft routines  
of daily life -  
the gathering of the threads of decades;

what better preparation for all this  
bright bold work in clean framed circles,  
that take all those who see your craft to  
places you have never been yourself?

## **Hot air**

With the Earth Summit  
at least we understood  
the meeting's name,

but what on earth does  
'Conference of the Parties'  
mean?

Indeed the conference parties,  
fast asleep  
atop a rumbling volcano.

*Written about COP(Conference of the Parties)17, the United Nations climate change conference in Durban in 2011.*

## **End of the lesson**

Bell's rung,  
already standing, but  
I feel a flicker of a choice  
to take an extra minute,  
speak  
ten words  
or so  
after class  
that just  
might

light a path,  
offer hope,  
inspire;

might  
be forgotten  
a minute later.

One small stone,  
thrown or not thrown,  
either way  
our every action  
ripples through eternity.

## **What I dislike about rugby**

Nothing,  
except the  
hegemony.

## **On the drive to work**

Amidst a scramble of young men and paint tins  
on the back of a sputtering bakkie,  
one old man with a wise white beard that  
shines in the morning light  
laughs a full mouth of teeth.

# **On words and writing**

## **Writer's block again**

Where did those poems go,  
my writ companions that gave sense to things  
and wove the meanings of the world  
into a substance I could grip?

They used to come out all at once,  
word-wolves ravening for light and audience,  
emerging eager from their burning dens  
and baying to be read.

But they're hidden now  
beneath an iron cage,  
dropped in place,  
shut tight.

## **Only waiting for a pen**

A notebook with a hundred pale pages,  
lightly sleeping in your bag.

## **Lament for unwritten poems**

I recently read advice,  
(well-meaning I'm sure),  
to aspirant poets wishing to be published:

"Read as much as you can,  
see what publishers are accepting,  
let that guide your writing."

What rubbish!

Since when do publishers decide what people want to read?

Maybe one of our poems  
is the one that helps  
a lonely soul see the world afresh,  
and pulls them from the brink of madness  
(it's happened you know),

but it didn't get published  
because it didn't fit the mould,

worse, it didn't get written,  
because the writer knew  
it wouldn't get published.

There may be whole genres  
of new writing silenced out there,  
while publishers only print what sells,  
as if money were the measure of creativity.

## **My darling**

You say it's been so long since you even felt  
to write a poem -

don't despair,

your current anthology  
of unique and powerful works  
is being penned upon  
four lively, eager epic poems  
that overflow our home with laughter  
written on their faces;

the great Publisher is most pleased with your work and  
guarantees the printing of no copies at all;

this is your finest hour and may well spawn  
more poems down the centuries than you can dream of,  
you will have brought them forth  
without any words but love.

## Poet's house

From the outside it is a little cramped place  
squeezed between two other dwellings and an upper story,  
which presses like the future down those too-steep stairs,  
a rectangular and contracting box of a place.

But inside, entire earths are waiting,  
huge caverns of creativity and dreams,  
wide gates to new impressions of this life,  
inscribed in fresh and rich and poignant  
worlds of words that pour out  
from the tip of just one pen.

Much bigger on the inside than the outside,  
it would be a fool who says  
it's just a shell an old man lives in,  
there are wonders bulging  
in there if you will turn to face his door,

where a wise one  
scoops up handfuls of experience  
and spreads it out in books  
for us to know ourselves,  
the world, and him,  
more clearly.

*For Clive Lawrance, fellow poet and journeyman, and his family.*

## **Irritation in the poetry section**

Why are angst and pain the currency  
with which I am supposed to get  
almost all South African poetry?

## **In process**

A flock of eggs  
in my notebook.

## **Written longing**

A poem can cut you to the heart and  
leave you weeping,

take you soaring  
over uncharted country,  
giddy,

delve into your soul  
and dredge out hidden things,  
evaporate them in the light,

kiss you far inside,  
tenderly touching  
folded dreams;

remarkably like  
prayer.

*(With thanks to my cousin Stephen for making the connection)*

**The sheer  
goodness  
of creation**

## **Lying underneath a storm**

I've never lain beneath a storm before,  
above now is a swollen brewing  
lens of white creating white  
and calling cooling moisture to itself.

A growing, greying gathering of whales  
surge and gulp and feed on ice,  
they bump huge heads,

a giant shoal becoming one,  
fills more and more bright sky, leaps,  
swims slowly into space,  
drips clear clean rain.

## **Pride on four legs**

A pied and ochre  
palette of Nguni cattle paints this country;  
quiet bellies sweep the grass  
that sways to meet their mouths,

A lowing cow, magnificent in milk,  
hooks down a swathe of sky and cloud  
with long and shining horns,

bright nimble calves skip quickly through  
the boring trudge of mingling in a herd, and

bold young heifers swish  
their adolescent tails in time,  
to match the egret's subtle music.

One great red barrel of an ox  
spends years chewing  
on the edges of a frosted field,

another huge and ambling bull,  
his dark brown belly paling to an antique cream above  
as if he took a swim up to his neck in rich milk stout,  
presides over the kraal and sets the tone;

even chiefs listen to them.

## **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 manoeuver, 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.

## **Ode to the Mountain Malachite**

New to the world and fresh  
up from the effervescent stream  
and rollicking in sweet clean light,

the Damselflies dance down  
a glad and laddered  
glittering  
cascade, then  
flick out to hang on reeds  
above  
the same slow, still,  
clay-banked,  
contemplative  
water;

wings pearlescent,  
thin as a spoon of paper  
lapping the air  
film-light  
just dry  
from this very morning's hatch.

Each abdomen a living wand,  
their bright green iridescence  
like a singing flame.

*Mountain Malachites are Damselflies – close relatives of Dragonflies.*

## **Ode to the Galilean moons**

Ganymede, Callisto, Io and Europa,  
four fair maidens of the ancient sky.

Thirty years since I first saw them,  
still and frozen on a poster,  
still they hang like pearls in my imagination,  
each name a portal to their mystery and  
their sweet beguiling roundness.

Europa has the smoothest youngest face,  
Io the fiery offspring of the sun  
(would 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

## Flower

What symphony coursed through that air  
as your sweet beauty blossomed into being?  
What music draws dust in  
to cells, lines, petals, bees,  
yellow, mitosis, nuclei, roots, noses?

Does that Sound, smiling, see me  
far down Adam's line,  
breathtaken, smitten,  
fumbling, child and  
trying to catch the scent,  
and hold the moment  
through a glass lens plus  
assorted electronic gadgetry,  
from an age called civilised?

## **Surfacing**

A swell of rough rocks rises  
from the soil,  
like a set of frozen waves,  
like breaching whales,  
their grass sea washed away  
by fire and winter.

## **Niche**

The Mocking Cliff-chat  
and his mate have found their place  
among the rocks

turning, skipping,  
skirting, landing,

above or  
under, over,  
near to, even  
in between  
the stones,

not long and very restless  
in all other bushveld spaces.

Where is our place,  
my mate and I,

around which rocks  
do we turn, skip, skirt,  
name home?

## **If rocks could talk**

We are huge and heavy,  
slouching in our soil beds  
like great potatoes,  
dug up and not yet gathered.

The odd frost tickles us,  
boots brush our complexions,  
the only things we really feel are earthquakes.

Termites erect their quick clay tents nearby,  
they come and go as quick as an ice age,  
everything is so ephemeral.

Some of us grow lichen on our skins,  
which others of us find vain, or lovely,  
depending on that century's mood.

We eye the weather every thousand decades,  
and then stretch out again  
beneath the endless sun.

## **Jumping up**

A humid night,  
the hot road popcorns up  
a swelling wave of tiny frogs  
that leap in perfect arcs beneath

an out-loud shout  
of sudden stars;

and suddenly  
I am aware.

## **Urban wildlife**

An escaping dustbin bag  
cartwheels down the road  
like a twirling earth-bound bat.

Eager chip packets  
raptor their way into storm drains  
seeking suitable prey.

One empty tin tries  
to bite a passing ankle,  
winks at a taxi tyre.

Five-cent beetles  
wait on the tar  
for fingers that will  
buy them freedom.

Chewing-gum amoebas  
glide inexorably down  
the back street pavement.

All hibernate in the landfill,  
the earth will turn,  
their time will come.

## **Forest voice**

Every great tree overflows with glory

yet a few short cuts  
with the wrong attitude and a chainsaw -  
the timeless cloth of living wood can just be  
stripped right off the fragile soil.

Earth's every forest lies open so,  
as vulnerable  
as a tossed silk shawl.

## **With the earth**

The separate threads of nature and humanity,  
lovingly from the same tight-stranded cord are drawn,  
untwined then woven into living cloth;  
each string is loose,  
the whole complete.

## **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.

## **The qualities of daylight**

You know the early morning  
by its clean transparent freshness,  
mid-morning manages to  
blink away the angled blades of harsher light,  
but midday flattens under a blunt, weighted haze  
and mid-afternoon chars beneath  
an open, glaring, thrust-down oven;

late afternoon lifts,  
warm, golden calmness,  
promise.

## **Lurking on the slopes of Table Mountain**

You may think these ancient trees  
in this ancient forest with  
roots that clutch onto the ancient mountain  
are vulnerable and fragile, yet

for how many millennia have they been patient  
here, at the edge of a breathing-space in time,  
gradually working great root-pythons deeper,  
mastering the wrestling of stone,  
biding time in cool kloofed safety;

as climates turn, they will come back,  
a short march down the stream  
they just retreated up some centuries ago;  
your neat house  
beside the river  
in the suburbs  
is very temporary.

## **Infusion**

I am fond of tea,  
as fond of the ritual of making it  
as I am of the drink itself;

how good to make it on a hot day in a clear glass,  
to spring wet fire onto cool dry leaves  
and watch them unfold their hidden secrets to  
the beckoning of boiling water,  
as fisted flowers persuaded into opening by the sun.

One cannot clearly see it changing,  
but, through the delicate minutes of infusion,  
heat draws that steaming empty window into  
a sweet and living cup of rich anticipation,  
charged with flowing flame;

lean in with me  
to watch the swirls of red  
seep freely from each swelling leaf,  
and fill the world one brushstroke at a time.

## Deeper

To get to know her  
you must

dive  
deep  
beneath  
her silky, oiled chocolate skin  
and tumble  
twist between her 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.

## Water

I remember, floating,  
just after conception,  
I was formed in water, floating,  
liquid womb enclosing me,  
safe in warm water,  
slowly swimming into life.

My very person full of water,  
even now, my blood, skin, flesh, eyes,  
all all filled with water.

Outward  
my breath is full of vapour,  
joining clouds, falling as rain;  
I have watered a flower in the mountains with my breath.

the very ocean spray has, yes, been breathed before,

all whales are made of it,  
we are connected,

living, flowing, cool, warm, moving  
cords of water threading through the world.

## **Not just a bird**

When you look into that tree  
and see a solitary feathered bundle perched out in the sun,  
where has it been,  
what has it eaten,  
what deaths has it avoided,  
what sunrises has it seen,  
what chicks has it raised,  
from what ancient lineage has it descended?

A theatre of history  
behind every glowing feather.

## **Sanctuary**

One eagle's joyous flight line  
intersects the sun;  
the longing choruses  
within my heart's deep hunger  
sing again.

# **Walking the infinite distances**

## **Yearn**

There is space in me  
for you, for all of you,  
the endless all  
of you,

Fill, and fill  
the empty places,  
swallow  
every longing,  
drench  
the thirsty heart.

## **Ungulate**

The second stomach of the soul,  
always ruminating  
on unfinished things.

*(With thanks to Torin Pfotenhauer for this never-ending image)*

## **Long term**

Wow! You're engaged!

Let's see the ring  
*of fire that even now I hope you are building  
to protect the coming sacred union of hearts*

What are your wedding plans  
*after the one day that comes before the decades of togetherness  
in which you wed and wed again each day?*

Show us the dress  
*(in ten years' time) of loving service with which you  
cover each other as the growing garment of commitment*

Have you got a good house  
*or shed or tent or any place that she can be at home  
and he can write and pray,  
and where strangers are welcomed  
with the warm embrace of Christ?*

## **Baking**

Warm knuckles pummel down again  
a pale balloon of rising dough,  
into the blue-and-white-striped bowl  
that soothes the baker's kneading soul.

How strong the sweet togetherness  
of friends who later break that simple bread,  
around one shared and simple bowl  
that pours into their hearts instead.

## **Dissolved**

A curl of ash  
churned up from flaming grass,  
cupped high on feather-fingered air,

drifting

light as hope,

swallowed  
into utter disappearance  
through the cold grey surface of a quiet pond.

## **Cleaning lady**

Under great soaring arches  
of the grand school chapel  
she sweeps quietly,

and from each stained-glass window  
lofted worlds gaze down in silence  
at the floor.

The chapel is empty,  
except for the tap  
of a duster on the pews.

A solitary mop nods,  
obedient to the  
daily rhythms of cleaning.

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

## **Dark stars**

Hold my body,  
my heart is cold,  
yet in the dark,  
all stars still shine.

Squeezed from the same  
elemental stuff,  
my rough body  
and the smooth fire  
of a billion suns.

In the utter silence,  
I'm certain that  
a black hole's hidden mouth  
calls out my name.

## **Don't look now**

Sometimes,  
to really know,  
you only glimpse the truth,  
out of a corner of your  
heart.

## **An Anglican prayer book**

Here is a dark blue book  
with well-thumbed edges  
framed by a wooden pew  
and abundant prayers.

Pages rustle  
brushing words  
fingers flick  
a fine light page lofts  
and lands  
amidst the comfortable line-by-line that joins the reader  
with a whole community of faith  
who read and read again strong lines  
that hold like strings that hold the soul;  
anchored to the wisdom of centuries.

It is a weighty book indeed  
that helps the holder  
balance life and hope  
on one thin page.

## **Two bowls, one song**

On a cathedral floor near the altar,  
and full of a single candle,  
a glass bowl's warm and welcome light  
is thirsty for the tears of kneeling saints.

Continents away,  
with a sharp tap from a solid stick,  
a singing bowl's bright rim is struck to ringing;  
one monk's hidden prayer drawn out  
and carried, on its bell-clear voice.

## **Staring through a stained glass window**

Shimmering,  
a carved shard of aquamarine,  
one lit part in a veil of singing lightness;

I hear the sea in it,  
lapping at the shore of my heart.

## **Never say it's over**

The tree-top broke clean off in a storm,  
but  
six months later,  
amidst the sagging dormancy of winter branches,  
a firm splash of green leaves  
sprouts like a spike of hope  
into the open air.

## **Inside a man**

In the womb  
of every man's  
imagination;  
power and beauty silent lie,  
like patient children  
waiting to be born.

## **I simply respond**

To these whispered entreaties  
from  
beyond the universe  
within my heart  
a far-off palace  
as near as breathing,  
  
all that I can do  
is  
yield.

On this page many authors write: **Notes**. I suspect this has a lot to do with using up blank pages so as not to feel guilty about wasting paper. I have not often seen the opportunity to make notes used. Please prove me wrong.

Now that you have got this far, thank you very much for reading my work. I hope you found something in this book that touched your heart.