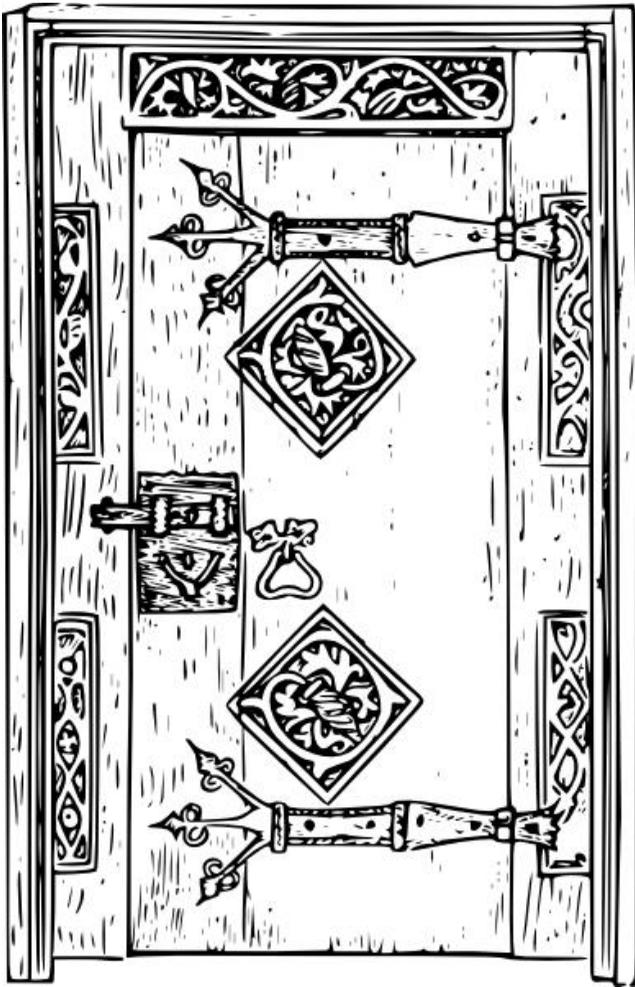


Opening the door



A collection of poetry for:
lovers of wild places, spiritual investigators, explorers of any sort,
fellow writers, and anyone who likes fresh perspective.

John Roff

Introduction and thanks

I write because I must – I feel incomplete and frustrated unless I write fairly often. I publish my poems because many people enjoy them, and so I wish to share them with more people, who will hopefully also enjoy them. I am open to suggestions, discussion and critique, and always want to make my writing better. Feel free to contact me: johnroff1@gmail.com
I hope you enjoy this book.

I am blessed to be married to Jo, an encouraging, supportive and extremely helpful wife. We have 4 unique and delightful children – Jonathan, Iona, Judah and Arwen. All of you have inspired me enormously and given me space to be my creative self. Thank you guys, I love you.

Thanks also to the numerous other people who have encouraged me as a writer – staff and boys of Hilton College, Clive Lawrance, Len de Beer and many other friends and family.

John Roff, Pietermaritzburg, 2011

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Interest Index

I have tried to group the poems in this book into a few categories that may appeal to different people. Here they are, with page numbers:

Lovers of wild places, try these:

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Spiritual investigators, check these out:

In an old chapel 27, Dragon 7, Help me 33, Seeking 5, Stained Glass window 35, Seeking contemplation 36, Solar Eclipse 22.

Explorers, go here:

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Fellow writers, tell me what you think:

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Anyone who likes fresh perspective, try:

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This is not to say, of course, that you won't like the poems that aren't in your category – please explore.

Thanks

One of Tim's delights was a good poem,
thoughtfully chiseled from a quarry of words,
taking form under his pen;
a loving carving of shaped English,
loud and clear.

He chiseled me, too,
from a quarry of confusion,
shaped me, saw my calling,
loud and clear.

Now we are many, living poems;
through us, although his pen is still,
Tim keeps on writing,
loud and clear.

Dedication

With love, admiration and deep respect,
this book is dedicated to my mentor and friend Tim Wright.

Small miracle

'Oh beautiful worm,
cool in the soft soil,
companion of roots,
mixer of soil,
maker of compost,
stretching, contracting,
tiny rings of pink muscle
propelling you through the ground,
transforming barren land to fertile ground.'

Metal gold is a blank and pallid thing next to
this pink treasure, gold-of-the-earth,
moving more than men's bulldozers ever have.

It may have been a million years of slow creation that has
brewed these splendid creatures in the distillery of time;
now they forge the rich dark depth of soil on which I stand,
with light, gold, dancing grass.

This richness reduced to dark squirm
in an old tin,
then stillness jammed on a curved hook,
to catch something that
makes men feel good
about themselves
for a day,
maybe two.

When did you last

trace those branches twined on sky, **touch** the light bright leaves
with your soft fingertips,

feel

that

bark-

skin

like

an

elephant's

hide,

stand

underneath long enough to breathe today's fresh oxygen-gift,
and **sense**

the living roots that even now are wrestling
in harmony with the soil?

If I took a wooden spoon

If I took a wooden spoon and stirred
an old metal bucket half-full of
cold diluted milk and pebbles;
shone a yellow torch over it from the side
and breathed on it open-mouthed,
then I might have caught
the Tugela River at sunrise
one fresh April morning.

.

Seeking

In dark silence, I sat on a dry road.
Heart-weary to my core,
seeking a voice or revelation from the great I AM.

Something glorious, profound, magnificent;
to stir a discomfited soul
and haul me out of melancholy by distraction.

But suddenly
a black wasp landed on the silent soil,
smaller than my little fingernail,
perfect.

Quickly, clearly, five crisp words:
Behold the magnitude of God.

Ladder

I stumbled, under a pale sun,
through a broad hillside of
leafless Maples.

The snow, still thick,
worn through in certain places,
the faintest possibility of life beneath.

Then a solitary Hemlock, arrowing a clear path skywards,
slung me a low branch,
hand sized,
unavoidable,
affording most profound
relief to one too near forgetting
there are still channels to the sky.

Maples and Hemlocks are trees in the deciduous forests of Eastern North America.

Dragon

In many cultures they are there,
breathing fire, enemy, archetype... lurking.

Why are they there?

I don't mean why are they on the mountains,
in the caves, spewing flame, erasing villages;

I mean why are they there, in the hearts of men,
hidden in dark corners, half asleep,
one dull-lidded eye smouldering,
aware and waiting?

Does my hand grip the carved dragon head of
this walking stick in firm triumph,
that I have grasped the beast and tamed it to my will,
or do I squeeze a little too tight,
in case it wakes and,
spraying liquid fire,
erupts into the living world,
vomiting destruction?

Perhaps there is more dragon in me than I care to mention.

Memory

Somehow this bowl of age-peppered shells
(on a dusty shelf in the holiday house)
has lost nearly all its original flavor.

When we first collected them was it after
running breathless, rejoicing in the sand and waves and
breathless glory of it all;

or on a bright new morning after
a spring tide, perhaps a storm, when
mingled with the sticks and jellyfish
we found fresh treasure calling?

Still these are reminders,
each ordered spiral filled with possibilities,
waiting years for our next visit.

A cup of sky

The moon in a teacup
stars in a spoon,
reflections of light in the black play a tune,

Of shimmering dancers,
of pinpricks of light,
gathered like dust
on the coat of the night.

Scattered in silence
yet singing in peace,
a time when the shadows
and magic release;

A symphony nightly
played out up above,
each part is a player
yet one star's enough,

to capture the night time;
we'll whisper – and soon -
the moon's in a teacup,
stars in a spoon.

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?),
proudly placed in a bowl
over the fireplace,
a chunk of ivory, brittle,
like a memory.

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

But that tooth is gone,
and something has been left behind;

There are six years of history in that bowl,
and I cannot go back and get them.

Something for everyone

A chainsaw of Hadedas,

urban wake-up, one more weapon in dawn's armoury,
harsh throat-clearing provokes insanity and swearing.

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 grip of abseilers,

nervous, swaggering, precarious;
swaying on the blunt edge of manhood.

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,
their calls softening and dissipating down gentle valley slopes.

Classroom window

Behind a glass wall, mired by silence and four-walled conformity;

'LET ME OUT' I shout to anyone listening,

'CAN'T YOU SEE BEYOND THE SYSTEM?'

'What's out there?' a timid tickle in my mind enquires,

'Freedom, you fool'

'Oh, I thought freedom was a choice, four walls do not a prison make and all that...'

I push against the pane that pins me to the ground of my excuses.

Nothing there.

The glass is gone.

I am not in advertising but

Aaah, this coffee has
a scent that practically
reaches out of the bag
and pulls me in
by the nostrils;

When just the smell is more satisfying
than a hot bath, or a Cuban cigar,
how can you not be captivated?

Phenomenon

The night came,
treading heavily on soft silhouettes
and forest outlines.

Night,
thick,
two-dimensional,
impenetrable.

Then they came out, one, two, maybe ten,
a delight even these,
drawing us down a little path
and there were hundreds of fireflies,
lights giving depth to the dark,
illuminating hidden contours,
a galaxy of dancing patterns,
an ecstasy of flashing,
translucent green globes of light,
carving silent trails between the trees.

Later, passion having simmered,
all that was left were a few desultory flickers,
like final fireworks ending off a new year's party;
and most strangely,
in the soil and leaves,
a tangled matrix -
glowing strands and globs
of earthworm mucus remained,
residual magic.

Linguistic nemesis

A thorn in my creative side is the apostrophe,
is it a catastrophe
to
exclude one,
this tiny blip of ink,
this careless afterthought
of grammification?

Sometimes the poet in me is
frozen in his creative tracks by the uncertainty of
whether or not
its a crime
to leave one
out
or put one in.

Warrior poet

A good poem is a blade,
a forged sword,
crafted to cut.

Sharpen the edge, word-soldier,
trim blunt verbiage,
don't let your reader dodge the thrust, and parry.

Hone your words well enough,
and a hundred years
from now they will
still draw
blood.

Late last night

Late last night, in thick dull mist,
I hit a Water mongoose on the road.
Didn't want to hit it – who does? – a flash of fur
in my left headlight blurred too quickly and a quick, dull thud
broke my evening rhythm.

Drove on for a few taut seconds,
exchanging a train of rambling thoughts for an insistent new emotion;
quickly stopped, turned,
headlights and heart pushing back upstream,
hoping I wouldn't find it...

A young one, still as a brush, seem-sleeping on the tar.

I grasped the tail to drag it to the side,
hoping quick death had prevailed,
but then it moved, dragged forward on 2 good legs,
staggered in helpless drunken circles,
awkwardly lolling half-functional hind-quarters,
seemed to seek assurance like a lonely kitten.

Strong wild urine burning my nostrils,
I nudged the soft bladder of a body
(those sharp mud-ready claws clattering in slow panic
on unforgiving tar), and got it to the edge of the road.

Maybe I noticed some improved function in the anxious seconds
while I contemplated ending a broken life, and left it,

prayed for a miracle, that temporary shock would pass and
sweet restoration come, equally prayed for the next set of
lights to hit it square on and do what I probably should have
with that big spanner in the boot.

I chose to look on my way past that place this morning.

She was not there.

Confessions of a lapsed twitcher

I used to tick them, list them,
know their every name.

A human spreadsheet,
I even knew the Roberts numbers of a few.

A kindly pause of some twenty years or so,
and I am really

enjoying the delicate shading on that one's breast feathers,
a sort of orange grading into yellow,
with a crisp eye above,

delighting in not naming every cheerful bubbling
note on this most orchestrated evening,

loving the surprise and busyness of tiny buzzing
feather-balls whirring from the grass,

wooned and smitten by the softness, pattern, size
and wholeness of a hundred feathered beauties,
whose names I don't quite remember,
or really want to.

Ode to a toad

O waddling lump of cold porridge,
bulging your way across the lawn like
you own it...

Why do you insist on invading my
barefoot garden privacy with that
lazy excuse of a hop?

At least you could have had the delicacy of
a smooth-skinned reed frog,
piping on the evening breeze like a water flute;
or even the swift, purposed elegance of
those green river frogs with the stripe down their backs.

But instead I must contend with amphibian arrogance,
wrapped in a slack skin of warts,
and entirely unsmiling.

I even found a toad in one of my gardening shoes once,
probably plotting the downfall of the human race;

I cannot stand them –

They

Freak

Me

Out.

Second ode, same toad

Ah, beautiful harbinger of spring rain,
when your familiar croak returns
I know the seasons
are coming round.

You remind me of the ancient cycles,
after long dry winter
comes
damp refreshing spring;
moist enough to soften your skin and
draw you out of hiding to
snaffle those annoying crickets in my lawn.

I love it when you gorge yourself on flying ants,
poetic in your punctuated hopping and
intentional
grab and
munch and
munch.

Thoughtful you look, a warted Buddha
contemplating the vast expanse of inner lawn,
round brown sack of happy toadness,
soft-bellied,
beautifully ugly,

content with the world.

Words like fish

We seek to catch
sleek streamlined words
that show and speak
and truly are our feelings, thoughts
and even
motives, meanings,
passions and desires.

We bait with wonder, observation,
musing, thinking, conversation;
wait on mental streams in place, and space, and time.

And thus prepared,
with pens like nets,
we trawl the fertile waters of our minds.

Solar eclipse

How globes of such size can move, and yet be suspended,
it seems to me they are dancing,
gradual,
majestically unstill,
precise,
glacial,
pushing perfect invisible paths through the great silence.

They do not have anywhere to fall,
and they do not bump into each other;
gravity and my small brain do not work out there,
where part of the mind of God is somehow very loudly on display.

Getting Stoned

I get rocked by giant stonework,
leaning up a silent slope,
slowly losing the ancient arm-wrestle with gravity.
I get stoned on these,
God's ceramics, baking in the kitchen of time.

Let me sit down to a stone-feast,
consume great sandstone sandwiches,
limestone, mudstone, soapstone, calcrete, love to say their names,
roll cannonballs of doleritic rock between my teeth.

I love rocks, love this rock,
sandwich coloured,
warm in the sun,
full of glinting and rich brown weightiness.

I could eat it like a stack of Marie biscuits,
chew methodically through its coarse sandiness,
taste the baking warmth of sunlight on my tongue,
brush the grains from my chin
and sleep for a hundred years,
burp a small sandstorm and,
squatting, satisfactorily leave behind
soft heaps of crumbling stone.

Flamingoes at night, Kosi Bay lakes.

Coy moon behind a tree,
she's painting leaves,
blinking spoonfuls of light;

the lake is lapping soft tongues of swilled ripple,
flushing a white strip of smooth shore
between dark forest and mercuric pond.

Shhh, listen...
a pale platoon of night-filterers,
flamingoes out of pace with day,
step clear across our vision,
croaking throatfuls of plankton...

and now the moon is caught behind a cloud.

For all with wilderness in their blood

I hear your voice in the trees,
in the branches of the trees,
indeed in the dancing journey of an autumn leaf;

I hear you speak in silence,
between the punctuations of slow drips,
water droplets slowly plunging down to
hidden pools deep underground;

I hear you, YES!, in that
oh-so-loud and perfect
plumage of a Lilac-breasted Roller,
dancing with the landscape,
happy servant-demonstrator of light's full spectrum;

not only there but also in an Amethyst Sunbird,
enunciating through iridescence,
catching the light on a neck-full of joy
and well-nectared magnificence;

And in the murmured grunt of a hippo,
subtly guffawing into the rose-purple dusk
at nights warm edge, I hear you...

Sports bar

Worn benches tired of the smooth slide of slurred bum cheeks,
inching their owners towards the match highlights.

Stale sweat and beer,
cigarette smoke begrudgingly banned,
it still smells dark;
I always feel uneasy in these places.

It could be any game from any decade displayed in that corner,
all distractions welcome,
you could spend your whole life here and
never find out who you are;

wake up 50 years later as a hollow shell,
with a bench etched on your behind and
your soul the shape of
an empty screen.

In an old chapel

In this castle of stone and memories,
I am sitting on an ancient wooden bench,
staring at a glass picture that shines like a living thing.

I feel something here,
something more than the smell of the old floor,
something other,
something real.

Collective invertebrates

A confetti of butterflies,
dipping, dancing, dispersing,
paper wings skip and kiss the air,
tossed like tissues to the sun.

A squadron of dragonflies,
darting like drunk arrows,
a jagged choreography,
stabbing the air,
intensely precise.

A reluctance of butterflies,
coy, looking away, teasing the light.
Somehow I am always watching them depart.

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.

Writer's block

I thought I had writer's block this morning,
struggling to skim a few bland words from
the surface of my thoughts.

Couldn't really make the words work for me and
pronounce my purpose in the writing,
couldn't make my meaning clear;
Could not get my inside out.

But somehow some words have slipped
through the cracks, dragging with them
real meaning from the reaches of the heart.

What is that crust around my soul that holds my writing ransom,
demanding something smelling of fear,
that, when I pen my freedom,
dissolves like it was never there?

Lunar eclipse

Earth's shadow is an eraser,
just nudging the clear-edged circle of the Full Moon.

She is fast becoming a silvered calabash emptying
libations of wonder across the western hemisphere,

then a space-bound coracle pincerred by Scorpio into
a cast-off fingernail clipping,

finally gentling to the warm blush curve of
my new-born Iona's soft milk-fat cheek,
and the dawn.

With whales

Like gentle water-elephants,
they all seem female somehow,
flirting flippers waving
like an invitation.

Chins individually speckled with barnacle-beards,
each one a quiet mottled submarine,
how profound it is
when one massive tail
lifts out and eases back
into that blue and changing mystery.

Ambush

A poem sneaked up on me this morning,
demanding to be written.

Hammered on the door,
wouldn't take no for an answer,
no time for procrastination.

I'm glad it didn't have a gun.

Help me

Help me to enjoy the wilderness in one leaf,
the wonder everywhere,
the transcendence in a single star that,
defying street-light haze,
reveals hope in the everyday.

Yearning

In the bush, away from the city where I live,
my heart fairly drips with anticipation of some quiet space;
time enough to follow thoughts for longer than a minute,
a gap from the burgeoning demands of daily duty.

I long for silence,
yet when I find her,
we seem like strangers.

I dawdle, doodle, distract myself,
mumble rubbish about schedules and
reluctantly allow my heart to
lumber through the door of expectancy.

Silence will seep into me.
I can feel her coming.

Stained glass window

5000 degrees Celsius is the
flaming, roiling, restless surface of
the giant thermonuclear furnace that we call the sun;
blasting light and power
through corridors of
dark and silent space.

Now here, in a quiet wooden corner under a slate roof,
someone has carved sandstone from our little planet,
formed an arch, and therein hung a beautiful glass filter
for the sun's incessant rays of light.

If I am open to the voice of colour and
the sharpness of beauty, that window is more
a tree of knives than gentle filter;
shards of stained glass pierce my heart like
daggers of light,
illuminating darkness,
splintering self-absorption.

The maker of stars and commander of nuclear reactions
is painting on my soul, and has my full and rapt attention.

Seeking contemplation

I need a place where nobody can hear me,
where the loudest report is the breath of the wind;
a port for my heart in dark seas of confusion,
the silence of quiet where healing begins.

O give me a space to be free from the clamour,
the hundreds of voices besieging my ear;
somewhere that is open and neutral and silent,
where my heart's opinion can voice without fear.

Prepare me a place for my heart to belong in,
a sphere held with graceful and humble intent;
a soul-sphere, a womb,
soft in water suspended,
'twixt leaving and landing, on stillness clear-bent.

O music of heaven please sing through that silence,
the notes of my longing for heaven's bright sun;
please pour without ending the tune that, transcending,
requires of me nothing till drinking is done.

Amphibotanical (South-Western Cape)

A frog is a frog, it lives in a bog,
A toad is a toad, in its soggy abode.
But why do they differ, and why is a frog?
Does it wonder, you think, as it sits in the bog?

And does the toad ponder, while perched in a pond,
"Why is my name toadish, and not 'Toad the Bond'?"
"I think I'd like 'Bond, yes - James Toady Bond',
special agent of termites and croaking and pond."

But up croaks the frog "Hey, I'm being left out,
my frogness ignored, and my ego put out."
"Now give me a title in keeping with Frog,
with Noble and Honoured and Valuable Frog."
"I'd like to be Emperor, Lord of the swamp,
the place where my tadpoles and bulrushes romp."

So Bond (toad) and Emperor (frog) set a duel,
they'd wrestle and fight high above a dark pool.
Frog chose for his weapon a *restio* shoot,
Toad fought with a stout *wachendorfia* root.

And strange, as they wrestled, they took on the look
of the weapon that each for the fighting had took.
Our toad became lumpy with growths like a root;
the frog grew as smooth as a shiny new shoot.

So now when you see them, eyes bright in the pool,
and wonder if they are enjoying the cool,
Remember to look just a little bit longer,
and see if they've sorted out which is the stronger.

To an old trailer

Years of hammering by the roughest roads
have reduced you to the bare essentials -
like a fish skeleton picked clean by ravens,
you retain only the truly necessary parts.

But there is life in you, almost eternal;
when too many joins and bolts break and clatter to the ground,
your jagged bones rise as a phoenix,
re-born from a welder's torch.

With thanks to the Calverley family of Zingela Safaris, who keep this trailer alive.

Polished work

Life is not polished you know.

we bumble, fall over,

try again, make mistakes,

bravely pick our way through this maze of life and choices.

So come as you are,

present yourself in your current state.

And no, it is not wrong to try your best,

to do the best you can with what you have;

writing is like that –

we want to make it as good as we can,

but you know what?

Life is not polished.

Come as you are.

We are all still learning.

