

# With the earth



Nature poetry

John Roff

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## Introduction/Invitation

**“Concepts create idols, only wonder grasps anything.”**

*Gregory of Nyssa*

Great animals, tiny insects, ancient trees, new shoots.  
Wild places, pretty gardens, secret caverns, open plains...

I love this beautiful earth. And so do you, I suspect. Please join me, through the words in these poems, to delve deeper into the wonder and mystery of connection with our sweet round home in the universe.

If this book touches you in any way, I would love to hear about it. Feel free to contact me: [johnroff1@gmail.com](mailto:johnroff1@gmail.com)

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## **Appropriate footwear**

When crossing into wilderness,  
even a dry river-bed demands  
that you remove your shoes.

## **Rich spring night**

A rich array of sounds and scents are  
moving on the liquid wind tonight,

crickets chirp the night along in measured squeaks,  
fruit bats ting and shrug their shoulders at the ground  
from high and hidden perches,

a train marches past with chattering steel teeth  
and rhythmic carriage clatter ahead of  
subtle steady engine hum,

syringas close at hand drape  
invisible veils of scent  
across the nosefields of the night.

Yet no sound or train or scent ever wrapped  
the soul with sweet captivity like this  
invisible and everlasting rose  
that even now is blooming in my heart.

## **iMfolozi soul seat**

Below, the timeless river curls a lazy elbow of broad sand  
into sheltering reeds and warm fig trees,

above, I could sit on this rock for a thousand years,  
staring through a window in the wall of time,  
walking somewhere deeper than contentment,  
glimpsing home.

## **I don't think I had a choice**

The sea called me this morning,  
a quiet thunder,  
mist-fingers reaching  
through the closed door of a warm room.

Her ancient gravity a drawn bow,  
that arrow of road shot me  
through dunes  
to the edge where change  
is the only washing constant,

I played there in the toes of the tide,  
drinking the untamed,  
and listening.

## **Seasonal uprising**

Enough bare branches and numb toes,  
sluggish mornings and cold car batteries,  
the novelty of the shortest day has run its course.

Bring on the revolution,  
that blossom-burst of fired colour,  
when Winter's mundane mediocrity  
gets shattered by the Spring.

## **Poetry in motion**

*(on the noble office of the bush toilet)*

To sit and think while in the bush has always been worthwhile,  
but better still, to squat and think may bring a greater smile.  
The finest place is one from which there is a splendid view,  
but do look down and watch out for... the ankle-tapping poo.

On matters lavatorial there is a general hush,  
and for the trowel and paper I have seldom seen a rush,  
but if they knew the peacefulness of dumping with a view  
I know I'd have frustration, and be waiting in a queue.

## **Making compost**

*(the bush toilet revisited)*

At last, I think I know why I love to poo in the bush.  
There is something elemental about the process,  
straight back to the soil,

knowing what you leave behind won't be there in a few months,  
connecting intimately with the grand cycles that  
you are a part of anyway but may have forgotten,  
remembering that your body is  
simply and profoundly part of the earth.

What you're made of, and who you are:  
trillions of molecules of beautifully gathered, shaped, dust.

## Take your time

The dawn takes time.  
To experience a full one takes hours,  
the soft gentling of sharp stars,  
that subtle lightening on the treeline  
calling grey shades into colour,  
takes time.

A tree cannot be rushed,  
many people try, but  
*slow down*,  
that pattern of branches and  
wild symmetry of the canopy  
took decades to expand into the light.

Western life seems to have become  
a race to speed up time.  
Perhaps we think we'll beat it,  
reach the finish line first and look back  
at the gods we think we have become,  
ignoring the gentle tap on our shoulder.

## **Rolling home**

*(written next to a railway line)*

Evening settles round the rumble of homebound cattle,  
a small herd with a chaos of front-runners,  
half-slipping and half-controlled,  
slurring down the hill and  
stirring up dust.

So different to the soft trundle  
of a slow train on the steel track  
between the cows and me,  
all trucks ordered,  
one obediently following the other  
into the dusk.

## **Fire and ice**

Brushed on the brow of a far-off hill  
lies snow from a recent storm,  
with smoke from a tired grassland  
drifting up the same slope.

Snow gently blankets earth like a down duvet,  
numbing all sharp edges.  
Fire tears the tan veneer off the land,  
exposing every rough contour and jagged stone;

something in the air today has pushed my emotions to a peak,  
hot and cold competing for attention  
in the changing climate of the heart.

## **Coming down**

Hérons landing lightly  
on tall trees  
draw the sky  
to earth.

## Full circle

As a child I hid in a huge tree,  
and high in those sheltering leaves  
tucked myself again and 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.

Later, a wondrous journey in search of identity  
found me pilgrim, on California's granite backbone,  
at the feet of Bristlecones, Sequoias and Redwoods,\*  
a glory of arboreal contemplation that  
I would gladly repeat tomorrow.

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

*\*(The oldest, largest, and tallest trees in the world, respectively.)*

## **Guitar on the wall**

A moth blundered into a string last night,  
one clear ringing note  
rippled the still fabric of late evening,  
changing everything.  
Are you still the same?

## **Wilderness moon**

Cold night lit by a  
sweet silver moon  
glinting like the lid of a tin, then  
just like that,  
a pair of geese flew right in front of it,  
a swift and living signature on the brittle silence;

many, many minutes after,  
translucent clouds washed over  
and erased the page to white.

## Thaw

You would not believe that two days ago  
these gentle grassy slopes  
were snowed right under,  
here where a cheerful sunbird  
now joins jewels of spring flowers  
colouring the growing veld.

While high basalt bastions  
still guard the remnant ice,  
daring us to siege the passes  
and take the summit,

the foothills laze like sandstone elephants  
that test the swelling river with their toes,  
the warm wind shrugging snow from off their sloping backs.

## **A dress**

Almost dancing off the earth  
within its own perfume,  
a black dress  
peppered with white crosses  
sails across the room.

A closer glance reveals each cross  
to be a tiny bird  
with wings outstretched,

a gathering of perhaps five hundred  
danced in light flight  
across a fabric sky,

blunt gravity will never keep them here,  
those swallows like fragments of dreams.

## **Water power**

A river begins,  
such a gentle little trickling thing,  
oozing from a wetland  
drop by drop,  
or welling mysteriously  
from a cool spring,

sliding over smooth stones,  
hopping down waterfalls,

slipping through a silent valley,  
through the rocks, beneath the trees,

joining other streams, gathering volume,  
spreading over gravel under great cliffs,

slowing down and swaying round long bends,  
eventually yawning into lazy sandbanks and the sea.

Entire mountains were above us once,  
the water has removed them all,  
carving the very hills it flows through,  
moving a million million tons of soil and sand,  
eating whole continents, and  
pouring them into the ever-thirsty oceans of the world.

## **Cedarberg**

Guarded by sandstone gargoyles,  
the ancient fynbos  
at their feet  
is the cathedral.

*Fynbos is a unique and highly diverse vegetation type, restricted to the South-western Cape of South Africa.*

## Daydream

I am far from here today,  
seated on the sandstone edge  
of Umgeni valley,  
where I always feel at home,

then dancing north  
and thirty years back  
to giant boulders baking  
under a Matobo sun,  
where I discovered ancient paintings  
tucked inside a little cave,  
and dangled my young legs over the edge  
of the glorious unknown.

*Matobo/Matopos is the name of a range of granite hills in Zimbabwe.  
Please try to get there if you can.*

## **Awake after midnight**

Wide awake at one a.m.,  
hoping for rest,  
but the land is not asleep tonight;

from far across the Great Karroo  
this bold 'berg wind takes on huge trees,  
and wrestles waving branches  
whose only strength is woven suppleness,  
except in the strongest blasts.

The slack and surge of hungry wind is  
beating like the weather's heart,  
pulsating pressure's push and shove  
a silent strength that tests the town,  
then lapses...  
gentle strands of breeze  
sigh and falter,  
nudging  
single leaves to soft scuttle  
or cool flight.

A tin roof is a thin barrier tonight,  
the bold wind edges under the door,  
brushes my face and  
hands me desert songs  
on the sweet warm air.

## **Price on Application**

### **FOR SALE**

#### Magnificent Fig tree, centuries old.

Mature tree, in large wooded suburb,  
significant potential for continued growth,  
well watered by mists and a small stream.  
Roots are thriving and occupy most of the garden.

Healthy neighbourhood community includes

- several other large trees nearby,
- numerous fruit-eating birds,
- regular visits by Bushpig and Genet and
- a large termite nest.

In close proximity to several nature reserves,  
on three major bird flight paths,  
and a Steppe Buzzard migration route.

Includes house with large windows.

## **Tumbleweed**

Today the winds of confusion and disarray are  
blowing me all over the place,  
stumbling through the day with too much to do  
and too little will to engage with it all,  
I scan the horizon for hope,  
some form of plan,

and a Monkey-puzzle tree,  
whose branches jut geometry against the clouds,  
provides a firm and structured scaffold for  
these fractured rambling thoughts,  
gives structure to the chaos and aligns me  
to a safer, better-ordered world.

## **Come**

Come live in the clouds awhile,  
you will not fathom them from underneath  
or above,  
you need to be light  
as a drop  
of light  
a fragment of ice  
to move as wind through them  
for them to move through you,  
to become one with breathed water;

those huge dark brooding anvils,  
the weight of storms,  
the regular cumulus of daily life,  
the high bright cirrus laughter.

## **Anthem of an endangered species**

I do not care if I am extinguished, all my beauty lost,  
extinct and faded into memories or  
images that never held my essence anyway.

But you will lose something,  
though you know not what,  
you will miss the scent of my flowers on the wind,  
and the promise of what might have been.

## **A bat**

Suddenly

the evening's little wing-master is there,  
flicked onto a clean and darkening sky like a flag  
to show it's safe to be

between dusk and dawn,  
awake and dreaming,  
seen and hidden,

in all the places that are in-between.

## Love letter

I watched incredulous as it flew to me  
on a moist and urgent breeze,  
slipped around an open window,  
scuttled boldly through the frame.

Awe deepened as I watched its softened body squeeze  
between the burglar bars  
and land upon the floor,  
complete.

'I have not forgotten you' said that sent leaf.

I held it then,  
its shape an open hand  
that holds me now,  
cupping me safely and  
letting me fly.

## **Needing summer**

Thirsty trees,  
eager for baptism;  
spring courses through their upraised hands.

## **Whose ball?**

My little daughter toddled  
to a ball this morning, in the garden.  
She held it close, then, fighting over it with her sister,  
whined 'mine, mine'.

The rich industrialist  
lays his hands upon the full round of the earth,  
boldly proclaiming rights  
and ownership.

## **Good morning**

Dawn sings from the growing light,  
painting the morning sky with hope.

## *Lake Malawi 1*

### **At the surface**

The eighth largest freshwater lake in the world and,  
can you believe it, seven hundred metres deep.

Where water meets the land,  
the waves wash every boulder to a rounded smoothness,  
each granite rock a baked brown bun,  
yet still being kneaded pale by the tide.

We stayed upon an island built of roundness,  
great strewn jumbled things,  
their rock-flesh nibbled by swarms of

twisting fish. Quick, rattling sand and shell,  
darting, dancing fins punctuating quick, light  
stories in the busy shallows.

Below lurked impenetrable quiet,  
occasional wriggling swimmers scratched the depths,  
but really, there was only silence,  
and the still, bleached stones.

## *Lake Malawi 2*

### **From above**

This great lake has a thousand faces.  
Soft lapping lazy acres of undulating ripples, then  
a subtle change of wind and now  
the water neatly peaks in sharp tight waves  
that cut and chatter at the edge;

a distant storm begins, and  
wind-charged sets of pushing waves  
now sharply march and  
sluice the shore with rhythmic flush and rush and wash.

From high above  
deep water frowns while  
bright sunshine highlights clear blue fringes,

reflected, changed and doubled  
on the mirrored space:

unfolding storm clouds, sunset,  
sweet, rippling, moonlight.

## **Dangerous magic**

From fitful sleep in a cave on the mountain,  
we woke up and there it was,  
heaven raining snow from open hands,  
tissue scraps of light sailing to earth  
against dark cliffs and a still sky.

I could have danced into the waking dream,  
and laid my head on fresh, white pillows but  
it was so, so cold.

Eighteen hours later,  
safe in bed at home,  
I watched my retina replay those white and silver stars  
drift down through blackness,  
etching their way into memory.

## **Invitation**

On the uninhabited island,  
did you trace the horizon with your eyes, my friend,  
drinking unadulterated wildness,

run the exploratory fingers of your imagination down  
those thousand trees outcurved against the living sky,  
that ten years on still give your soul the longing to be moved?

## **New leaves on a spring morning**

A fresh wind slips  
through the leaf-soft gold of early growth,  
waving coy hands  
that delicately balance  
sun flakes on their open palms.

## **Even freedom needs a framework.**

This year Star Jasmine made a strong appearance,  
outshining even Wild Pear and Coral Tree,  
so often stars of the show in early spring;

scattered thorn trees spread like living frames,  
and twirls and curls of twining tendrils  
draped them in a flowing foam of jasmine.

It was a dancing of stars on leaf-green space,  
and lent a solid form to gushed exuberance.

*Star Jasmine (Jasminum multipartitum) is a South African bushveld creeper.*

## **Autumn cut**

Soft blond waves of thatching grass,  
then harvest.  
Brittle stubble remains.

## Single track mind

*(Single track: a narrow trail prepared and used for mountain biking.)*

Walking the path before, we used to bend our way around  
the great rocks that had been here for ages beyond counting,  
moulding our movements to  
their shape, their pace, their size.

Wind, rain, hoof, paw  
and low-slung rubbery porcupine bellies  
shaped the stone, grain by patient grain,  
long before there was a path at all.

Well smoothed by time the rocks seemed... timeless,  
grounded reminders that we are not God,  
that we could not sculpt this painting in a million years.

Somehow the land became commodity:  
*'it will be fun for the guys to go somewhere new, but some rocks  
will block the bikes and must be moved, a few hours work should  
do it, and we'll keep the damage to a minimum',*  
the route-maker's vision bulldozes rocks away  
to drop them belly-up in scarred piles beside the new track;  
straightened to our liking.

This sacred world is like my sister,  
and I have kissed her beauty, along  
this sweet cathedral of path that slowed me down  
to taste the warmth of summer and connect  
with greater things than stones;  
violated,  
for a few minutes of raised adrenalin.

## **Thirst quencher**

A welcome Summer decoration,  
wisps of mist dance  
and thread their wetness  
through expectant branches;

tiny drops condense,  
drawn drips descend  
from leaf to leaf  
and slake the aching soil.

## **Guarding the future**

I should like to draw attention to seeds,  
eager packages of potential,  
always full of hope,  
eternal optimists.

Little knights in smooth armour,  
whose very existence is  
to continue, perpetuate, keep going  
and defend the holy grail of life  
passed down through all millennia.

## **Pulse**

In the still hours  
of a still night  
I lie still,

captivated by the suck and nuzzle of  
my little daughter's lips around her dummy,

for her  
a centering comfort,  
puckered to the softest, oldest symbol,

for me  
an ordered rhythm,  
a song of the tides, lapping at the edge of still waters.

## Glimpse

*Blaise Pascal, in 1654, had an encounter so powerful that he sewed an account of it into his jacket and wore it for the rest of his life.*

Last night I lead, or followed,  
four young men into an ancient forest,  
and sitting in the deep dark,  
enwombed by gentle rain and sheltering trees,  
stepped outside of time.

We felt, no,  
became aware, no,  
encountered,  
something...  
some great power;

and hovering at the wall of vision and perception,  
soaked in other-earthly rain  
and dimly perceiving  
the Fully aware,  
we caught a glimpse  
- a hint of perfume, and the sigh of a garment -  
outside of rationality's edgèd confines and clumsy poetry,

and in that invitation into awe  
I am sure there was a hint  
of yearning

## ***Bird Hide 1***

### **Frame**

I step quietly  
into hallowed anticipation,  
as one enters a cathedral  
but in this wooden one the focus is beyond,  
drawn out through a viewing hatch  
that draws attention to the everyday,  
and frames the feathered world,  
transforming it

so even an ant is wonderful,  
most days you might forget that they exist,  
but here you could gaze upon its glossy beauty  
for minute upon timeless minute,  
transfixed.

## ***Bird Hide 2***

### **They should be called time machines**

Once here and seated,  
it still took twenty minutes to actually  
arrive,  
for the river of birdsong to  
flush out stagnant thoughts,  
polish my awareness  
and still a busy mind.

Drawn to the frame,  
as if it were a living screen,  
I watched for an hour before  
an obvious nest in the flowing reeds  
began to show itself.

It is as though you go inside and become  
somebody else,  
someone much quieter,  
from another time.

## **My clever torch**

I have been quite proud of my little black torch,  
its shiny compact shape,  
its power in measurable lumens,  
the special adjustable focusing beam, and  
I have even whipped it about  
*'wooah, cool, that's a really bright one'*  
amongst lesser torches,  
(in the absence of a red sports car)  
to make light of my insecurities.

Tonight's muted sepia moon is not quite full,  
she floods the garden with a surge of silver light,  
and smiles on me with  
sweet benevolence.

## **City sunrise, 38 ° Celsius predicted**

Half an hour after dawn,  
the sun is still innocent,  
gazing at me through bleary morning eyes.

The birds are exuberant and  
unaware of anything amiss,  
but do they know that today  
their milky yellow friend  
will swing a hammer of heat,  
and pound them to a crisp  
upon the burning anvil  
of the city bowl?

## **Missing the moment**

Sorry, I was staring so hard  
through the viewfinder of poetry,  
and trying to find the perfect words,  
that I missed the essence of that sunny timeless place  
and can now only offer you a meager afterimage.

## **Water music**

The light plinking of rain on the roof,  
its increasing trickle into the gutter,  
the growing rush of little streams onto the grass  
and the numbing roar of a full sky falling,

easing,  
and a quiet breeze  
slips between a few remaining drops,  
then peters out  
with a sigh.

## **Caving**

I am willing to be  
swallowed by the earth, to  
risk dark throats of moistened rock,  
and delve the silent underworld

within my soul;  
then from the cool stone womb  
emerge

as one reborn,  
into the lightness of the light.

## **The delicate minutes of infusion**

How good to brew tea in a clear glass, and  
spring hot wetness  
onto cool dry leaves,  
which swell out like  
bristles of a waking brush

to paint that clear glass  
canvas in loose swirls of red that  
dance to heat's engulfing rhythm,  
load the cup brim-full with flame,  
and quench a deeper thing than thirst.

## **Best bed**

Soft grass makes the best bed,  
and after sleeping on its open carpet  
you leave behind a pressed space,  
even as you, leaving,  
carry a pressed space  
inside.

*With thanks to the Cobham mountain poetry group, December 2011.*

## **Poet in the foothills**

I came expecting to write poetry,  
but these mountains are the writer today,  
inscribing a glory of living words upon me,  
the blank page.

## Reflection

I know I am often not transparent,  
the muddy torrent of my well-rehearsed defences  
obscuring the rocks below,

but I would like to be  
as clear and friendly as  
a gurgling round-stone stream,  
contentedly musical and welcoming,

to be as this brook is:  
like a pot coming to the boil,  
with the promise of sweet hot tea  
and a friendly chat.

## Reference point

On a huge beach of rounded stones  
my children are playing,  
finding simple pleasure in  
the surge of sea-foam and games with the tide,  
leaping in unbounded bounds from stone to shining stone.

My little daughter sees me sitting on a rock  
and turns to thread her way  
with trust and single-minded adoration  
through the maze of boulders  
to her reference point -  
the solid safety of my arms.

I gaze up  
at the vast unmoving arc  
of Sandstone mountains that surround me.

Where do  
the rocks,  
the stones  
and the sea  
turn,  
when they too cry out?

## Turning

Turn up your collar slightly,  
there's freshness in the air tonight,  
and the stars are just a little clearer.

You smell it before you feel it,  
that first flicker of autumn,  
a firm cool wind nudging the season's inertia;

the full glass of summer tilts  
into autumn's still bowl, cools  
into those brittle shards of winter, then  
wells up, overflowing into spring.

## **Oh to be so focused**

On wind, on wild wind  
a Malachite sunbird swoops like a mad thing,  
mad with the joy of living, of being a bird;

a little green king  
patrolling hillside territory,  
commanding a dark branch  
that boldly frames him,  
telling out that living brightness for a still second  
then

he is again a turning sequin in summer's bold light,  
shining in taut swirls with  
neat plumage shimmering and  
twin-ribbon tail trailing,

singing and swooping as though his life depends on it  
which I'm sure it does,  
along with countless sunbird generations  
coming on the future wind;

he may only do this for a few short months,  
but in his high and potent place of power,  
there can be nothing else that matters.

## **Daisy**

I have seen more wisdom and commonsense  
in a daisy  
than in a hundred books  
gathering dust on a corner shelf.

## **Camping in adjectives**

Changeable weather.

Palpable tension.

Remarkable suddenness.

Elemental lightning.

Visceral thunder.

Horizontal wind.

Torrential rain.

Permeable tent.

## **Little wink**

Under still cool midnight, from a warm pillow,  
in the not-unpleasant prison of my room;

outside the burglar bars that frame  
the gentle fragrant garden,  
one distant winking starlight beckons,  
smiling from between the leaves.

## **Not just numbers**

More-than-beautiful is this almost sacred mystery,  
the closest we can come to holding  
the hidden order of the cosmos,  
ratios, sequences, fractals and geometry -  
sweet fragments of the language of creation.

Such mathematics rises from the mundane  
subtractions of the everyday and  
brings us very close to  
resolution.

## Naming

In the morning, on the wall under the light,  
a kaleidoscope of little insects  
around a great orange inkblot of Emperor moth;

but should we really call them moths:  
five days as adults,  
a month or two as caterpillars,  
nine months as pupae?

Surely they should be named  
according to some longer-lasting aspect of their life,  
*chrysalises* perhaps, or even *larvae*,  
although, thinking about it,  
perhaps something more pronounceable,  
like *moth*.

## 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 Hadededa.

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.

## Two new moons

### 1

Neat poem of a new moon,  
two small clouds  
escort that open page  
below the horizon  
to be read on another shore.

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### 2

Tilting silver cup  
sinks through the skyline,  
for sipping later in the evening,  
further to the west.

## Sunrise

Hug-dancing two-year old treasure to Grieg's Morning mood,  
clean early morning light illuminates our living room stage,

lift and whirl and lift and whirl  
loose blond curls flying  
round and round  
again daddy  
again again,

with every smile  
a fresh sun rises.

## **Unwriting**

Raking the leaves off the lawn  
reverses poetry  
that wind and trees have left behind.