

FOR THE INQUIRY

poetry of the dirty war

Nigel Mellor



FOR THE INQUIRY

Copyright © Nigel Mellor 2010
All rights reserved
Limited edition 1989

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Mellor, Nigel 1946 –

For the Inquiry.

1. Title

821'.914

ISBN: 978-0-9513862-2-4

e-book edition for sound files and text available at www.nmellor.com

Design by Adny for Dab Hand Press
Dab Hand Press, Newcastle upon Tyne
Visit <http://sites.google.com/site/dabhandpress/>

Environmentally conscious book production from
www.printondemand-worldwide.com

For Mary

Acknowledgements

‘The man who knew the make’: *New Poetry 1, The Arts Council.*

‘Official secrets’: *Time Out*

‘Afterwards’, ‘The clouds’, ‘Chernobyl’, ‘At times like Spain’, ‘Preparations’, ‘Opposition’ and ‘Interrogation’: *Tribune.*

‘Detention’, ‘Doing accounts’, ‘War crimes’ and ‘Might’: *7 Days.*

‘Voices from a bike’: *The Third Half.* ‘Kevin Finney’ and ‘Two foot of 3 by 2 pitch-pine’: *Nutshell.* ‘Lingering’ and ‘Premonitions of memories in old age’: *Writing.* ‘Vigil at Lavoite sur Loire’: *Weyfarers.* ‘On Souter Fell’: *Ostinato.* ‘Feeling used’ and ‘Following an unusual conjunction of the moon and the sun and certain planets’: *Jonathon.* ‘Party’: *Torchlight.*

‘Annie at Medlam’: *Newcastle Evening Chronicle poetry competition, prize winning entry.*

‘Corruption’: *Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers ‘Post-a-Poem’ competition, prize winning entry.*

‘Kevin Finney’ and ‘On Souter Fell’: *set to music by Rick Potter for a performance at Newcastle Playhouse, Mar 7 1989.*

Reprints

‘Preparations’: M.Mellor “Breaking the Boundaries” (Virago)

‘Might’: J.Tierney “Criminology” (Prentice Hall)

Notes for the current edition

I have re-titled the poem on page 35 to avoid giving offence to a community. In Kevin Finney, ‘hinny’ is a local term of endearment; ‘Cherry’ refers to Cherry Blossom, a shoe polish.

PREFACE

At some point, there will be a reckoning. Those who were responsible will be held to account. This is my evidence **FOR THE INQUIRY**.

CONTENTS

Unease

- 11* The man who knew the make
13 Lingerin
14 On Souter Fell
15 Feeling used
16 Vigil at Lavoite sur Loire
17 Kevin Finney
19 The craft of the poet
20 Party
22 Premonitions of memories in old age
23 Spider
28 Annie at Medlam
29 Voices from a bike
30 Following an unusual conjunction of the moon
and the sun and certain planets

Signs

- 33* The clouds
34 Two foot of 3 by 2 pitch-pine
35 Speelam on a Sunday
36 Corruption
37 The re-burial of Lord Haw Haw
38 The Bronze Age horn
39 Preparations
40 Doing accounts
41 Chernobyl

Crisis

- 45* At times like Spain
46 Might
47 Official secrets
48 Opposition
49 Detention
50 Interrogation
51 War crimes

Collapse

- 55* Afterwards

UNEASE

At first, there was nothing you could put your finger on; but as we carried on in the same old ways, we looked back to an age which, in reality, had all but gone. Flowing through it all was a sense of unease. Something had to change – unfortunately, we were not ready.

The man who knew the make

*I
Cannot see
I do not
Understand
Why
This body no longer lives.*

I cannot remember.

*Yes
Clearer now
I do remember.*

I remember the day the mill broke down.
I remember the feel of the air
The very colour of the light
That day the engine died.

Ever with us in our workplace
Made the ground beneath us thrill
No matter where or what the season,
That engine bound us to its will.

But then, that day, at first a falter
Then a most peculiar cry
The engine shifted in its halter
The engine slowed, began to die.

A vital vein in vital clockwork
Pulsed an oily, wasteful stream
A gear seized and pistons welded
Crying out with vented steam.
The wheel lurched once, spun, jammed then settled
While boilers cooled and metal ticked.

But then they called up first the foreman,
Then the man who knew the make.
Then the craftsmen, then the guildsmen
Then the room grew thick with skill.
Soon that wheezing, dying engine
Lived and turned and shook at will.

Now, show me please, oh please I beg you
Show me how and where to mend
Fix this corpse, this solid waxwork
Restore to life my loving friend.

Bring me up no mumbling doctor
With Yes and No and Just Perhaps
Send away that bloody surgeon
With cut and probe and gouge and hack.

I want right fast that engineering
Oily-handed Lord of Life
That overalled, certificated
Metalmaster, Lord of Life.

Drag him from his dusty cavern
Dredge him from that coaly slake
Find him, pay him, sign and bind him,
Find the man who knows the make.

Lingering

I know you *are* there
When I come in
Voices suddenly fade
The air is not quite still

It's silly
I can't tell anyone
They'd think I was mad
But you are there
Don't play games
Show me
Just a little more.

On Souter Fell

Latch's rasp on rough plank door
Opening
To the sad half light
Of Souter Fell

Through draughty kitchen
To sodden heath
Past rusting spares of farm machines
He trudged unmarked
Returned ungreeted
With logs to burn
With thoughts to speak

This bloody fell
This mean poor pasture
Unfit for men
Not fit for beasts
Stones it grows
They spring up daily
Grass it yields –
A miser's treats

He drove his thoughts like simple creatures
And turned them to a well trod path.
Perhaps a woman, warm and tender
With odd off days and secret ways
With things to dust and rinds to render
But not some farmer's coarse-grained maid

A voice to still the killing silence
Perhaps another tale to tell
In place of days all worn out hopeless
Soaked up there on Souter Fell.

Feeling used

If you only knew
The power of your face
You would simply smile
When you visit
And share a bottle
And ask no more of me.

Vigil at Lavoite sur Loire

I waited for you that night
You and Jean Luis
Breathing in the darkness
On the corner near the chateau
No one came.

Brave at first
Beside the railway line
Rehearsing all our moves
I almost stayed the time

But I remember running
Then, back along the hill
I saw the sentry halt you both
Saw him shoot to kill

I said that we were young
Whenever people asked.
I said we had agreed
To try another day.

And now for thirty years and more
I've owned the house which hid that night
And stood each day to watch the road
And waited by your grave.

ICI SONT MORT
POUR LA LIBERATION DE LA FRANCE
HILAIRE AUBENAS
J. LUIS RAYMOND
2 AOUT 1944

Kevin Finney

Little Kevin Finney
Was pale weak and skinny
Little skinny Finney
As the kids called him

Running Kevin Finney
Glasses held on grimly
Panicky and screamy
As the kids chased him

Crying Kevin Finney
Sobbed on his mother's pinny
You've got to tell me mammy
Why the kids hate me

Listen Kevin hinny
Don't be such a whingey
Frightened little baby
As his dad told him

Trying Kevin Finney
Was beaten in the spinney
Crouching in the alley
As the kids left him

Growing Kevin Finney
Left his school so quickly
Never been so happy
When the kids lost him

Apprentice Kevin Finney
They blacked his balls with Cherry
Shoved him down the lavvy
On his first day in

Working Kevin Finney
Made a job so tinny
Thicky Tinny Finney
As his mates called him

Called up Kevin Finney
Put him in the army
Put him in the barracks
With soldiers baiting him

They tormented Kevin Finney
For months and showed no pity
You'll have to learn to take it
As they all told him

Hanging Kevin Finney
Took his life on Sunday
Left no note to ask them
Why they hated him

Buried Kevin Finney
Forgot him very quickly
Brought it all upon himself
They all said of him.

The craft of the poet

The craft of the poet
Is not to set jewels
Into the walls of a hut
But to take old stone
And build a cathedral.

Party

No one
Ever knew
What went on at
Their parties.

No one ever said
Or hinted
Or by any sign
Gave any indication whatsoever
About what went on at
Their parties.

They sat waiting
For their latest guest
Who, with sweet enchantment
Would accept that invitation

Everyone
Must know
What goes on at
Their parties.

Later
Much later
In the house outside town
Near woods
Near rings
Near all manner of unusual things
The party
Begins.

Lock that door
Says man to wife
Wear your cross
Say your prayers

Stay in
Tonight.

She's left here now
The latest one
They never stay
And tell.

And no one
Ever knew
What went on at
Their parties.

Premonitions of memories in old age

In the kitchen, family calm
August storm and tempers done
Clothes hung damp upon the line
To hear a tape of birthday gone

Recorded voices somehow made
The present telescope and fade
So that the rows and spiteful ways
Of that quite ordinary Summer's day
Seemed like a once remembered play
Recalled in distant future time
But dimly, from an *old* man's mind.

Spider

*The male St. Andrew's Cross spider attracts his much larger mate by tickling her feet. Unfortunately he ends up being eaten.
The female St. Andrew's Cross spider traps moths by emitting a scent that mimics the female moth. Unfortunately, a species of predatory wasp lays her eggs in the belly of the female St. Andrew's Cross spider.*

Smooth smooth silky smooth
Spin and spin and spin
First the long long leaps
Watch, my sisters
Branch to branch and branch again
Smooth so smooth so silky smooth
And now the dance
Crossing crossing criss and cross
Make my web
And spin and spin
Mmmmm spin and spin

I see you sister
Hiding in the bark
Mossy coloured
Still
Watch! The bird! Watch!
Still and still and still
Mmmmm
Feel my web
Singing twanging
Waiting

Sister in your hole
Jump. Grab. Pull. Bite bite bite
That's it
Now drag that ant

That juicy eaty squashy
Anty anty anty ant
Mmmmm
Watch me sisters
In my web
Still and still and still
Mmmmm

What's that?
Web bouncing
Thread pinging
Where?
Other side
Feet. My foot.
Third one back
Second left
Ohhhh
Over there
On his thread
Feel it. Oh feel it sisters
Oh feel it. Feel him play it
I must go
Must go to him
Must go along his silk
Come to me lover. Come on. Come on.
Feel your palps.
Oh I feel your palps.
Quickly. Come on lover. Find me. Come on. Find me.
Let me squeeze you
No. Don't go. Not now. Come back.
Come back. Come back.
I have your arm
I want you all
Now. Come on. Now.
Promise I won't eat.
Promise.

Watch me sisters
Eat this weakling.
Hah.
Three legs. Half dead.
All gone.
Mmmmm
Spin. Spin. Spin.

Quiet. Quiet.
Watch your sister.
Who do we want?
Want that moth
That tasty moth
That tasty lasty mothy moth
Use the web
That sticky web.
Like my smell, lover boy?
It's me, yes me. All you ever dreamed of.
Not your dowdy little wife
That boring little frump
It's me. It's me.
All you ever wanted.
I'm ready.
To hold you. To fold you. To love you.

To eat you.
Sucker.

Still. Still. Still and still.
Watch me sisters.
Feel my babies
Feel my spiderlings
Spin. Spin.
Broad and flat. Great swathes.
Beds for my babies
Beds so smooth and soft and warm.
Watch me sisters

Spin and spin.

Now my babies. Now.
Ohhhhhhh. My babies.

More
Must spin
Spin some more
Cover my babies
Spin. Spin.
Tired! Must stop.
No!
Spin. Spin.
My babies
Wrapped in silk
Dappled brown
Birds won't find you
Warm and safe
My spiderlings
Spin. Spin.
I'm tired. So tired.
Sisters. Can't you help me?
Spin. Spin. Spin. Spin.

Still.
Must eat
Soon.

Wasp!
Wasp!
Too weak
Can't move.
Not there wasp
Not me. Not me.
Not your eggs in me. Not me.

Weak. I'm so weak.
Can't move.
Not your eggs in my belly, Wasp.
Please. Not me.

Still. Still.
Must eat.

My babies?
Safe
Good
Rest
Must eat.

Something growing
Twitching
In me
Inside
Eating
Eating me. Me!
The wasp
Its babies. In me.

Too weak.
Too weak.
Too weak.

My babies,
My spiderlings
The wasp
Beware the wasp.

Annie at Medlam

Father drank
And when he left
Mother couldn't cope
With awkward Anne

Took her off to Medlam
Saved her from her mum
Locked her up in Medlam
Mother couldn't come

But Medlam helps girls like Annie
Leaves them calm
Leaves them
Walking up and down
Leaves them
Quite forgotten
Leaves them
The way mothers never could

And who'd believe
After sixty years
When Ancient Annie passed away
Just in case of any hint
Of favour in the home
No flowers would be allowed from life-long friends
And to mark her place
Just a number on a stone.

Voices from a bike

I feel sorry for the Chemist on the corner
Although I usually can't stand small businessmen

I rarely see anyone in his shop.
The Chinese does a steady trade
Even the butcher's has a queue
But while trying not to stare past his display
I can see him standing, looking.

I would go in
But who needs shampoo every day
And who can pay their prices for developing and printing?
I checked, then sent mine off to Boots
I felt richer
But can't go in today.

I don't like her - the woman he employs
I know she feels the same
Yet she still resents the times I don't come in.

He comes from behind somewhere
And stands and smiles
And nods
Not in agreement, but because he cannot stop.
She glares and wants you out
And him as well.

Cycling past on Monday
Up the lane to miss the cars
I passed him walking
Turned to smile and shout hello
He glanced, but that was all.

Years of not knowing are not cancelled
By voices from a bike.

Following an unusual conjunction of the moon and the sun and certain planets

There were exceptionally high tides that year
And in one of the few places still accessible
Where the Harbour and General Works Department
Had recently laid piles and infill
To strengthen the quayside against the event
The river swelled up to be touched

That flood
Dragged upstream by the moon six hours before
Against its natural order
Surged back
At such a speed that even the best swimmer
Would not make the bank
But face down and lifeless
Wash out
And under the Northern sea

At low tide
Mudflats were exposed which
Until that day had never dried
And beyond the breakwater
Weed choked pools of unsure depth

We hesitated too long in that opening
Then the planets moved
And the waves returned.

SIGNS

Their first actions cut deeply. We tried to escape the consequences, to deal with it alone. We could not see the pattern. That came much later.

The clouds*

You laughed
When I said that the verb
To own
Did not describe a natural state

You smiled at my poor attempt to reason that
Even though this ownership
Was never questioned
I could prove it wrong

You listened, painfully,
While I described
The possibility that someone
Would build a meter large enough to hold the air
And send me bills
For rent and standing charge
And so much fuel adjusted cost
Per breath
And that armies would defend
This meter
And this man
And you their right
To deny me air.

As I say, you listened, painfully.
Since that time I've heard complaints
That someone tried to steal the rain
From Denver, Colorado
The problem there it seems
Is that no one knows who owns the clouds.

** For the 50th anniversary of the death of Robert Tressell, author of 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists'*

Two foot of 3 by 2 pitch-pine

Two foot of 3 by 2 pitch-pine
To mend the door where the burglars had been
But it'll be hard to get
Warned the joiner

And it was
Nobody keeps it these days
Except Southernns at Jarrow
And I didn't think they'd bother
For such a small order
But, despite hard times, they wrote
To say the job was ready

Bit of an unusual request
I suppose it caught his interest
A hard softwood, high resin content
Withstands the rot
Used for building piers
And sometimes for boats
Never heard of it in a door

Couldn't find it in the machine shop
Where the hell!
Chocking up another stack of wood.
But there it was
Heavy, smooth, warm
From the Caribbean
Must have been planted before the Russian revolution
And been growing through the Depression
And two world wars
Then felled and somehow brought to Jarrow
In decline

Two foot of 3 by 2 pitch-pine
To mend a door
Broken open.

Speelam on a Sunday

Speelam Harbour sits in pools of engine oil
Not leaking, thick from a tanker
But thin and wasted
Furtively disposed

A beach of stones
And half-bricks
Round, but not quite smooth enough
To hide the brickwork's stamp

Leading to this sorry tip
Were many paths
But mining falls
And erosion by the weather
And neglect
Had cut them jagged.

"Harbour" to unwary folk
Is promise of a welcome scene
But in Speelam's worked out maze
Of walls within walls
The coal stained sea
Sucks up beaches oblong, flat
And squirts through concrete cracks

Further down
An abandoned mineral line
And staring out
Someone remembered Speelam
Full of men.

Corruption

One hundred feet
Below the canopy of the equatorial rain forest
Known as the Kaross
Amongst the hectic but delicately balanced activity
Of little known life forms
The stink ant goes about its business
Until
It inhales the spores of a harmless looking fungus
Which drift about the forest floor
Then, for the first time in its life
The ant begins to climb

On reaching the top of the plant
The ant sinks its jaws into the stem
And grips
Until it dies

The fungus however
Continues to grow inside
And in time
Thrusts its way out of the brain
To fruit
And cast new spores

There are always ants, below
To complete the cycle.

The re-burial of Lord Haw Haw

Hanged at Wandsworth
Thirty years this month
His body placed in sacking
In an unmarked grave
Soaked with quicklime within the prison walls.

I had thought that justice
Had progressed.
Surely death was quite enough
For traitor and betrayed.

The Bronze Age horn

No one could blow one single note
On the Bronze Age horn
From the Irish bog
Except the captain of the military band

Deep in the mud
Old swords and axes
Sucked and pulled
Waiting for the hand.

Preparations

What the hell
Is a well?
I mean, do you just dig a hole
And up it comes
Ready to drink?
And wheat.
I've squashed bits of what I thought was wheat
But nothing came out
Looking at all like flour.
Sheep make wool
We all know that
And potatoes grow in the ground
But how do you stick woolly hairs together
And where do the seeds come from
Which make the potatoes grow?
You see
What I'm worried about
Alongside all those others
Returning to nature without knowing why
Is how to survive.

Doing accounts

For chipboard, catfood and two cents off the burger

There goes the butterfly, Giant Blue

There goes the whale

There go the Indians of Brazil

There go the trees

One day it's going to be you

Brother,

One day it's going to be you.

Chernobyl

We lay in the dark, scared
Alone, because in the end
We are alone
In the rain.

CRISIS

We wanted to fight back but there was nothing to fight back with. The rot was too far gone, they had laid their groundwork well. Even so, their success turned sour and the dirty war began.

At times like Spain*

O.K.
So Alec often gets it
Wrong
And he's workerist
And just a bit of a sexist
But he kicks arse
(When camera men from the Front
want photos for Bulldog)
And that's not nice
But at times like Spain
Looking back
Words were not enough.

** For the 50th anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War*

Might

They are tough now
And so sure of themselves
That we even begin to accept it
Because they don't try to hide
And they don't care who sees.
They are so confident
And that's what makes us weak
But when the change comes
(and it will)
The truth will shift
Because they are wrong
It just happens that
For a time
They have the power.

Official secrets

We are in greatest danger
From the freedoms we have

They do not become a part of life
But a way of forgetting
The struggle which gave them life

When we no longer have to fight
We forget why and how to fight

To be free is not enough.

Opposition

We talk
At times
As if they came with hammers
And iron bars
To kick and splinter
An oak door.
It wasn't like that at all
The door was hollow
Rotted through
They hardly needed to push
And we did
Nothing
To hold it.

Detention

If you come for me
Then you're lost
Not now
No, I accept that.
For the time the movement's finished
And so am I
We were both weak in any case
But that's the point
If you have to come for me
And I'm no threat
Then you don't know where to stop
And because you can't stop
(since to do so would mean denying
all you have ever believed in)
You must carry on
And destroy me and others like me.

But they have family and friends
And their friends
Have family and friends
And soon, within the terror you create
Some will feel
There is little left to lose
And the nightmare
Which you have spent your life opposing
Will finally arrive
And consume you all.

You see
That's why I can smile
In the little time I have left
Because if you come for me now
Then you're lost.

Interrogation*

I won't hold out for long
Soon you'll get the lot
The names
And more besides
I will crawl at your feet
I know that
But in the long dark night of your soul
You must finally face what has been done to you
That you can do this to me.

** For the fortieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights*

War crimes

Now listen to me
You have one job
And one job alone
Do not resist
You have no power to stop the screams
They would kill you anyway
Do only this
Remember
Remember the names
Remember the faces
It may be a lifetime
Before you can stand there
And accuse
So do your job well
Just survive
And remember.

COLLAPSE

This was their only way out.

Afterwards

It would have been about three in the afternoon
If there had remained
Some trace of reason in the world

The man continued to cradle the child
From time to time
She appeared to sleep

They faced ruined walls
But made no attempt to turn
Or seek shelter
As the walls were everywhere

It did not comfort the child
But when awake
The man spoke of times past
Until her sickness returned

For a long while
He had held a housebrick
But could not use it

It would have been about three in the afternoon
When the child began
A cry that would not stop.