SURFACE NOISE

*Surface Noise* was a manuscript of poems from 1968-1977, but the dozen in this file are from ’72-75. They were written after the work for *Feet At Dawn* (compiled when I was 22), and before I came, at 25, to America. Several poems from this MS made it into *YGIBTGTIT*. These didn’t.

IN MEMORIAM

He would leap up onto a table and say nothing.

At Speaker's Corner, the groupies at his soapbox

nodded, as he stood silent,

grappling with the Essence.

In millions in front of their TV sets, all of us who knew

there was something

to be said—

if only we could discover it—

gathered each week to see if this time, finally, he'd speak it.

And then they would interrupt the football,

to show him once again about

to moonland at its pith—

not quite managing it, as it turned out.

(But oh so ravenously aspirant.)

When he died—no longer grasping after the air of it,

nor spent and gasping like a grounded fish,

but simply smiling—the silence, as if in tribute, glowed,

briefly, around him—it contracted, and dissolved—

as if some ingenuous leprechaun had tossed a gift, and vanished,

the folds of his grin broadening away in the ripples of a pool—

until the world became again its noisy self,

of usefully approximate words.

LONG JOHN SILVER PURSUES A POGO STICK

I

try to see life levelly

but smudge it when it doesn't suit

balancing most cleverly

dreams, despair, ideals, and loot—

I

try to smell it wittily

I smile at Cindy's girlfriend's charms

who having lived in Italy

no longer shaves beneath her arms—

and taste it all so lingering-

ly—squeeze an orange till it bleeds—

and touch it lushly fingering

the being of the wind and weeds

And

strain to hear harmoniously

its voices in the shadows' breach

between the lilt of lunacy

and troubled aching after speech

I

try to speak reflectively,

yet finish breathless, and downcast,

spawning what, invectively,

are countless words, and none the last—

and try to hold opinions,

when sometimes all they do is shift,

and drop me in dominions

where vagrant songbirds catch my drift

While

I was in America,

a stranger asked me what I thought.  
 I told him, *My name's Derek.* A

reply inadequate but short.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH HICCOUGHS

The pigeons in Trafalgar Square

will sometimes gather on one roof,

then swoop en masse into the air,

like a surmise in search of proof.

They settle opposite. But then

they change their minds, and turn about—

to wheel awhile—fly back again:

assertions in the grip of doubt.

This goes on until the flock

has lunged, looped, lagged into two camps,

or none: some, flummoxed, run amok,

or scoot for refuge on streetlamps.

A few who make it make no sound,

and no more move: they stick to it.

Others go flapping round and round,

speculatively dropping shit.

I watch from the National Gallery steps.

The tourists swirl. One asks the way.

The way? *That* way. (This way, perhaps?)

I shake my head. Better not say.

ANON'S DREAM

*— Anon, who'll live when I am dead,*

*How did you write this song?*

*— We told our rhyme to them, and they*

*Remembered it all wrong.*

There's an angel of the sea

whose task's to smooth, and smooth.

In his hands the dead are pearls,

and time is one long harmony.

Into his arms the troubadours must fall,

have their music sculpted. He'll catch

a mannerism, style them around it,

so they may speak for a race.

Someday, when all my eyes see straight

(and they will) —

when all my thought is celebration

and my words its sound (and they will be) —

when I've nothing left to say,

and only things to sing—

I'll sing him one last diapason

as he drowns me.

A gull, perhaps, a flung stone across the tide;

the sunlight clatters off its wings;

the breath of it as it hosannas into cry;

blue scour of sky above, around, below, turned in its eye.

PSALM

I would learn to fight the word with the word,

would learn to make the world insist,

Don't trust me, but judge

first what has caused me to be.

I would learn to dust and rub up clichés like old china bowls,

and fill the vases left in basements

with turns of phrase from which the meanings

thrust, heavy-headed, dropping their scent.

Half-asleep one night, I heard someone come singing,

and saw he had no shape, but was one with the sounds he sang.

I lay enchanted and transfixed, for the message of his song

was of oneness and of perfect stillness.

But this singer had no soul, who was the sounds he sang,

and somewhere in me my soul cried, "You would have me die."

Sweetly, he replied, *Do not listen, do not listen, this is pride.*

But I raised my sense of the single being that I was,

raised it like a club and smashed it through

his image where he came.

Still he did not vanish. But came on.

He took me in his voice and wrapped me in it,

and would have soothed me. But I ran from him.

"I am the only one I am," I kept repeating,

"and will not hear you, who would take me and make me you,

smoothed of my anger, humour, of surprise."

His voice demurred like water, yielding about my touch.

As he sighed, *This is pride.*

That voice pursues me still, as smooth and pure as anything

that would be only soul; so which is soulless.

Its timbre haunts this song, this song smoothed out of anger

or surprise, that moves to the patient heartbeat of the sea.

SNOW ON THE ROSES *(this poem first appeared in the journal Assegai)*

1. Woman On A Couch With Fruit

Because absence is a kind of perfection

and all that is positive is flawed,

she pared the self down barer

until she found it beautiful.

In her head, one shadow

was falling from one dim light

in a featureless room.

In her head she circled it,

weighing each detail

in her intellect at once.

As outside on her sofa,

never quite vanishing,

a red-lipped Cheshire cat

sat fatly slaughtering peaches.

2. Meeting In A Wood At Midnight

Through the trees at midnight slow draughts slide like snakes.

You are fleeing something:

in your old scuffed boots that the mud-ruts suck at,

and your thin coat that the slow draughts crawl through.

You are fleeing something; you do not feel them.

Someone stands before you. You are listening.

In the shipwrecked forest are no voices,

save your own: let it be silent.

In the darkness, the stars hook no surfaces

to hold them, save your eyes: bid them close.

Lie down; the sky will tumble

through the trees like water: you will float.

And will hear the havoc in your head

still into rhythms, and your heart's flow

shift into its one direction. And you will

find this good. Therefore accept these

further promises; here, in this hand…

With no sound, it unsleeves; empty.

Ice catches no light.

He doesn't move.

He waits

for you to come to him.

STATISTIC

Who is this lies dying in this street,

where no bomb or bullet or smashed car has bloomed—

someone faceless,

who is a light dwindling, and breath that comes in gasps?

There are people who are talking at his form:

they describe his features, which he has forgotten—

his nose he blows so loudly—

he surely won't pretend it isn't there?

He says he is ridiculous,

they say, Don't be ridiculous;

he says he's desperate,

they say, Oh, please, more irony!;

he mumbles to himself,

they say, Yes, we know,

but…

Ah, they're probably right, he decides,

collapsed like a tired balloon on the Town Hall steps.

SWEETIE'S SONG

*(this poem first appeared in the journal Assegai)*

And you will never stand the way I shall,

beneath the moon, inviting it to tromp on you,

broken and holy, joking but barely,

your real pain painted and made saintly,

your fingers spreading to describe a shrug, a verdict,

their arc failing with the thought that nor is

anything fulfilled by this, your ideals and your dreams

shuffling and shifting in your hand, to play again to

reach out for the sky under the sun.

You will talk of what is real, and face the world

by its steady light, changing nothing of it, except,

perhaps, to not see the dreams the rest of us walk

queerly leaning on. Here I stand before your door

right now, queerly leaning on one. If I could explain

this way I twist myself around this hope of (that

word!) loving you (but fine, fine, it isn't possible)—

your real self painted and made saintly—

what dream stuff might we coax into a life?

So here I stand right now before your door,

queerly leaning for excuses on distortions,

and punching strategic holes out of willful

misunderstandings, through which, terrified,

I might escape. Wondering, as you with your

steady gaze would never, whether I should

stand instead like this: as if in a hot shower,

in a cold room, on a cold day—about to turn

the water off—and run—as you will never stand.

WITHOUT ILLUSIONS

17, with no illusions:

I was the only one of my kind.

I knew because my friends were young, and clumsy with words:

when they said, *Isn't it funny, we never really think of you as black,*

the rest of it: *But now we come to think of it, you are black, aren't you*—

the shame of it—was nailed to the back of their laughter

and trailed like a cackle-string of cans.

And I knew because I was 17, and changing—

finding what might pass for caves to weep alone in;

to shelter, and wonder what was happening,

as the night grew savagely beautiful.

And because in the way of those

turned 17, I was well-acquainted with shadows,

and I had no illusions.

One afternoon as I came from school,

a motorbike muscled past the gates,

and I heard a shout of *Nigger!*

On the pillion, a half-turned figure

looked back, smirking, wanting to see me break:

a face that won't ever wholly dwindle into distance.  
But I grinned too, of course; and forced myself to hold the grin,

the way he held to his: two fighters locked

in their maul of an embrace

until some referee’s arm might reach

and stretch its revved grace to separate us.

What did he feel, I wonder, that smiling human

with his need to hurt, as our faces lied,

and his blow lodged in my gut?

I was 17 then, and without illusions, and with a heart

coached deeply into guilt; as delicate as glass,

delicately splintering.

CUPPED HANDS

I reach out my hand towards you, my cupped hand,

and you fill it, fill it with fog, tumbling and luminous.

Is it fog or something wrapped in fog?  
See how it shifts and curls, thicker than steam

or smoke, shifts like a question that can't be answered.

What's that wrapped inside it, that sparkles and dissolves,

like a jewel hammered out of fogs?

Your hand reaches out towards me and I fill it;

our cupped hands fill with fog or with something wrapped

in fog, something warm and luminous: with a jewel,

perhaps, or with the reaching of another hand.

But that can't be all;

but this could surely never be enough.

WAKING IN THE NIGHT *(this poem first appeared in VCU’S “Writers' Corner”)*

1. The bed shifts weight; I wake,

squinting into the darkness, where your slim

shape flickers among the shadows.

Something I was dreaming flits out

and brushes the surface

of my reason, like a moth the water—

with rich and liquid movements;

its red wings turning… Their red reflection

rinsed dark in dark water.

2. You rise from the bed with your weak bladder

and I wake; something I was dreaming

flutters out among the shadows.

I reach out my hand, but my touch

is heavy with water: its

wings go black with blood…

When you return I watch your white

shape turning in the darkness;

through fluttering lids,

I feel it settle; feel you

nestle its warmth against my side…

In my head, the dead moth lifts and flies.

3. —you have had a nightmare.

Quickly, I set the thin light streaming out,

straining against the hollow walls.

Outside, the night draws tightly round us.

No rain, no cars, no cries of insects.

Its silence is absolute.

You tell your story: each word

weighs itself against the stillness

In the heart of the city

we sense only emptiness stretching

into emptiness; kissing, feel

only the shiver in each other's bones.

TO THE MOST REVEREND ULSTERMAN IAN PAISLEY

"I have hated God's enemies with a perfect hate."

Ian Paisley, slightly turning a phrase taken from Psalm 139

Winter, the sun rose like a Christ:

a glimpse of blaze, and then grey rain;

this week, he rides the chariot

of gold among green trees again—

and raises high the shine he shed,

and reclaims the life sacrificed

when leaves fell like Iscariot,

blazoning his name in trampled red.

Because I know he doesn't judge

(whose praise and blame derive from us)

and knows no chosen, no unclean,

I name his coming glorious.

But you: you leash your God. You grudge

whole tribes their right to love His word;

their map to your excuse; their spawn

shall fall like leaves to prove Him Lord.

EPITAPH

I loved my hair; the way you brushed

it out so lovingly (I thought)

had shown you loved it too; I blushed;

but now, good sir? I know your sort.

Never trust a balding barber:

he will always sell you short,

and call it long—and if I harbour

grudges, well, I know your sort.

Shampooing it to make me lose

all track of length, you had your sport;

I came to ruined. Your sort use

one just as they will, I know your sort.

When at last you deigned to stop,

it was to charge me three quid, which

I paid; and stumbled from the shop;

and threw myself off Putney Bridge.