

## Another Place

MIKE BARLOW's first collection *Living on the Difference* won the Poetry Business Book and Pamphlet Competition 2003 and was shortlisted for the Jerwood Aldeburgh Prize for Best First Collection. He has won prizes in a number of competitions, including first prize in the National Poetry Competition 2006, the Ledbury Competition 2005 and the Amnesty International Competition 2002. He is also a visual artist, making drawings, paintings and assemblages of found materials. He lives near Lancaster.

Also by Mike Barlow

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# Another Place

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To J  
*who keeps me in the real world*



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## Aubade

My head's a strange room. You're there alone.  
The stove glows, quiet as a train of thought.  
Round your shoulders a herring girl's shawl—  
lichen, ribwort, colours of an island  
I make you up from. Outside it's night  
and a wild one, wind's castrato in the wires,  
a shed door banging, someone coming  
and going to check the roof's tied down,  
harbour lights bouncing on the water  
like salmon trying to leap the pen.

You're reading. It's a letter. I think from me,  
though it's odd I should write when I'm here  
beside you. Any minute now I'll open my eyes  
to a room outside my head. I'll squint  
at the finger of light between the curtains, get up  
to the view I see every morning, city towers  
glinting in the sun, the runescrypt of cranes,  
the small green rug ten storeys down, the Number 23  
ticking over at the lights, noiseless from up here,  
and the miniature newsvendor sipping a hot drink.

It'll all be exactly the same though subtly different  
from the way I'm imagining it now  
as I wait for the right instant to move.  
Your warm skin sticks to me, your hand  
twitches with its own electric dreams. Perhaps  
you've not quite finished the letter which  
come to think of it is probably about  
the difficulty of living in two worlds at once.

## June Bug

It must have been drawn to the reading light.  
I was with Captain Cook in Poverty Bay, a place  
so fertile and well settled the Maori wouldn't yield  
an inch to the diplomacy of small arms fire  
or beads. As the first warrior fell I heard a thump  
in the room like a cupboard shutting or a book  
falling to the floor. When I finally gave up  
on the Captain, his misgivings, his ill spirits  
misnaming a land, and forsook *Endeavour*  
for my own berth, something slight and hard  
dropped from the dark to scrape my cheek.  
On my outstretched arm a scarab the size  
of a finger joint, like a brooch of beaten copper  
with a green armoured face. Still seized  
by the zeal of the ship's quota of draughtsmen  
and philosophers, I knew I should draw it  
or take a photograph at least. But it was late.  
I put it out, closed the window. Sleep  
carried me up a creek where tattooed warriors  
pulled faces, inedible fruit dropped from the trees  
and for the first but not the last time, home  
was an idea so remote I doubted it was real.

## The Illustrator

Upstairs in the family semi, the main bedroom  
given over to his studio, you'd find the makings  
of adventures months off yet: pen and ink roughs,  
the gouache storyboard worked up image by image  
until a horse, half chestnut half white page and ridden  
by a pencilled ghost, cantered right towards  
the next blank frame and cunningly suspended ending.

Cluttering the room the real things: leather chaps  
like oblong sails, spurs, bridles, Stetsons.  
On the mantelpiece a Derringer pistol once  
slipped into an evening bag or stuck in a garter.  
Handle first he offered me a Colt .45  
my twelve-year-old arms could barely lift  
without his hand propping up the barrel.

He cocked the hammer, spun the empty chamber,  
explained the kick, how most fired wide or high:  
in those days, if you were shot, chance was  
it wasn't meant for you. He stroked a polished handle.  
*You'd be surprised. Complaints pour in  
if toolwork's wrong on a Smith & Wesson  
or I miss some detail on a saddle.*

In the window bay, instead of a dressing-table  
or Lloyd Loom chair, an easel held a painting  
of a steamboat thrashing the Mississippi night.  
From its lit windows I could hear a Dixie band,  
the laughter of dangerous women  
eyeing the gambler with his bootlace tie. On deck  
silhouettes in stovepipe hats smoked cigars and stared  
into the dark, trying to make us out across the water.

## Two Poems after William Maxwell

*(In desert country the air is never still.' The Folded Leaf)*

1

In the country where those who can't speak  
and those with nothing to say choose to live,  
an old man leads a moon-eyed mare.

He can tell a thunderstorm's coming by the wind  
as it soughs round his earth-sod house.  
There is much he can teach us.

But it's the children, the desert children,  
we must listen for first, the sing-song  
tricks of their games, their word for stranger.

You'll know when you hear it. It means cousin,  
which means they'll share their bread, their fire,  
the clothes on their back.

It's a word you'll hear them call out to dogs,  
deer, geese, a word they'll honour you with  
should you be lucky enough meet them.

In the pebbled river, in the wind  
as it fingers rods of grass,  
in the circumspect whisper of blown sand,  
another life: the voice of an old woman perhaps,  
or a man scything hay.

In the distance a windmill  
swings its bone white arms. This  
you don't hear. If we close our eyes  
it won't be there.

Reality can never exist  
through one sense alone.  
Think of the strained faces of the deaf,  
the inward look on a blind face.

The world suggests itself  
continually and we respond, continually  
making our way over mountain and desert  
to tended lawns and raked ponds  
where a gardener talks to himself in his sleep.

## Evening Wind

*after Edward Hopper*

I'm passing through. Who knows  
where to. Upriver, upstate. Wherever  
there's skin, leaves or dust to unsettle.  
But tonight it's New York. I billow  
this curtain like a sail and there she is  
up from the bed kneeling naked and surprised.  
You may envy me the intimacy of her thighs,  
firm stomach, those breasts you can't see  
from where you are. I'm only the wind  
but she knows otherwise. I goose-pimple flesh.

She goes to close the window. But doesn't.  
Looks down there at the city, night lights  
and traffic hum, the usual cliché, except  
it's not a cliché, it's one of those moments:  
life suddenly swung like a knocked gyroscope  
and anything's possible. Nor does she  
go back to bed. Instead she dresses,  
gathers spare clothes, packs, picks up  
cash and a pocket book, closes the door  
quietly, takes the elevator to the street, hails a cab.  
I bowl along wide-armed to greet her.

## Another Place

They could have come by boat. You can see  
there's a channel through the rocks.  
They would have brought with them the timber they needed,  
nails, corrugated sheets  
and basic tools: saw, hammer, pick, spade.  
They would have put up the roof by the first night,  
first shelter, first title. There might have been rain  
driving in from the west, or it may have been warm and clear,  
like today, making everything feel right.  
Later, the hearth, its stone trimmed and hefted into place,  
some mortar, infill and the chimney  
grown by muscle and eye into the main prop,  
the one part that would last, a monument  
to forgotten labour on an empty coast.  
Early on they would have planted the rowan,  
perhaps a whip brought from another place, and the holly,  
to ward off evil. And here are roses  
gone wild among the rusty iron and rotting creels.  
Tall blue flowers that don't belong in these parts  
are signs of a garden where cattle now wander and browse,  
leaving the poisonous flowers which,  
like the old iron bedstead propped inside,  
still anchor the place to a history.  
Otherwise, there are no ghosts here, only us,  
dreamers from away, picking about, reading signs.  
Us and our conjectures.

## Choosing the Moment

I'll choose my moment: sea fog, no sign  
of the cockle-gatherer, his old blue van.  
I'll come up on the blind side, slip through  
the doorless doorway, light a fire.

It'll need new lights seaward, a couple of panes  
at the back. I'll work quietly at first, straining  
to catch boots on the track or a car door slam.  
Clear days I'll keep an eye on the horizon.

If no one comes possession will settle in me:  
the door rehung, slipped shingles fixed,  
stack and ridge repointed, traps set,  
holes in the skirting plugged.

In the roofspace there could be letters, a bible,  
a shepherds manual, cuttings from the life of Elvis.  
Each morning a one-legged gull  
will tap the window till I give it crusts.

Back end she says she'll join me.  
I'll wait out lengthening nights, first snow  
passing to fall inland. Lamplight will cast  
the room's reflections through the dark.

I'll look out at myself and there she'll be,  
a smile that might be a blemish in the glass.  
Imagine her reaching to touch me, both of us  
afraid we'll move at the wrong moment.

# House of Winds

## NORTH

No doors face that way.  
We keep watch through a squinch.

An army's barked orders, whistled signals,  
the creak of cumbersome wheels.

All leave cancelled, letters home  
censored. There's no outfacing the ice-  
queen's smile, her armoury of splinters.

## EAST

A winter blade through  
bone-thin gaps and cracks,  
angling for flesh. A stoat  
scuttles in the roofspace,  
the washing line whines.

In summer it's a Baltic kiss,  
goosefeather cool, carrying  
the scent of heather from the hills,  
scorching the leaves of roses.

## SOUTH

The warm breath of amnesia,  
promises made and never kept. Prodigal  
brushing aside the skirts of curtains  
to return glad-handed, scatter  
pink sand from the Sahara, cargos  
of exotic bugs. A strange bird  
blown off course scouts the garden,  
unwitting herald from another parallel.

## WEST

Cockle breath, the tail end  
of hurricanes, Caribbean spun.  
Waves of rain against the gable end,  
snapped ash, jug-band music in the flue.  
Waltz or jig we dance its temperate dance,  
plant by it, harvest, lean into it  
like old salts unsteady on the land, listening.  
It speaks in tongues, its narrative  
a prophesy we turn a deaf ear to.

## Butterfly

An ocean bursts against cliffs, dislodges a handful of shale  
and a fossil. Five storeys up a man with a hammer  
demolishes the wall he stands on.  
A crofter lifts potatoes in the rain. A long way east  
a foghorn barges into the yachtsman's dream.

One sleeping body curls round another  
whose cells cluster and multiply.  
A swallow flies into a window and lies stunned.  
Lights and dancing in the High Street  
celebrate a deft cross in extra time.

Mars winks red and a rocket lands in a lemon grove.  
On the radio a politician answers her own questions,  
not ours, nor those keeping a child awake  
as he listens to his parents downstairs. If it rains  
where you are, in another hemisphere the land will bake.

When you feel the wind change  
think of icebergs calving, the political climate  
moving towards its opposite, the pollen count falling,  
the Dow Jones closing up, a mirage  
luring a lost tribe as it searches for the sea.

## The Boat in My Brain

has long since slipped its moorings, cast off  
from the quayside, the rower  
jumped for dry land, away  
to the nearest bar to lose himself.

The painter's spliced end trails the surface  
like a finger on an idle afternoon,  
rainwater sloshes across the boards  
and a tin baler clinks its bell.

It bumps me in the night, breaks  
the current of a dream, wakes me  
as a turning tide  
might nudge a dozing pilot. I jump.

My weight rocks the strakes  
like old scales  
suddenly struck into life. I bale,  
slide oars through rowlocks and pull

with no clue where I'm heading,  
whether back to the quay  
where a lost figure waits  
or out to the grinning horizon.

## Someone Else

The two foot ledge cants me outwards.  
To stay put I have to bend one leg,  
brace against the heel; below,  
the sheer grey wall, the dangle of rope,  
pebble faces squinting from a skirt of scree.

I pay out, the red line inching upwards.  
So scared I couldn't spit I swear  
I'll take up golf or Scrabble,  
long for office politics,  
a lukewarm pint in a smoky bar.

A tug. *Climb when you're ready* plumb lines  
through the gut, the heart flies round its cage.  
Someone else, not me, draws a deep breath,  
swings past a bulge of rock to seize  
a pinch grip on the edge of all that air.

## South Westerly

We crawled like insects, bodies as close  
to the shapes of the rock as possible.  
I think back now and feel  
the unwieldiness of limbs,

how we shouted to one another  
just to hear, to know we were really there,  
in the rush and howl, the sting of grit,  
those invisible punches.

And below us we could see  
the troubled eye of the tarn  
whipped to a cloud of spray  
driven up the scree like rain.

Instinct told us we should turn round.  
But with our backs to it  
we feared being lifted, tossed  
like bits of tumbling moss.

So we crawled on and it seemed  
to enter our bloodstream,  
inflate us so we had to anchor fingers  
round the edges of rock

or grab makeshift ropes of cowering grass  
to stop ourselves taking off  
like dirigibles, all the time leaning,  
inching forwards, grinning.

And grinning at what? It was more  
    than the clenching of teeth,  
the involuntary rictus of effort, more  
    than wind moulding our soft masks.

I saw it in your eyes.  
    You must have seen it in mine  
because your grin  
    widened when you looked my way.

## Decoy

I'm a trailed wing in the meadow  
crying *Here no here no here*  
drawing you despite yourself  
further and further from home.  
Or closer to home, let's say  
I'm paw marks on a freshly painted floor,  
out into the street, round the corner  
and away onto waste land  
where toads and lizards colonize  
old tyres and fridges.

Or I'm the wave reflected  
in a shop window, gone  
when you turn of course  
but breaking thought for long enough  
to throw you off the scent.  
And I'm the News, The Shipping Forecast,  
a bass beat boosted from a car window;  
voices from the ginnel, the row  
quiet neighbours have  
when their children are away.

And I'm the mutter of the town at night  
that keeps sleep shallow  
or the silence of the country so complete  
phantom noises chase you through the dark.  
You run. I follow, closer  
than you think I'd dare. I'm there  
to catch your eye, your ear,  
your nerveless heart,  
until it stops.

## The Ball

Slow down you said, look.  
We were mid-island, as far  
as you could get in any direction  
from the sea, the intricate danger  
of cliffs and stacks,  
arches sunlight drank through,  
drongs and dizzying geos;  
or from voes of quietened water  
gently rocking yachts and yoals  
while the ocean beyond  
struck land with a force  
you could feel in your core.

Here there was nothing  
but shoulders of moor,  
a scudding sky and the road  
twisting and rolling ahead and behind,  
not a building, shack or shed  
in any direction, that far from the coast  
where a seabound folk's  
timber houses wore  
white-framed windows and looked  
surprised at the view  
across to the lighthouse  
or down to the pier.

Here there was nothing  
and here was a man bouncing a ball,  
a tennis ball, along the road.  
Bounce, catch. Toss, catch.  
No break in his casual stroll.  
Glasses skew-whiff, shirt hanging out,  
he wore a slight smile as if  
this was all you had to think about  
when you walked from nowhere

to nowhere in the middle of nowhere,  
this is what it meant  
to be at the centre of things.

## Likenesses

You're walking along a beach,  
a steep slope of pebbles sliding under your weight,  
the sound of a hundred voices  
saying the same thing  
but not in unison.

What you're looking out for  
are small washed-up objects that remind you of others,  
pieces of silvered wood like fish, a stone  
like an eye, a rusty nail  
like a used toothpick.

When you look up there's a stranger  
coming your way. Something familiar makes you uneasy,  
perhaps the mole on the left cheek or a hand  
in a pocket jiggling change  
the way you do.

The figure stoops, picks something up,  
offers it. You feel its weight, its shape, notice the colours,  
the patterns on its surface, how light strikes it.  
You've no idea what it could be  
or what it reminds you of.

But you have to speak. There's an urgency  
about this stranger's look, a need to know, a need  
for explanation. The face in front of you  
is both very old and very young.  
It won't take no for an answer.

## The Sparkle in the Arctic Sky

is not the Northern Lights  
but a firework show. There is  
the promise of dancing  
until dawn

and caribou, seal and walrus  
and the south wind  
which is a good wind  
for walrus;

but we cannot only be  
a part of the world we once had,  
for it is hard to get anywhere now  
without a skidoo

and on the radio  
we are talking in our own language  
but about our language too.

(source: Mike Donkin, *The Independent* 10 April 1999, on the Inuit  
achieving control of their land, Nunavut.)