

Dear Alice

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AS EDITOR

- Shouting it Out: Stories from Contemporary Scotland* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1995)

# Dear Alice

NARRATIVES OF MADNESS

TOM POW



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING  
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom

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Salt Publishing 2008

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

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ISBN 978 1 84471 416 2 hardback

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges  
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

*for Julie*



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## Acknowledgements

In 2000, I began to work for Glasgow University at the Crichton Campus in Dumfries, the site of one of the great nineteenth century asylums. The poems in *Dear Alice—Narratives of Madness* are rooted in this experience. Although I have made use of documented evidence for many of the poems, others are drawn from a daily experience of working within the Crichton grounds. Whatever their source, they are all works of the imagination. I am indebted to Morag Williams, Archivist to NHS Dumfries and Galloway based on the Crichton site, for her enthusiasm and her deep knowledge of the Crichton. She guided me towards sources that were of immeasurable value.

I am grateful to the Scottish Arts Council for a writer's bursary and to the University of Glasgow for the time without commitments in which to work on *Dear Alice—Narratives of Madness*.

Some of these poems have appeared in the following: *New Writing* 13 (Picador), *Poetry Scotland*, *Southlight*, *The Scottish Poetry Library Newsletter*, *Both Sides of Hadrian's Wall*, *60/60* (Daemon), *Markings*, the on-line magazine *Mad Hatter's Review* and the SPL website. The title poem, 'Dear Alice' was previously published in *Sparks!* (Mariscat, 2005—with Diana Hendry). 'Inmates', after an artwork by Jan Hogarth in the Crichton grounds, was first published as a postcard. I am grateful to the editors and collaborators involved in all these earlier appearances. 'Questions of Judgement' was the result of a commission from composer, Ali Burns. I am especially grateful to her for alerting me to the potential of what was all around me.

TOM POW  
DUMFRIES, AUGUST 2007



*Everything possible to be believ'd  
is an image of truth.*

from *Proverbs of Hell* by WILLIAM BLAKE



## Prelude

It's one of those mornings  
when it's a blessing to be  
up and about. The chestnuts  
wear the early light with grace,  
the grass is silver with dew.

A young, tawny cat pads  
over the path before him—  
in its mouth, the early  
morning sparrow, its beak still  
soundlessly praising the day.

## Inauguration

He casts an eye round the brightly painted room—  
the perfect pot plants, the prints on the walls,  
the audience at their tables  
down to their last sips of wine.

“Let us remember,” he begins, “what’s most remarkable  
about the very room we’re in tonight—  
only last year it was home  
to the criminally insane.

“And we’re delighted,” he continues,  
“that some of them are able to join us now.”

They shuffle in—the criminally insane.  
One carries a sparrow jammed in his mouth;  
one swishes a dead chicken through a spill  
of blood red wine. The crowd

eases back, not wishing  
to cause offence, demonstrating more  
than a clear willingness to share the space  
with its former inmates.

We are a *Liberal Arts* College, after all.

But the criminally insane have a spokesperson too,  
a small man with electrified hair,  
who wishes us to know what’s most  
remarkable about this space

is how many of the dead  
once moved here. “So please, with me,  
welcome back the dead.” And the dead  
mooch in, lifting their heavy lids to the light.

They look around, approvingly it’s clear,  
at the decor, at us and at the fidgeting  
criminally insane. “Remarkable . . .

“Remarkable . . .” the chairman repeats  
as a sound of thunder fills the air  
and the foundations  
start to shake.

## Song for M

1.

it began with a hen  
which fell in a pond

and a girl named M  
who plunged in the pond  
to save the hen

her blood bloomed  
in the water

2.

once her blood  
bloomed in the water  
M caught a cold

she had no stopper

the hen flapped  
its useless wings

and M plunged  
                  headlong  
into madness

3.

what plunged M  
                  headlong  
into a cold hen

her blood had  
bloomed in the water

but M saved  
her madness then

far from the pond  
she outlived that hen  
the end

## Nebuchadnezzar in the Arboretum by Moonlight

Nothing but madness till now, the hard earth  
callusing my hands, the snow and the rain  
seeping through cracked skin. Though it was birth  
of a kind at first to leave far behind  
that other madness—my name on each brick  
of the city, each flower willed into place  
by me—and to fall on all fours, to lick  
dirt, let it matt with the hair of my face.

But let those who can still read, read the signs:  
cherry trees stand amazed in their own moons  
of blossom, while I root through the rich wines  
of the earth. I'll excavate a new song  
to last till my empire falls. Let all fall—  
apart from these trees and one well-lit hall.

# From Foucault: Two Tales and a Bedlam Ballad

## 1. APPETITE

A man, believing himself to be dead,  
stopped eating. The world became a plaything

of shadows. Spectres haunted him daily.  
But Death, he discovered, was thin gruel—

there was no nourishment to be found there.  
In for the long haul, he took to his bed.

Dying, however, remained active long after  
he'd thought it disarmed. Nothing for it

but to soldier on till the cupboard  
of memory was bare. A few of his friends

disguised themselves. They whitened  
their faces then shrouded their forms

in loose fitting black gowns. They entered  
his room, set up a table before him

and brought to it a spread of bread, meat,  
cheese, chocolate and wine. They ate and drank

then replenished the feast. He stared at them  
from out of the hollows of his fading eyes.

But why they asked him did he stay in bed?  
Didn't he realise dead people eat as much

as the living ever did? They helped him  
up and they ate together through the night.

As dawn broke, they rejoiced at his rebirth—  
the colour that flooded his cheeks, the energy

with which he cracked a chicken wing apart.  
Yet they wondered, as they rose from the table,

how he'd lit the hunger in their bellies,  
that drew them back to these splintered bones.

## 2. THE WISE FARMER

It was said, between Tinwald  
and Torthorwald, lived a farmer  
who could cure the mad. A Hercules  
of a man, he yoked two to the plough—

and if one shrugged at the traces  
he larded the stick across his back.  
They were kept naked  
and dark as the earth itself

and, as the plough thrust in—  
cleaving to one side clods,  
roots and rocks—the tendons  
of their necks were guyed like ropes,

the clenched muscles of their flanks  
clear as if they'd been flayed.  
In the cloudbursts of spring  
blindly they lifted their faces

and the rain washed them  
like stones. They were as nothing  
from where the rains came—as peewits  
in the vast open rigs of sky.

Madness, the farmer instructed  
his neighbours, is the bestial  
raised in man. The trick's to restore  
to man the animal that rages

in his heart. With Reason beaten,  
docility's assured. Below Torthorwald,  
come evening, the Lochar Moss  
is groomed with gold. He unshackles

his pair and leads them to the byre.  
After feeding, they crouch down  
together in their stall. They tend  
the raw burns on their shoulders,

the welts across their backs. Neighbours  
claim they hear them howl, insist their door  
is firmly snecked. Still the wise farmer  
has his champions and it's said,

if you travel between Tinwald  
and Torthorwald, it's hard to tell  
which half of the men might be beasts —  
or which of the beasts be men.

### 3. GLASS

Because I'm made of glass,  
I must beware I break.  
Because I'm made of fire,  
I can't give back what I take.

Because I'm made of water,  
I must cup every drop.  
Because I'm made of iron,  
I must cradle other crops.

Because I'm made of ice,  
I must keep out the sun.  
Because I'm made of pain,  
I keep away from guns.

Because I'm made of love,  
I find I'm haunted nightly.  
Because I'm made of grass,  
I must move surely, lightly.

Because I'm made of feathers,  
I must not fear to fall.  
Because I'm made of fear,  
you must come when I call.

Because I'm made of memory,  
I live in an endless forest.  
Because of appetite and will,  
I must be always polished.

Because I'm made of earth and ash,  
I keep my head bowed down.  
Because I'm made of hope,  
I sew my wedding gown.

Because I'm made of piss and shit,  
I must live by grace alone.  
Because I'm made of wheat and chaff,  
I bide between two stones.

Because I'm made of air,  
I've had to learn to share.  
Because I'm made of darkness,  
I rely on others' prayers.

Because I'm made of off-cuts,  
I must write my own story.  
Because I'm made of light,  
I will not ration my glory.

## Tom Thumb Visits the Crichton Institution for Lunatics

23 FEBRUARY 1845

It's a fine afternoon, almost on the edge of spring, when General Tom Thumb draws up before Crichton Hall. His equipage, which wins the first applause of the day, consists of a miniature chariot drawn by Felabella ponies, the smallest in the world, attended by an elfin coachman.

The cold sun shines on the tips of the General's shoes, where they edge out beneath the cats' tongues of his spats. It picks out the brass of the ponies' bridles and the sheen on the chestnut buds. Each sticky bud, before it bursts, will be fatter than the General's fists are now.

For three years, P. T. Barnum has honed Thomas Stratton's talents for this tour. The little General, now seven, has mastered the singing of songs in character (a *Havana Exquisite*, *One of the B'hoys*) and the dancing of the polka and the hornpipe. In costume, he will posture for you as Napoleon Bonaparte or Frederick the Great.

He arrives at the Crichton newly anointed as the rage of London society, having received no less than two audiences with the young Queen. Moreover, he's charmed gifts from the English nobility—from Queen Dowager Adelaide, a dainty gold watch and chain, made expressly for his use; from his Grace, the Duke of Devonshire, a jewelled gold snuff box.

In the recreation room, sun slants onto the stage from high windows, as if this were a cruise ship, freighted with misery, open to the unhindered light of the sea. The little sea-legs jig and the large head tops one more sloping-shouldered costume. The crowd—eighty-nine patients in all—watches, as attentive as any the General has known. Meanwhile Superintendent Dr William Browne and his attendants watch the crowd; for this is an anthropological regime, thirsty for knowledge.

Writing of the event in his annual report, Dr Browne's tone betrays some satisfaction that his patients showed more perspicacity than the cream of London society—and no doubt the