

Zeppelins

CHRIS McCABE was born in Liverpool in 1977. His poetry has featured in a number of magazines including *Magma* and *Poetry Review*. His first collection *The Hutton Inquiry* was published in 2005 of which *The Guardian* said 'Chris McCabe's debut is shorter than Hutton's original report, but still an impressively inventive survey of the uses of English in the early 21st century . . . the whole book zooms by sparking with spot-on phrases'. He has discussed and read his poetry on BBC World Service, featured a poem on the Oxfam CD *Lifelines* and performs his work regularly. He currently works as a Librarian at The Poetry Library, London.

Also by Chris McCabe

The Hutton Inquiry (Salt, 2005)

Zeppelins

CHRIS McCABE



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For my wife Sarah, and son Pavel

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Some of these poems have been read and discussed on BBC World Service and Resonance FM. Thanks go to Tom Chivers, James Wilkes and Vincent Dowd. Thanks go to Roddy Lumsden, and to Sarah, for proofreading and advice.

A Proposal

There was a night before a day with no rent when I spoke softly in your ear as you slept: *one day we will get married*. I have never told you this. The heatwave brings out what the winter kept hid. The most extreme since 1911 when *The Times* at last stopped listing the heat-stifled dead. East London was putrid in trapped tanks of air & as the women joined their men marching on Trafalgar Square the open sky was a massive success, a freedom worth fighting for. Those in Liverpool walked out in sympathy & opened the kegs they had lugged for years to drink the contents on the streets. Tomorrow you might walk on as an extra in the film of *Brick Lane*—relocated to Turnpike—& the money you make will go into the fund for the plans we make. Reading John James in bed I am starting to believe that I am here again. You say you are hot but wrap your legs into mine, well there's nothing the breeze from Shoeburyness—through the curtains and over the dresser—can do about that. *I can't wait for our future together* you say, but when does it start? The night it happened, two weeks ago, I was no more aware of what I was going to say than *would you like more wine?* Ness, our time was then. The kestrel had cut its own shape against the sky like a tattoo on the retina—hovered with no wind—& as the bats, like burned swifts, tried to skirt the subject it was too late: the stars had already put us on the map. *Very quietly & very secretly should we get married?* Between us a glance of vitreous success that wanted to last, as if this piece of Dagenham grass would be our legacy. We waited, holding hands, for the first show of fox. Dogs barked & plotted out the silent tracks she made. Imagined fox gave way to fox—swift on the outhouse, feral, musically-ribbed—all was perfect *this* as she passed. Mongrel Max clambered his trampoline & scared her off. Midnight we found the doors but the walls were too thick—accustomed as we were to the poise of night our home seemed docile, an oafish fist of brick. We went to bed & the rest is this: a cost of one hundred pounds, a catalogue dress at

two pounds sixty for 52 weeks. Last night I dreamt us a thumbnail baby with no rollover link but as we looked close we were so pleased with the breaths that it took. Ness, I think we are starting now. Don't tell anyone until the Summer's gone.

The Mananger

after The Brothers Karamazov

Dolphins are the Osmonds of the sea
the Mananger said & introduced his sons:
Benneth, Billip, Barreth & Whillip.
During the Summer they support Sunderland
and in Winter, Arsenal. It was October
so their bannered scarves said Arseland.

They had travelled to this festival to watch
Jack Clown & the Whites: the quietest
karaoke in town. Whillip asks for an oyster
and ends with a clam in his palm. Look,
there, in the moo-tent, he mutters—an upturned
motherfucker of pink & yellow udder.

Barreth is first to become romantically attached
despite being only seventeen with a comb-over,
he attracts interest as he puts forward his theory
on an unknown species capable of the Pregnant
Foetus. Disgusting, says Mananger: wash your
vowelly mouth out with consonants.

Benneth & Billip sit themselves under a tree
and look up—the first carousel they ever
knew has a whoosh in the trees—it swirls
childhoods of pink & purple paisley.

Whillip thinks: my brothers will be made to pay for this.

101 Differences Between Poetry and Popular Music

after Tom Leonard

Nobody queues up all night to get tickets for a poetry reading.

I don't remember carving the names of my favourite poets into a desk at school.

No one shouted 'Judas' when Geoffrey Hill dropped the end-rhymes from his poems.

I can't recall the last time I had a drawn-out discussion about the *concept* of a poetry book.

The greatest praise you can give to a lyricist is that their work is 'pure poetry'.

The greatest praise you can give to a poet is that their work aspires towards the tonal qualities of music.

If T. S. Eliot had said that he was bigger than Jesus this would have had more to do with an inflated sense of the self than actual sales of *The Waste Land*.

The song happens only when it is played, the poem sits patiently and waits ('You're frozen, when your heart's not open').

The emotional-time aspect of poetry is in that life is continually passing in all the time you don't visit the poem. With music, your life sits squat as the song joyrides past: if you miss a description of its face, it is gone for good ('past the leisure centre, left at the lights').

Music acts as a mnemonic for the moment. Poetry forgets the details of its genesis, hence the *Lost Quotations* board.

If you want to read something that justifies the speed, energy, violence, contradictions and innovations of popular music then you read the prose of Paul Morley. If you want to read something that justifies the speed, energy, violence, contradictions and innovations of contemporary poetry then you read the prose of Andrew Duncan. Paul Morley appears on *Newsnight Review*, Andrew Duncan doesn't.

For the question 'how far can music go & still be called music' you could assemble a party of willing explorers to set out on the road of discovery. Although the outcome of this would be similar for poetry, you would have walked that road alone.

When rolling a narcotic cigarette on a vinyl sleeve it is impossible not to comment on the association between the artistic quality of that sleeve and the drug experience itself (*Dark Side of the Moon*; *Electric Ladyland* etc). In Amsterdam as you were preparing to roll I handed you Robert Creeley's *Later* and you said 'great, a hardback.'

A record that skips is similar to being interrupted time after time on the same line of poetry

A record that skips is similar

Poem

learn to touchtype
don't

trees bold
as Kandinsky's horses

don't learn
to touchtype

kebab spat
& whistled: fox

waited, learn to touch
urban, lean

lights green
eyed, hunger

hands
touchstones

exit paws
across wet stones

bold, bold as
touchtype

How can a black butterfly make me think
Merchant Navy?



THE MORNING

A wedding gift of Chatterton's poems
what a day for this last will—
Mad Genius
of Powerful Utterance
leaving in jest
his last five pounds

How could he prepare to die so young
when we are only just beginning?



Two fat shoehorn crows
Doormen
Batmen
A Toastmaster General

They have no place at our door today



The local surgery doesn't scare me
a black cab in a drive
like a commitment
a slab of our history

As in *The Graduate*
here's our bus to the Registry



AT THE SEA

Does anyone eat seagulls?

Don't eat *anything*
that eats *anything*



Christ with a kite

Cormorant



Leigh-on-sea
on the Lower Thames

road too far to the next bar



Untie the wedding shoes
after Shoeburyness
Barking
Leigh-on-sea
Upminster
Romford

loose laces swirl
but won't bed down
like the *C* in *Chris*
and the *S* in *Sarah*
now in the register



THE HONEYMOON

Barcelonians at the bar
like prairie dogs
in the sawdust

Doors open on this day
orange slabs of light
like, You're welcome



snippets of language
strange to me

like that's your toe
just turned up
in Istanbul



getting ready together
now husband & wife

eyeliner applied
legs of cicadas

I turn my head to shave
a simple, thinking bird

it is as if we are trying
to create just one person

for us to call *a special night*
just one person

You look so beautiful to me



A certain blue in early Picasso
in a shirt, a cardigan

caught the eye & took over
all he saw

azure, aqua, seagreen
in every angle of waves

more waves of angles
and every one of them blue



Off The Ramblas
The Queen Vic pub
with Fosters on tap

fin-de-siecle lamp-posts
stuck in kitchen tiles—

free sambuca shots
when you hand in *this*



PICASSO

nostrils of a bull
nose of a boxer.

buxom women.
bricks. boxes.



911

Relive the memories
live on CNN
in hotels across each continent
in all states of mind



Spanish guitarist's fingers like a family
happy on different days
together at different times

pick & peak in their own lived timelines



In the sea at San Sebastian
a silver fish with a black spine
caught & cupped in my palms

gone before it was digitised



at seven euro a wife can watch her man
enjoy ma-saa-gee
a 'nice cold beer' shafted in the sands
for six euros less



Rammstein followed us around hotel rooms
once with flags, now wearing masks—
Rosenrot means Rose of Red



Pablo we followed all that happened
from 1881 to 1917
and just when what you would think would take place
at that time, our ticket must have expired
and we arrived at 1963
when what you did was what you signed
beautiful, big, majestic
and yours by virtue of being too much of it



Can there ever be too much of this?



Go commando on the metro
the only eye that will know
is mine, kindly, from behind



MIRÓ

When more than one person
take in an exhibition together
there is always one that talks
while the others try to learn—

See how this one differs
gouache-drawing, text & numbers
Nineteen Thirty Four



moon & bird & woman & stars & sun & bird & moon & sun
& stars & woman & sun & bird & stars & moon & sun &
moon & woman & bird & stars . . .



The bird that nests in the fingers in flower
now we're talking poetry before we've taken in the power
before us—how you respected the poet's strength to evoke
like this:



Which I call *Personage Painting No. 1*



George Brecht dreamt mushrooms in his legs
now everywhere above us
like Plato's tables on the Nue de la Ramblas
in yellow & blue kitchen tiles
as if streets are the forbidden places we heard of as kids



I write each night
as you take your bath

the poured rioja
connects us together—

'We're having a great holiday
aren't we?'



MIRÓ'S SCULPTURES

alien-beasts
in monochrome

doe-eyed
moonheads—

which way do you look
when you don't know

where they came from?
So ask the question:

How can I understand you?



the smell of the sea
on your skin—

as today your breasts
(can I say this) poured out

to the beach at
San Sebastian

eyes saw more than they
could hold

like Aphrodite was back
against the tide of fashion

a shell in your hand
innocently to show me

with more inside
than today can hold



hands swirl
for shells—
fish euros



Lorca in the light rocks:
shifting shells of these days.

Falco in the *Hard Rock*:
Rock Me Amadeus.



Hard Rock logo
a skeleton with missing teeth—

were they lost in life
or some time after?

So long the body must last



Like a BA advert when we get back—
a familiar door like finding new things to say—
we will be hungry & tired & married