

Nowhere's Far

PHIL BOWEN was born in Liverpool in 1949 where he taught Drama until 1979. During the eighties he was a publican in several outlets throughout the West Country. Since 1994 he has been a freelance writer, performer, occasional broadcaster and teacher, working in over four hundred schools in more than thirty counties as a writer-in education. He lives in Newlyn in Cornwall.

Also by Phil Bowen

POETRY

The Professor's Boots (1994)

That was Peter Glaze (1994)

Variety's Hammer (1997)

Starfly (2004)

AS EDITOR

Jewels and Binoculars (1993): poetry about Bob Dylan

Things We Said Today (1995): poetry about The Beatles

PROSE

A Gallery to Play to (1999, 2008): the story of the Mersey Poets

DRAMA

A Handful of Rain

A Case of the Poet

Parlez Vous Jig Jig

Anything but Love

Nowhere's Far

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS 1990–2008

PHIL BOWEN



CAMBRIDGE

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Contents

<i>from</i> THE PROFESSOR'S BOOTS (1994)	1
Which Poet	3
About Larkin	5
Popping Her Cork	6
Take a Dream	7
The Professor's Boots	9
The Lad Himself	11
Releasing The Dots	13
<i>from</i> THAT WAS PETER GLAZE (1994)	15
Timing	17
The Poetry of Babies	18
Girl on a Bike	19
<i>from</i> VARIETY'S HAMMER (1997)	21
Elvis Meets Hitler	23
The Tree in the Disco	25
Chubby's Turn	27
Corrected	29
Behind the Landsdown	30
What's the Darkness For?	32
Enough Said	33
Torn	34
Menace	35
Frank's Old Mansion	36
What the Scarecrow Saw	38
Building Sight	39
When it Was Woven	40
What a Little Scarecrow Can Do	41

Worth a Shout	42
Cinders and Song	44
By a Cornish Bungalow	45
Stopping in Time	46
Kestrel Rock	47
Finding the Mermaid	48
Legoverland	49
Gallery	50
Sticks and Pipes	51
What was Underground	52
The Miss Garveys	53
Concrete Lace	54
Clock Life	55
How it Went	56
Thirteen in Sixty-Three	58
There's a Place	59
Leaving Mum	61
What it Means	62
Coping With It	63
Dearly	64
Another Woman	66
Going	67
<i>from STARFLY (2004)</i>	69
Starfly	71
The Passenger Twin	73
A Place Named Ask	74
Behind the Lines	77
A Little Chat	79
No Question	80
Dying's Hard	81

The Time Being	82
When it Was the Ace of Clubs	83
Anyone Who's Anyone	84
Stardom	85
The Old Matinees	86
Tragedy	88
The Blue Hand	89
The Cameo Killer	90
No More Mr Nice Guy	92
Hats Day	94
Blue Docs	95
Can Birds Sing Over the Sky	96
That's Nothing	97
The Prince's Love Song	98
Moonlight on the River	100
Fresh	101
Heartscript	102
Love Somehow	103
In Powys With You	104
Don't Touch Blood	105
Wondering Why	107
What It Takes	108
The Whole of the Town	109
The Town Without Television	110
Survival	111
Slang	112
Soon	114
The End of Ink Street	115
NEW POEMS	117
Nowhere's Far	119

No Doubt	122
An Awful Thought	123
Like Poetry	125
Out of Time	126
A Good Road for Ships	127
Lost and Found	128
There Again	130
No Wonder	131
The Hell of It	132
In the First Place	133
Mister White	135
In my Own Light	136
This is the Door	137
By Chance	142
Cloud Nine	143
A Peck of Dirt	144
When the Field Commander Comes	145
In the Air	146

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from The Professor's Boots (1994)

Which Poet

- Which poet
Measured out his life with coffee spoons
- Which poet
Sat in one of the dives on Fifty- Second Street
- Which poet
Caught morning's minion kingdom
- Which poet
Sailed to Byzantium
- Which poet
Reached a profound, dull tunnel
- Which poet
Saw some blessed Hope
- Which poet
Had promises to keep
- Which poet
Counted the slow heart beats
- Which poet
Was blown hither and thither
- Which poet
wrote everything small
- Which poet
Was prince of the apple towns
- Which poet
Entered a cloud
- Which poet
Was summoned by bells
- Which poet
Squinnied for a sign
- Which poet
Believed in snake
- Which poet
Believed in Crow
- Which poet
Was a smiling woman

Which poet
Was much too far out

Which poet
Put his queer shoulder to the wheel

Which poet
Got tangled up in blue

Which poet
Was served tea and oranges

Which poet's
Piano had been drinking

Which poet
Spent summer with Monika

Which poet
Found a small dragon

Which poet
Saw the entry of Christ into Liverpool

Which poet
Got told lies about Vietnam

Which poet
Could see the quality of Sprawl

Which poet
Was evidently in Chicken Town

Which poet
Was sometimes warming her pearls

Which poet
Sometimes did this, sometimes did that

Which poet
Sometimes saw trivial things...

About Larkin

I always loved Larkin
(Excuse the pun),
Of that 'seeming three'
It was always him for me—
Ahead of Gunn or Hughes—
In a voice you thought you knew or trusted,
Somehow thought you may even use.

And the mistake that TV expose made
About what a bigot he was—
Ending up stewed with all his pet hates,
Was to play that melancholy voice
Just once too often—then that shot on the bike
By the church—the clincher—those cycle clips;
You know he's one of the greats.

Yeah man!—he'd probably agree
With those little critics who found him
So boringly gentile—mainstreaming
On booze, Bechet and Beiderbeckes:
I can see his face squinnying through the fringes
On the sleeve of 'With the Beatles'—
That second LP after they invented sex.

Popping Her Cork

For Dorothy Fields

Who could write
'I Won't Dance', 'Exactly like You'
and rhyme like Lorenz Hart
out of the blue
smoke of an unfinished cigar
which curls in The Cotton
right through the joint,
from The Fandango Ballroom
the Shuberts built on West 44th,
to the couple outside Tiffany's,
so 'awf'ly low',
the dream in *her* eyes
as wide as their side of the street
for the sparkler he can't buy her
like 'dem swells in the Ritz:
I can't give you anything but love Lindy',
before Lindy became 'baby',
became Dorothy Fields' first gem
in her parade of hits.

And if the bust of Wagner
on Kern's piano don't like it—
it don't mean a thing!
the great Jerome—
one of the 'men of distinction' she wrote with—
finally planted his European foot
next to the American one,
teaching the ace lady writer
how to waltz in the morning,
—while at night honey—
she taught that son-of-a-bitch how to swing.

Take a Dream

For Tommy

Take a card.
Any card.
Now eat it!

Ha ha ha!

I had a very strange dream last night
ladies and gentlemen

(Thank you)

Is that your dream?
Have a look in there.

Ha ha ha!

I'll show you this trick
ladies and gentlemen.

Dream Life

Life Dream

Like that.
Not like that!
Like that!

Or was it like that?

Ha ha ha!

I dreamt I was awake last night
ladies and gentlemen

I dreamt I was awake
and when I woke up I was

dead . . .

Ha ha ha!

(Thank You)

The Professor's Boots

For Max Wall

Behind Variety's dust-bitten drapes
where the wide-mouthed frog marches,
ogling dames, dwarfs and dancers,
Wallofski's piano-lid flattens a flea,
Chopin shudders,
Liszt is dug up in the time it takes to unwrap a flute,
Vaudeville bumps and grinds to Burlesque,
handbalancers and wire acts cling to their claps,
an eccentric-legged clown drops a clanger:

*We've 'ad 'em all 'ere
But comparisons are Odeon!*

Lights are coming on in the pubs and clubs,
let-downs being built up to twice-nightly in Batley
and in the time it takes to drag out Mother Goose
the cracked mirror lipsticks a grin.

Headwig in a box,
tailtights tied to the rail,
arms different lengths,
rest of him
hanging in a wardrobe
feet waiting for the drum.

And downstage
dangling out of Beckett's tree,
the Professor's boots
split sides,
kick shadows off the end of the pier,
where waves applaud the funny walks of crabs,
past acts polished in Mrs Cravat's theatrical digs—
old stars kept shining
steps scrubbed
and tumble

towards a final lodging

We've 'ad 'em all 'ere

Dan Leno Grock Grimaldi

Wilson, Keppel and Betty

Nat Jackley!

But you're a bit of a lad Max

God what you'd do just for a laugh

The Lad Himself

The sight of Archie Andrews
on his dressing-room hook

gave Hancock nightmares for years:

‘Oh we’ve got a comedian here tonight
— laugh—oh dear—oh he’s terrific,
— really worth seeing he is.

Culture mate,

that’s where the hope of the world lies

— I’m an artist, mush
and tonight you’re getting the lot!’

Out there
beyond the dust of stars,
overcoats, old props and cuttings,
a hatstand snaps on the Palladium mat.
The top of the bill is telling shadows.

‘What d’you mean you’ve never heard of George Arliss?
He’s only been dead forty years!
I’m not a layabout. I’m an artist mush
and tonight you’re getting the lot.’

(After the egg commercials, after the pilchards . . .

the shadow of his hat is the talk of the town
where words clench to walls, cringe,
allow funny things to happen . . .)

‘No I’m not King Lear!
And not that fuckin’ dummy either!
I’m an artist mush
and tonight

(laugh—oh dear—
yes, terrific—really)
tonight . . . tell them . . .
tell them things seemed to go wrong too many times
tell them I'm swallowed up
tell them I'm hooked
tell them h——half . . .'

(do do do do do dooo . . .)

Releasing The Dots

Fit as the lodging-house cat,
Fizzmelarious in a funfair suit,

Ken Dodd

tickles the Bogeyman,
makes him wait in the wings
with the tatty dancers,
the duckers and doodles and dots of Doddland—
he knew the last war was going to be serious—
walked past Vera Lynn's house—heard her gargling!

By Jove! What a beautiful day!

What a beautiful day for ramming a cucumber
down next-door's letter-box and shouting out:
'Wake up missus, the Martians have landed!'

He ricochets around the Bogeyman,
discomknockerates the Bogeyman,
tickles his taboos:

'Seven laughs a minute
in the fast lane missus
for these few quid!

D'you give in?'

For these few quid,
it's the fool in the dock;
Pagliacci's tears wet in the wings,
bursting banks, raining wet echoes
down Broken Biscuit Street—
Ken's nest eggs coming to boil under the bedstead,
asleep inside his hat.

He declared the lot in Andover!

Did he?

No Doddy!

Tickled the taxman under the circumstances.

D'you give in?

When love is the sound of a clown's violin,
a funny new world taps its feet in the wings,
while this man with his tickling stick,
his plumptious, clapped-out, chuffed finales
 these few odds and ends
that never stop that lot laughing lots,
chucks chuckles through Aladdin's window
 releases all the dots

from That Was Peter Glaze (1994)