

Poetry Series

Frank Bana
- poems -

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* What It's About *

'You are very young for hip replacements'. I've heard this several times. Reminds me

How I was too young for Botswana and Uni
And for the girls I wanted badly then
I was always travelling a little ways ahead
But now I'm slowing down it seems, body not quite what it was
And I'm not sure who'll reach the line, first, most out of breath,
Life, or me, or death.

My infant girl fought her way
Out of the oxygen tent
I sat in the soft chair with my book and the tubes
Poured coloured liquids in my chest, each week for seven months
Until at last the fever fell and strength came back
We went to dances, parties, seaside towns
For the beaches and fish restaurants
Went South for sunshine and came through
You shouted at my dreams,
I was afraid of you.

She still believes in tooth fairies
Is not so sure about Santa Claus
And I feel proud as she goes out to meet the school bus with her pack
You still believe in family and no-one touches me
I don't believe in deity, specifically the God of Israel, who stayed out on furlough
All through the Holocaust. My sole belief
Is in the love and tenderness I know.

Dreaming of flame lillies and flame trees, the fires in the desert
Blooming white like tumours far beneath the plane
Crop circles green in morning light, watered by tall centrifuge machines
Watching the Delta swell from its umbilicus, its river vein for a new season

you are absent in those bloody dreams, you say. It's not about all that, I cry
It's how the Delta drains into the desert. How it becomes its Omega
And where the herons and fish-eagles go to live
When the wet blue season leaves to die.

Frank Bana

8 Kids A Day

Taken away
Not educated
Clothed or fed
Let out to play
Or tucked in bed
8 kids a day
Allowed to bleed
From shattered bones
And screaming wounds
8 kids a day
Are blown away
Deprived of love
Removed from life
Exiled without
A word to say
Mourned where they stood
Burned where they lay
8 kids a day
Killed by the hands
That hold the guns
Since Newtown
In the USA

Frank Bana

A Distillation...

Our poem is a distillation
wrung from common and raw elements
unhusked grains of experience

drops for the journey's flask
caught from barely accessible slopes
of a deep desert well

sweet syrups tapped
from the surface of a long-lived tree
risen darkly from the hidden roots

poetry a hard-won slight reward
preserved, patrolled and guarded
once captured, always held

these works are power for their defenders
like a proof of science
which cannot be unfounded

I laboured most of my life
fifty years and maybe more to learn
to sift so lightly the dirt and stones

and urge to surface from the mass
one translucent gem or two
that could defy for us the vice of time.

Frank Bana

A Gloss On Love's Pavilion

PK Page, Love's Pavilion
Poetry as brilliance
Oh why should I write poetry?

I must write it differently
I will build a little altar
Wearing these inscriptions
In the dark of this pavilion
To which my heart is drawn
As a filing to earth's core

Inferior as poetry
Grossly, indisputably
Yet a noble piece of me
Pathetic simultaneously

I will sketch it quietly
Like a mouse on tiptoes
Sniffing round the vast borders
Of Love

My own fragile pavilion
Out here in the snow
Expecting rain, and tempest
To rattle struts and bones
And blow the construct down
Around me, all around

I am in a garden
It is England and the dawn
Appears in time, a shy feline
And flowers grace the garden
I drink coffee and sunlight brings
A calm after the midnight storm

I gather up the pieces, sure
We are not scattered anymore
We said 'unconditional'
As we walked by, and even though

Conditions would appear
Clement or unfavourable

Love is not lost forever
The word of Love is never

When its first shelter is blown down
It remains, there at the place
When one and one in Love
Were found
Insisting to be raised again

And I, like any other one
In semi-conscious obsession
Walk back and forth
Upon this ground
Where once I walked with you

Where Love was found
Newly inscribed
And entered our possession.

Frank Bana

A Merry Carnival

Some poems are love songs
And can even be sung
Some are praises to love
All its glory and cost
Or personal enquiries
To those who are lost

I have songs that give praise
But this song laments
I have poems for loving
But this poem complains
Of Americopia, where consumers spend
Afflicted by thirst, without solace from pain

A Merry Carnival
Whose show cannot end
This Americomedy
Its laughter undressed
By those calling for peace
And working for rest

The Americarnivore
Plays at love like a beast
The Americatastrophe
In implacable haste
Addicted to plunder
Lays its heroes to waste.

Some songs are praise poems
To heroines and gods
Which celebrate mortals
With barely-heard cries
At the well of the throat
Where redemption lies

And at the firm juncture
Of a shoulder and hand
Tracing the crossroads
With delicate allure

The poems are recited
The songs raised once more.

Frank Bana

A Song Of Her Garden

She builds her pleasant garden
Where the winds are not so strong
The sun sometimes relenting
Becomes her companion

The garden spreads its arms to her
Thick shoulders, fragile hands
The creepers and the vines that bear
Her flowers from many lands

There is shade upon her shadow
And a path of leaves and stones
That were inlaid imperceptibly
Through years of life alone

There's a trickle of river water
Breaking on a precipice
An ornately painted corner
Where she sees the light of bliss

Papaya trees and lemon trees
That the hurricanes forgot
The garden is her mirror
It reflects her, then does not

Wind chimes in the moonlight
Songbirds awake till dawn
She cultivates the seasons,
Leaves the garden to be born.

Frank Bana

A Space Beautiful

I sleep in a beautiful structure
After years of apartment life
My child shies from all flying insects
My wife says there's mice and there's bees
But the sun pokes its face through the skylight
And the wind plays among the tall trees.

When dawn comes to wake the horizon
The brown deer come closer to graze
There's basketball in the back garden
And soccerball in the front drive
So much green, so intense and inviting -
It reminds you of being alive.

There's a place to set up the computer
And a porch to write poems alone
With a chair for the weary commuter
To stretch out his limbs and to moan
And even though it's only rented
It's a space beautiful to the senses -
I could almost think of it as home.

Frank Bana

A Strange Day

A storm broke at dawn

Trees on the power lines

Buildings were falling on the track

I was accused of raising Cuba

I never talk of Cuba

Let the Cubans take it back

A small two-legged man

Walked a big three-legged dog

He was whistling a canine master's blues

I looked down at his feet

I noticed I was wearing

Two very different kinds of shoes.

That strange kind of day -

Let it happen, let it flow

It's bound to leave you stranded anyway.

A Tiny Echo Of America

America, why do you lock up millions of your young for enjoying just a little weed?

America, is this what you really long for?

America, why do you force dying old people to live and suffer, distressing and bankrupting their families for want of a shot of euthanasia?

America, why do you load your eager young learners with debt-for-life administered by heartless profit corporations?

America, is this is the path to full employment?

America, why do you keep your working class just one moment away from the loss of income medical insurance and shelter?

Is this your way of earning confidence in your compassion?

America, why do you think it fine for pupils, schools to fail, side by side with those who are educated and educating for success?

Is this the one nation which your God must rule?

America, why are children who have rights so threatening, when your sacred documents written by ancient men say everyone is born with inalienable ones?

America I don't want to give you my daughters.

In fairness I do embrace your postage stamps proclaiming 'Equality. Forever'. A rare sighting of your gift for irony.

America, why based on ancient documents do you uphold the right of evil or deranged individuals to arm themselves to kill whomever they please with weapons of unprecedented destructive power and then demonize anyone who calls, hey, for just a little restriction?

America, is this is your hilarious version of the prisoners' dilemma. An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind.

America, you've been dreaming of black helicopters again.

America, why do you ignore and falsify and undermine with lies, the evidence of human discovery concerning climate instability and the evolution of our species?

One nation united under whom, America?

America, why do you have a creepy shining eye on your paper money? Why are there no sidewalks? Why are you allergic to trains?

America, why do your politicians obey their corporate underwriters before the public, their party, their leaders, their constituents and their human conscience? And why do your corporations have the power to block, subvert and destroy any bit of legislation that is in the public good, example, access to generic drugs, example, protection of children from violent videos and soda machines in schools?

Are your all corporate leaders childless?

America. Let's not get started on your financial sector.

Why do you think you can invade foreign countries, America? Because you can?
And torture prisoners held without trial? Oh. Because you can.
America, you are full of Christians who fear the Golden Rule.
Heaven is New Jersey, my friends. Kabul is but a dream.
America, why are your little ones raped by priests? Why do your priests not kneel
to justice?
Really, America. You think you're the greatest. You're the Cassius Clay of
nations.
America, when will you stop fighting the Civil War? When will democracy really
come?
Do you remember how the West was won?
America, it's time for some more Amendments.
America, when will you learn the words to Blowin' in the Wind?
Why did Woody Guthrie die alone?
I don't want to die alone. Not with you.
America, why are all your Presidents male straight non-atheist?
America, what killed the Kennedys?
Why are your Kindles full of tears?
America, do you know this poem is a tiny echo of Allen Ginsberg?
Americans, why don't you know?
Americans, you all look like black people, poor people, Hispanics, homosexuals,
Muslims, immigrants, cripples and Jews.
I'm sorry, Americans. You are only people. I believe in you. You'll work it
through.

Frank Bana

Abilities

I sat next to a blind young man
His hands upon a coffee cup and cane
The train lurched through the morning air
Sunlight danced across his face

No newspaper at his side
No handheld device, well-dressed
Like the businessmen. What thoughts,
Assumptions floated in his mind?
To what was he resigned?

Sitting arm-to-arm, I visualised
How the world is built around
Designs made by the powerful
With all their senses in command
Their corridors, well-sized machines
To ease and entertain.

I wondered how a one-handed man
Or a woman with a broken arm
Could boot up the computer
With the three requisite keys
Of Alt, Control, Delete, must she
Synchronise her good hand with her feet?

I should give thanks, obviously
And take a deep, refreshing drink
Of my younger brother's perspective:
A semi-abled architect
Ejected from a cinema
For lying in the centre aisle
Unable to sit upright in his seat.

The upright world, visual empire
Media authorities
Drown out the silence, rituals
That patronise the veterans
Of Wars of Disability.

He yawns and drains the coffee cup
I'm certain he can read
Every word I'm writing through
His super-sensory evolved
Powers of receptivity.

Now I am yawning too. Does he disapprove?
I dare not eat my bagel, sure
He knows my every move.

Frank Bana

About The War Poem

This poem is about
The impossibility of writing
A poem about the war

Now don't go getting disappointed
You probably know everything
You really need to know
About the war

There's nothing more a poem could tell
Than what's in the lines of the dailies
That you read between so carefully

Nothing I could show you
That you haven't seen already
In your nightmare dreams or when
Your eyes are open

Nor could I shed enlightenment
On all the things we may not be
At liberty to mention

The silent tortured prisoners
Assassinations, smears and lies
And all the secret crimes
You know are passing by

There are some more events of war
Give me a minute to recall
I'm a little sleep-deprived

I learned with snakes and scorpions
Don't threaten them or step on them
It works with all kinds of people too

I know there is no other side
Everyone is born a child
The other side is only in the mind

I hear justice is on our side
It's somewhere here apparently
Check in your back pocket for me please

Well if it could, the poem would claim -
Before the subject's forced to change -
That peace is firmly on our side

Peace, well there's a useful thought.
I'm sure that we all could run with that.
This is no more a poem
About a poem about the war.

Frank Bana

After The War.....

Never forget how peace awaited you,
the joy you felt, the passion that you made
as Yankee tanks rolled down your streets
and shook your bedposts thunderously.

Or was it you? The nightmares fade
as window shards on cobbles laid,
glinting in the newborn sun
by stones once thrown to bring them down.

The ships were hunted too, sunken and drowned
their cargo holds of refugee
humanity capsized too far offshore, lost to
the promised lands, but not erased
from history, the sins of the descendants and
surviving few are never washed to sea.
For history will not forget so soon.

For me, the Shofar's calling, its caress
upon the curves of Pomeranian hills, the trysts
the magical, unfettered hours with you, but now
pleasure is scarce, and one must pay
in currency of life's regret

the moments have to find their end, our lives
tied to the ruined plough that furrows on
the fields we sowed. We can't forget
the love we made
in war's confine.

Frank Bana

After-Taste

... taste of a kiss, it lingers, like a syrup
on the edge of lips, like a harsh insight
that burns a slow void, on the fingertips, to depths
unknown at first, in flesh parts of the heart

... of an addictive brew, expressed from beans
picked broken-back from Wollo province slopes
blended with fruits of fire islands, desert capes
with hopes of energy, teasing the nerves

... of instants where eyes meet, alight with thirst
inquisitive for love, when bodies pass
each other on the street, the frisson sighs
vitality, regrets the moment lost

... of ginger root, the bracing bitterness
as partners bite too deep, the spice
lifting their lives from dark low-lying fog
the boredom, sour at night, infusing them

... it may be a mistake, but not too late
the taste of first attraction, open rush
and falling heat can still be felt, like tamarind
a trace upon the tongue, savoured again.

Frank Bana

Almost 21

A slim boy wearing summer clothes
Bare feet like cat's paws on the paving stones
Steps around last night's broken glass
Guitar in hand, heading for the busking site
Where the traffic never gets too loud
To play for tourist passers-by
For the drunkards on the benches
Where they pass their waking hours.

Becoming less boyish
Watching the summer's progress
Examinations done
Living in cloisters built centuries ago
For five-foot boys and men
All he had learned in recent years
Summarized in a fist of index cards.

Now he learns more by watching the town
An accelerated documentary of change
That overturns the marble statutes
And the old ideas of restraint
How amazing, just a few years
Of cultural fire up-ends it all.
He too is straining for expansion and change
A child of the universe after all.

When the songs in the guitar case have been sung
He goes looking for paperbacks of Descartes and Locke
And calls up ethicists, modern empiricists
From the depths of the Bodlean
He grasps at their schemes for a month or two
And then lets them loose for all time to come.

Walking at dawn in wet grass by the river
Around the ethnographic museum
Where the punt boats rock, tethered, half-asleep
He fully expects to meet
Strange mythic creatures at every turn.

Where will I go, he asks the inner sky,
What could be more perfect than this?
There are sometimes a few
Perfect moments in life
And this is one of his.
Higher education lies ahead,
Higher visions and dreams
To be found, without doubt
To be fought for and earned
Within the world of work.

This English summer, where the evening light lingers
Will survive in his memory all the time he is free
England's summer is fickle
Beloved and brief
Just as lives can be.

Frank Bana

America Under The Boardwalk

The boardwalk quivers, carousel lights go out
Jesus in sand guarded by the devout
Summer crowds jostle by the ocean side
Kids scream for tickets to the carnival ride
Young men hustling their blonde-haired prizes
Seniors try on new ages and sizes
Tongues pierced, arms and buttocks tattooed
With the first names of dreams that were never pursued
Every spirit hungry for something to eat
Ghosts, clapboard houses lining the street

Have your name engraved on a small silver cross
For a country whose prophets are more than its loss.
Have your name inscribed on a small rice grain.
The old wild America will be rising again.

It lingers like incense, ducking for cover
It will not be censored like the words of a lover
Hiding under the boardwalk, waiting out summer nights
Chewing funnel cake, taffy in faint autumn light
Until soldiers come home, hang up leather boots
Its untamed spirit will water the roots
Of a tree that the war has left shaken and hollow
No fences protecting, no leaders to follow
What they thought to command will reward them with pain
Until old wild America rises again.

Have your name engraved on a small silver dime
In a land where the future cannot tell the time.
Have your name inscribed on a cold marble stone.
Until old wild America carries you home.

Frank Bana

American Lives

American lives
Are being wasted in Iraq.
It is entirely evident
Why, by whom
And how

But if you are a politician
In the USA
You have to issue an apology
If you utter the word 'wasted'
If you dare to voice the truth
At this late hour

It's like a fatal illness
For an imperial power
That can't bear to see the face
Of its own reality
To hear the dead and wounded
Lamenting the futility
After all this
Even now

Frank Bana

American Of The Century (For Bobcats Everywhere...)

A jackdaw wisdom, tight-lined mouth and hands
Fashioned a diamond gift for the burgeoning culture
Like an alchemist drawing elements from the soil, but not so base.

Borrowing himself from bluesmen, small-town owners of the road,
From Rambling Jack, from Whitman, Guthrie,
Thomas and Rimbaud. And Macon's finest too. Out of
Deepest Minnesota what would he choose himself to be?
The joker of the pack, claiming his slice of pie,
Convert-rabbi, neo-prophet, passing evangelist,
Unsentimental, unforeseen, unloved romanticist.
Wallflower gazer, laser, thrower of small verse grenades,
Painting threats of judgement in the mirrors
Of the mighty on the stolen hills.

A man too easy to dismiss, if not quite finally –
A contradicted, flawed, sometime-misogynist,
Ingenué, leaping the book from faith to faith.
However, when the time runs down
Those around may still recall all faith is one, a range
Of many a ledge and foothold. For those who have to climb.

Hibbing was once a mining town. Must have had fragments of sharp refrain
Floating in the post-war air, around the ears of teens and babes: Ma Rainey,
Mahalia,
Dock Boggs and Robert Johnson, all of the splendid choir. As the ore ran thin
A voice emerged that "could not sing", against a pounded piano, harp and buzzed
guitar.
And hit a chord of confluence that five decades would ring. Would seize
Its moment in the light of centre stage before an avalanche of dross
Would cover it again, but even then, left trace for anyone who cared.

Minstrel tunes, quick river songs. Railroad, fly tree, putdown songs,
Songs of desire, so numerous and singular that none in that haze century
Could interpret their plurality. You didn't dance
And if you had to learn the words, he offered you good luck.
No marketplace, no double-track, rolling his stone down a single rail.
The first rap: homesick blues. And songs to power brokers
From the highways, blacks and jews.

He fanned the flames of heroes, names among the brave:
Medger Evers, Emmett Till, Rubin Carter, Davey Moore,
George Jackson, Hattie Carroll, Lenny Bruce and Catfish.
He unlocked and protested love, that broken-glass illusion of what little
Might be saved. The light went down, cold beauty fell away, sensibility
Waned. But again it grew with age, thus he
Survives today, not castaway, his vinyl digitized.
You can check the bins and racks:
Data units in the aisles, blood spilt on the tracks.

For you who hire to dull the danger's edge
And promote disgrace of person for commercial gain
He must be but a cipher, puffed and lined, a talk-show face
Who cannot entertain, nor write a line of "poetry". But surely he can be
Another scripted product to put out on stage.

So how do you explain his undertow of fame? What he became, what is by him
defined,
The enigmatic resonance that is triggered by his name? He skipped your ropes,
Denounced your pride and kept a finger pointing through the mostly wasted
times,
Observed your game, defined it, clung to his control, his nose and inspiration
Clean and scarce and cold.

Camelot invaded Cuban dreams. Even Roosevelt, barred the immigrant doors.
Reagan sponsored terror on the poor and has his airport now. Nixon
And his shonda jew turned Cambodians to stone, until the long
Predicted night when war-masters stand naked too. Clinton played
The sax at least, while Carter something of his slow train knew.

He sure was a contender, although he was no MLK,
No Malcolm X, no Ali/Clay - but from his strings and keys there came
A steady wind and rain, hard as you knew sometimes,
The tears of rage, the grains of sand, the journeys through dark heat,
Some element in all his work that anyone could use.
Even in his watchtower, Hendrix found some blues.

They must have made a margin note when he broadsided in the Village
And declaimed on pawned-off murder at the DC freedom march.
They surely didn't scan the reality rides to Mobile.. Brownsville
Nashville.. London, an electric hawk.. Jerusalem and Japan.

Distilling lethal verses underground, his hidden basement flooded
With the lyric of the hills. Rolling thunder and the never-ending tour
With make-up, red bandana, cape and mercury.

OK, his book and movie bombed, close to incomprehensible
And perhaps his finest songs were not 10 minutes long, but 2.
But he left no profanity, nor gave a real dumb interview.
And so they underrated him – managed only just
To keep alive and lip-service his name,
Until confinement to the hall of fame.

This is a fading empire, where demons are within, and children
Unprotected from the false are turned to enmity and sin. Where flaws
In atoms of the soul are magnified, so we can hardly see
Into our own dark eyes.
We're watching through the rain, by rivers
Flowing slow. Taken disappearing – invited to confession,
To let the distant thunder waken us again.

And when the buried histories rise and echoes have endured,
And the ring of truth proves harder than the medals of disdain,
The American of the century, from whom nothing was owed,
Will be seen to have delivered on everyone he was.
The century? The 21st. In these impending years
The answers blowing in the wind will howl around our ears.

August-September 2000

Frank Bana

Angel Of Love

One day I felt the angel's hand
Brushing my cheeks, on a slow train
Watching the long-lived trees pass by
And homeless men out in the rain.

The many years sped down the line
She whispered small words that she gave
I knew she was a love divine
For any mortal would have stayed

And had much more to say; and now
She makes my wings lighter to bear
My spirit sheltered in this life
By certainty that she is there.

The angel's presence strays so far
By time and distance measuring
Until her light falls by my hands
And leads me to its treasuring.

Frank Bana

Apparitions

The eternal spirits pass us by
On their shooting pathways through the sky
From the starting-point of time
Since the moment they were born
On occasion they take earthly form
Appear as if before our eyes

Nothing less than terrified
Lives weighted by tablets of time
When the electric calendar starts
We cover up the smallest signs
Of darkness pounding in our hearts

Now if I had gone to Liverpool
Or stayed awhile in Newcastle
And there had practised poetry
Every day with ink and pen
Crouched in broken tenements
Asleep beside the railway stations

There might be doves atop Big Ben
These energies might now be clean
I might be in the slightest wise
Prepared to meet these apparitions

Frank Bana

As It Happens...

As it happens, I suppose
I am not gay, if it matters at all
And hold almost secret and certainly close
Each memory of you - knowing some
We share and some to me
Are singular, like those Joni Mitchell songs
I am better at singing

As you have guessed for sure
Your webs of poetry and lyric song
Still raise me to tears and reduce my heart
At least when you are on top of your game
And provide a pitch on which I can sing
Filled by your inspiration, to the brim

As it will surely be kept under wraps
I am not shy to tell you, here and now
How the kiss most dreamed of and remembered
Among the miles of smooth-cheeked kisses I've known
Was given and received in surprise
Between us in the guise of college men

Well let me thank you for all the women
You saved and stole from me, even marrying one -
So kind of you to take that load!
And if I ever crossed a movable line
I was proud to be your Jonathan. Besides,
Close friends hold hands in Africa

As now we run to catch the times
Your children grown and mine still young
I am less afraid to know my longings
To love you and be loved.
And as it all turned out, apparently
I was not gay but glad to say -
Simply, I am just a man
Who loved and loves you, many ways.

Asteroid Of Love

Like an asteroid
Appearing unexpected in the sky
You collided with my surface, drilled inside.

Arriving with incalculable speed
Out of the void, you shattered the firm crust
Of long-evolved assumptions, cast them wide

Like impelled missiles
Like white hot shooting stars
My feelings sped beyond the curvature

Of the horizon lines
Traced the outer reaches of my mind
Laid bare distant perceptions, unseen shores.

Descending from on high
With fiery tail and steady burning eye
You touched and petrified my earthly core.

So close now, you and I
By time embraced, embedded, unified
Together in the unexpected sky.

Destruction and new light?
With fallout bright, your star transforms
All that was life, that lived in me before.

Frank Bana

At Last....

At last I stand before your eyes
Clothed in shreds of consciousness
To abandon what of me remains
To your first and each succeeding kiss
Dark hair to frame the radiant face
Skin soft as all control is lost
Exulting in our ways of tenderness

The senses of the mind made bright
By what the flesh will not give up
No longer youthful in its pride
Stripped of much presumptuousness
So I arrive to you at last
Arms opened wide, fit to receive
The breathless joy of being called to give

The game accomplished, whistle blown
Without design, to learn at last
The simple lesson taught by love
With all the wars of passion won
The peace so vast to conjugate
Not by insistence, as we trace
The tightropes where we join in our embrace.

Frank Bana

Ballad Of L. In Lesotho

Singer:

Frozen rivers
Seen from the plateau
Of a new edge that is this leaving
That sometimes
Makes you hard, and cry
In the weakness.
You will have to walk on ice for a while.

Woven weeds
Black as the sheep on the mountain
And for some time
Love
Widowed you from me
As you wander
Your sadness draped upon you like a shawl.

But on the hill
There is one
Waiting
Like sunlight, to come through.

Narrator:

Twenty years after you trod the foothills of Lesotho
You tracked me down to the Indian Ocean coast
I was married by then and again we could not meet
You had lost your only child, mine was soon to be born.

Once more we failed to run the streams of our lives together.

And I remembered the song of the frozen rivers
Where you walked on ice and still had not come through.

Frank Bana

Basket Of Sunlight

Laying aside the dreams I lost
Another world opens to me
Amid the gentle swirls of dust
Cappucino and cardoman tea

Addis jazz at every corner
Cafes called Adonai and Shoah
Painted eyes for the hills of Zion
Portraits of Emperor and the Lion

Arsenal shirts, kids in tattered shoes
Lada cars make patient traffic
Amid new buildings, browns and blues
Progress patched up and erratic

We climb towards the cafe floor
Hand in hand upon the stairs
The wind blows through your long light hair
You watch me gazing down the street

Couples courting on the terrace
The brush of hands and made-up eyes
The future, hesitant and sure
Hangs in the basket of sunlight.

Frank Bana

Because Of Your Love

I want to get lost in a poetry workshop
Walk in a garden at 5 am
Even start to believe in a God again
Because you came to me in Love

I mislaid my wallet and forgot my way
Abandoned all cares of identity
Because of the beauty that captured me
When you came to me in Love

I want to decorate a brand-new building
With colours never seen before
Because of wonder that came to my door
When you brought your Love to me

I will cross the Sahara by railway train
To hold your hand in desert landscape
Because of the visions of hope you gave
When you came as a gift of Love to me.

And we will go dancing through moonlit nights
Washed of dust by tides from the sea
We will be singing our song of delight
When Love is the World of you and me.

Frank Bana

Because You Wear Gold

Sun coming through
A straw hat
Once I had money
Now it is lost
Strange you should be so unconcerned.
Tell me where to look
I have nothing to put my love in for you
Some tell me you are beautiful
There are many things you may not notice
Because you wear gold.

Frank Bana

Beloved Country, Endless Journey

from one ocean to another
the struggle for human progress
continues on its journey
towards the endless sky

2007, nearly over
20,000 homicides
childless mothers
weeping for the stolen lives

50,000 girls and women raped
stolen bodies
damaged lives
300,000 deaths from AIDS
the beloved country cries

brave and unforgotten ones
have brought this country back to one
Papa Mandela you all have met
now you know Lucky Dube too

but not the men who carjacked him
as he dropped off his sons
as if he were a stranger
unhuman to them

Gauteng, the unploughed fields
Cape Town's windy shores
Kwazulu hills so green and low
the feet of the Maluti mountains
draped in shame and snow

? ? , ? ? ? babies born
to HIV and pain
1.2 million orphans
crying to the silent wall

imagine the death of a single child
imagine if we lose them all

that long, unending journey
from slavery through prison
surviving torture all the way
up to the gates of freedom

come so far, from mbaqanga
to liberation song
cut down by bullets in the blink
of a man who was his brother
before the world went wrong

there's time to touch the golden shores
of a country loved so well
refusing all the turns to hell
remembering the starting place
and what they started for.

.....

Notes on data:

Homicides (women and men) and rapes (grossly under-reported) - from national statistics.

Deaths and children orphaned due to AIDS - UN estimates based on national sources.

Numbers of babies born with HIV - unavailable, inevitably in the tens of thousands at current adult prevalence and treatment rates.

Frank Bana

Between Us

If you are far, then what is this I feel
The weight within my heart, upon my hands
If this is distance, does it fall
Between us, does it own us
Or do we tame and name it for ourselves?

If we cannot be sitting side by side
To watch the crucial moments of the night
The falling of the sun, the rising of the tide
The duel of stars and moon, are these not seen
On every shore of the same mother earth?

If there are tiny birds that sing
Around your hair of sunlight when I call
Will I not be so glad to know the song
That softly breaks the silence of your sleep
While I rest here with music and guitar?

Distance, tides, the winds of human fate
Dress the land in newly-fashioned clothes
For each new dawn, expression of our hearts
The words we cannot say
But know will pass between us every day.

Frank Bana

Beyond Love

What lies beyond love
Seems to be an unknown country
An unprotected landscape through which run wild
All hearts unguarded

It seems to be a greater love yet
More magnificent than we may ever know
Unless we could dissolve in its purity
And yield our selves for whatever it might be

The only gateway to permanent bliss
Is a sacrifice of self on behalf of greater love
Which is not God exactly but
Something human yet

Of course it is for this love that I long
And the remote possibility of knowing it
Presents me with a reason to live when oblivion
Could be much easier to play with and embrace

I long for whatever lies beyond love
Like the distant lover that I miss
Most endlessly, accepting the pain
Of reaching out but never touching her.

Frank Bana

Birthing

Waiting for the rain
Expecting to fly
For new life to emerge
An old life must die

Suspending my feet
Over rocks and the ledge
Preparing to jump
Or be pushed from the edge

There's a death in my heart
And this I must embrace
By the spark of a fire
That will lighten my face

From the pain of escape
When the bandage is torn
To the press of the prison
On the soul that is worn

With one leap to the sky
Being landed or broken
On the hill of the lion
In the desert forsaken

Preparation to fly
While expecting to rain
For the death I must die
To know birthing again.

Frank Bana

Blind Is The Deepest Love

Blind is the deepest love, where sight gives way to insight
And the wonder of her face is of no consequence

I summon my powers of composition, unswayed by her attraction
My skills of translation in the service of emotions

Language is my guide within her storybook of life
I hear her songs in lines made up more seductively than eyes

Dancing their descent and rise. And if I never see her face
I could find myself in her embrace
When I reach out with my heart to hold her close.

In the quiet of a small abode, large in its comforts
And in profile against a sky of endless dark

I dipped my small hands in the pristine pool
Of silence deep, finding a touch that made reply

As her hands met and conversed with mine
She spoke a tongue new to my life.

Insisting that I didn't mind, that the absence
Of her face before my eyes
Was beautiful beyond the beauty I was sure to find.

Renunciations made, you journeyed to construct
Your gates set on the freedom of deserted hills

Far from the cities which stand remote
Where stars and souls are never visible.

So at this evening hour, late in life as I am
My gaze declining as I gather your insight

I still conceive in dreams how we let our veils fall
At the wedding of our hearts, where finally

Your eyes meet mine as if the brightest stars.

Frank Bana

Blood Lines

Maybe this will be the last journey
And I will not return again
Riding down to the stony beach
Where spring once was gentle
and love innocent

Now autumn clings on, struggles for breath
Gliding on the tops of cliffs
The paths that resisted invasion
Germany, Spain, the French
Its strength diminishing by the year

Torn by winter's claws, relentless
Brave young defenders, sons of refugees
Stubborn homemakers, not ready to yield
Their locus of happiness by the sea

I chose the train and not the bus
Thinking how you converse in carriages
Like those Ealing films, black and white
That helped make England a great place to live

A little girl riding for the first time
Her mother pale and flittering
And grandad in bright Barbados jams
All mixed in together with me

Even for suited businesswomen
Dealing cards and property
The ride is over much too soon
Too soon for real ecstasy
Or to place the soul at peace

Fresh oysters sold on the stony shore
Seagulls louder than the drunken boys

And so the trail leads me here
I may not visit in another spring
This season is so harsh for weak

And sentimental hearts, as mine has been

Soft-bitten, easy with a smile
Thinking of homes in London, Spain
And summertime, carefree with them
Before the years of doubt and pain

Wherein these journeys can't escape
The shadows of the darkening sky
Where I piggy-back
On what came before
And lines of blood lead here once more.

Frank Bana

Blues At Sunrise

I'm walking down Old Avenue, with the blues this lonesome day
Singing the blues this morning, while my mind is ill at ease
Thinking who must bear the sickness, who is really the disease

I give prayers to the Memorial, standing by the village green
Under trees of English legend, where the ghosts of war assemble
No child come out to play. Silence makes the branches tremble

Going down to Weybridge Junction, to explore the empty station
Trains are rusting up in London, since the alien Invasion
You know a virus killed the Martians, so whence cometh our salvation?

Heading back towards my precinct, where the blues went out of fashion
Lately money has no purchase, for the mansions of the wealthy
Though I couldn't buy a patch of land, I am glad for staying healthy.

I don't care my back is aching, nor that my legs are getting tired
If my blues are inspiration, I will welcome the surprise
For your love is waiting on me, like a glorious sunrise.

Frank Bana

Botswana Meditation, 1978

Deep blues in the background.

I received her letter yesterday. Brought to me by the old post-office clerk who guided his bike over the bumpy uphill trail. He thinks I get too many letters. The way these whites spend their time.

She had not changed her writing much. The script on which I had modeled mine, remained fairly true. I call it a letter, but – turning it over in my hands – the words are like a loose necklace of beads. Seeds from the Jacaranda trees which were planted by missionaries to make their rosaries. In fact, the words are quotations, a poem of her own from those spring days of eight years ago, when we passed poems to each other under our Saturday prayer books, and would never connect more.

“Sometimes I wish I didn’t see – living would be so easy”. I know she means this. Still her life is bright and hard.

In reality, I am on good terms with the postal clerk. But I know my own accuracy despite the years. It seems that no-one ever leaves, even if they learn to let go. The strength of roots of truth, unearthed, doesn’t seem to wane. Their flowers are seasonal. In the end, by our nature, we must be dreamers, silent crafters of clay.

I was looking out over the hills of circling vultures and I saw the fresh rondavel cones, the thatch that rain and drought had not begun to etch and salt away. The children had risen and were stumbling to wash and make it to eat. Which child of the village had the right to dream of yellow syrup on her morning porridge, pouring gently from the tin as the sun filtered in?

A child of yours, born uneasy on its feet, watching you soak the earth or disturb it with your hard and caring hands, as you pulled up the thorns in its way. Your labour made dreams of syrup.

“We are children of each other, she and I. We plant dreams in one another, water them with inspiration. We work the field silently while they grow. We scare the predators with our glow-flies. We go hand in hand to harvest dreams and live in the season of plenty. We keep some dreams for next year’s seeds. We mould our clay and share our beads. There are neighbours and there is no despair to tax our fruits and grains ...”

I must write this before the morning to give to the clerk, if he can come. I could take it over there myself – it is not so far – only bushtrails to follow, but my bike is punctured as usual. But most of all, it is a season of watching and waiting. I know we have ploughed and sown. It is a blessed and slow procession.

Down at Manyana on the banks of the Kolobeng, the women are worried for the cauliflower. Heads must be marketed before they run to seed and there is no money to fill the tank of the Coop truck.

Springtime comes and the babies and the spray-packs are heavy on their backs. The thoughts of future school fees. The children trampling the spinach, playing by the pump which draws water from the river and sends it running to the reservoir from where it trickles down the terrace slope. At lunchtime they sit with me with plates of beans in the shadow of the mission house. The women ask, “when will you have a child, Motsumi? “. I wonder what they see in me.

“It’s about time I wrote this novel”, I said as I laid the newspaper to the desk. The weekly event of its arrival was liable to explode that feeling in me. “The vultures can hardly wait, there’s not much time left”.

That’s the way it happens (Pula the kitten clawing at the pen as I try to let it) . A little piece of silence must be tended. Some small response attempted. I’m watching the circling of the white-headed vultures around their nests in the crown of one of the hills above the children’s village in the distance, one of the hills where the evening sunlight spills. Like blood it spills. If there is only time enough to die, I would like to do it beautifully, having committed myself to the love our honesties allow. Fires are burning at the cattle posts and the world is wrapped and wedded with chains of science and energy. In such an agony, sufficiency is a freedom, sufficiency is one that reaches out to more.

So I sat down to write, pushing off my sandals while the armies of winged creatures massed outside the door, flying ants shedding their wings onto a transparent carpet, crippled angel guests hungry for shining light. In the sanity I tried to sustain, I told myself, be only what you can be to someone else seeing you truly. It was getting hard to hear for many voices floated near, sonic from the sky, wishing from the water, crying from the cruelty, burning from the bushes, wasting from the war. I knew she needed time, a place of calm to think on considered knowledge, sitting like a poor person might do. So I waited, even if I wished to make my gift. If I looked behind her eyes to the fires she would perhaps have cried, although we seemed to live together in the fire.

I went out to where the moon was at my back and watched it shadow the horizon hollows where she and the children slept. I thought the moon was weak and the wild dogs strong so I wanted to protect the children, from whom might flow the transformation into day if we survived this long night. They are already left crippled and dispossessed but they need no further jailor. Be guardian, I thought, because if you are strong you are also yet a child.

The night was scared of its own self, and there was I, talking to myself, on the ridge, on the edge. There would be a later time when I could not walk alone to my home at night, for fear of the boomslang in the branches of the large overhanging trees. But here, working over a skin of rainbows, weaving the batiks of lizards, boats, flamingos, waxing like the moon, there was still an angel.

"Meanwhile in the land of companies where all companions are guarded, no darkness is allowed. Children must not admit to fear. There are rainbow lights and music eating all the nights"

.... The generator at the secondary school shut off. I took it as a sign to abandon those thoughts. I lit a candle. I began the letter for the hands of the clerk: "... let us be there, in that hour of happiness which is sharing, let us pass life on into renewal and beauty, let us free each other in the age of technology ..." – until even the candle tired of me. I remained a while, thinking of the skills you need to see in the dark.

When the sacks of black-eyed seed had been loaded onto the blue Toyota, the man from the marketing board left me to my thoughts. I had been trying to appreciate, all the while, how people can cope with the sudden event of a death. Not the same desperation in the attempt as for we for whom the ending of a single life might be just a microcosm of an ever-likely nuclear fission. You can detect the reference of the Bamalete when they say that a sad person has climbed the mountain. You know then that someone has been lost to the god at the top – for who in this flat land would know how to climb down from so high – and has disappeared. Gods and hills are rare occurrences here; but death is not, so it is softened with mystery.

The weeks melt towards summer. We learn to long for rain. Clouds gather laughing and lightening puts on a show, but the figures on the rainfall sheets from the Met Department stand stationary, like a battalion which has lost its way. Donkeys are rolling in the dust to keep cool. The big farmers take to their tractors and they plough anyway, burning fuel, but the rows they make just hold the seeds sterile.

The women make beer for late springtime weddings in the village. Beer-making, they say, is the profession of widows.

As the dust rises higher, I weary of living alone. Only the patience of trust keeps me from visiting the children's village. When the people begin to whisper of drought, I wait for the weekend. Then I take the Combi to Molepolole and walk through the thick ranks of aloe trees to where the village boys in ragged shirts spread their little nets in the pools. I watch them heading for home with catfish dangling from their hands. I start a song, "little fish are frying, and the stars are crying to be let out of the night"! And after the weekend, when my work takes me to the infant capital town, I sit with friends in the evenings, listening to their novels through the threads of the disco music, which afflicts everyone at this time.

Here is a novel: "You know, in our culture if a man wants to have a woman he can just go blah-blah to her parents and he can marry her. She must give up her job and friends and prospects and what. Some girls can even commit suicide because of that".

Another time: "Barbara-we, you drink too much wine", I say as I sit on her carpet-floor and flip the record player. "He was a father to me", she says, "a darling and a mate. We lived together two years and it was just peace. He was a Danish volunteer. But now he has no job, although he sends me money. He doesn't want to be a volunteer any more ..."

Such loneliness seems a high price to pay for internationalism when the people are too poor to travel, and a high price for the lack of industry which pushes the homeboys to golden wages in the distant mines.

The bus speeds its daring way towards the dark on the southern hills across the border. There's a child on my lap, held against me safely with the crook of my left arm, while I'm pouring poems into a red notebook with a jolted right hand. The men half-way back are drinking hard; nonetheless they are calling out "multi-racialism! " approvingly, to me and the child.

Then it gets too dark for writing and the gumba sounds too loud. I'm just concentrating on the countryside flashing by, so as not to miss my stop by the lights of the children's village. The outline of the hills gets lost in the moonless sky.

Suddenly the song of the wind turns into a broken rushing. People are tugging the windows closed. The bus pulls over to the dusty verge and it's time for me to

step out into the storm which is invisibly loving the green back into the land. The damp is rising warm and soft from the roadside. I cannot face the lonely walk to the house on the hill; I'm sharing this ending of barrenness, and now soft lights are beckoning from the mouths of the children's houses. One of the crazier children cries out in her last burst of energy before bedtime.

I pick out the path over the cattle-grid and stumble through the spoiling piles of thatching grass. This change in the air – it seems to say that our time of silence is over.

Frank Bana

Botswana Suite

In the Village: Motsumi's Advice

If you have only one place to see
Make sure it's the village of Mochudi
Where thatched and metal-tipped houses peek
Over the rocks and around the hills
And the old road now is nicely paved
To the hospital and meeting place
Where Chief Linchwe's dynasty holds sway
And men and women debate all day

From the cross of the great North Road
Where leatherworks and undertakers thrive
Mochudi seems to sparkle in the sun
And village life remains alive
Children stroll home in uniform
From school in the falling afternoon
Little groups of three and four
No-one seems to walk alone

I know that things are different now
You might not even glimpse a cow
You could check the Capital instead
The ministries and discoteques
The Kalahari Typing School
Famed by Alexander Smith McCall.
Who know what was built while I was away?
Perhaps an air-conditioned mall?

Some praise the Chobe's forests and parks
The gushing splendour of Victoria Falls
And I won't deny the wonders of
The endless desertlike expanse
Where horizons are caught only by those
Who dance themselves into a trance.

But I'd urge you to foresake all these
And look out from the vantages

Of the rocks behind Mochudi museum
The house of a small tribe's history
And glance beneath, as the women greet
On the pathways, men head for the bars
Walking slowly in the evening sun
As if the day had just begun.

Motsumi brings you good advice
In case you may not visit twice.

First Time on the Trail

Northward from the village fires
Crossing the Capricorn
Become a good receptacle
For sight and smell

'Welcome to Serowe' - white stones on a hill
The elders guarding Khama's bones
Sit in council as we eat
At the cooperative hotel

The truck passes Seretse's kraal
Narrow trails to where his men
Were brought from Nata to the north
To guard his cattle pen

Counting by fists that fall on palms
Through interpreters we understand
Totems that are indigenous
Eagle and eland

At compounds we're invited to
Exchange of gift begins
Salt and tea, a shirt maybe
A calf felled yesterday

Dust curls snake-like from the wheels
Shrub is swallowed by the sun

Cobra-spit of danger flies
Behind the wheels that run

Storm and silent lightning play
On spectral shades within
Answering to desert song
The Kalahari rainbows sing

Last camp is cleared and wood is burned
Fire and moon reflect on skin
Hyenas bay as the hours pause
Breathless before dawn begins

And swarms of yellow butterflies
Play below the Capricorn
As we leave the desert trail
For our village home.

Home for the Weekend

Peace lies in the villages
Last night we slept in the heart of change
The rain a heavy paintbrush
Filled with hidden green
Dripped on every root and stem
As we like broken pillars dreamed.

The crimson-bellied clouds
The messenger of butterflies
The spirit of the darting lizard
The feet of morning stealing by
Regiments dance in heavy white boots
Lanterns are hung as you arrive.

The earth is softened, rivers
Eat the roads, the stems are suckling
From the well, the running child
Hungers and grows
And is waiting at our gate. Come near,

Tla kwano, I used to call
Until the child came.

A place like home, even before
Motsumi was my name.

1977 - 2007

Frank Bana

Browsing By The Beach

I wore my father's raincoat on the beach
I took the golden road to town
Went looking for a record store
There was not even one in reach

The songs are hidden now,
Lost are pleasures and the sins
Of browsing through the record bins
Hangers'-on tips, delivered live
Spontaneous crucial debates
Posters of forgotten gigs
The sweet and heavy scent
Of Indian patchouli sticks

So I went back to the windswept beach
Where joggers run to earphone beats
I looked out to the lonely sea
With Random on my MP3

For in these disembodied days
Browsing pleasures come alone
In the fresh sheets of your bed
The rocking shoreline of your head

If I were wealthy, nonetheless
I'd build a shack beside the beach
And have you come and spend an hour
Browsing through old LP discs
For which you'd pay a dollar each
And carry happily away

The sand between your toes
With sandals on your feet.

Frank Bana

Build Back Better! !

Huge red sun rising over Harlem
The pain from Haiti is finally heard
Children have been dying here for years
Each infant death an earthquake of screams
Buried far below our Richter scale
It's time, world. We can stop all this.
We can build back better, we can be
A race with things to be proud of
Worthy of our beautiful red sun
That graces the slums of Kolkota
The bright white yachts of Greenwich
The penthouses of Manhattan
And the ruins of Port-au-Prince.

Frank Bana

Bulletin

Good evening lockdown
Here's your news reader
Scotland is quiet tonight
Welsh streets are empty
Cape Verde still on the rocks
Botswana is debt-free
Sirens wail ghostly
Across New York City

China's been lying
DC has gone crazy
Germans in relapse
Spain's in recovery
Slum deaths in Lagos
And joy in New Zealand
Parties in Portugal
There must be a reason

Airlines are grounded
Bond markets are crashing
Conspiracies walk the earth
Truth's out of fashion
At the base of the pyramid
Kids hungered and crying
Cloistered in single rooms
The old folks are dying

It is lately reported
That Ireland is tearful
Scotland's the brave one
This green land is fearful
Try our tasty deliveries
Fit for the Last Supper
If the curve's on a downslope
Go out on an upper

Now the Future is hazy
As a warm summer morning
The Past a lost country

And the Present is boring
The silence looms louder
Freedom? unrealistic
Human evolution
Just a freakish statistic

Have you heard of the struggle
Between good and evil
The reach of the greedy
In the heart of the people
These airways are desolate
Who comes to claim them
Whose censors will rewrite
Your very next bulletin

Frank Bana

Cancer Blooms...

Cancer blooms in the corporeal garden
Slow, dreamlike, insistent
Not advertising its next appearance
Choosing at will among the garden's delights.

I don't care so far to die
Or not to die. I care
To live outside of fear
And inside the present time of life.
Shall I live as slow as cancer moves
In harmony and equal intensity
Multiplying thoughts and creative waves
As it multiplies itself?

We find ourselves locked fatally together
In negotiated inevitability –
Host and uninvited guest
Who depends on me as I depend on her
For life, destruction and survival.

Come with me, ill-intentioned friend.
Be part of me. Let's do our worst and best.

Frank Bana

Cargoes Of Childhood

The world was young in mystery
The Winnebah breezes blew in song
No child would bring cargo to Tema Harbour
Or steer her ship by that violent shore

And once the green Dalmatian coast
The bandit Macedonian hills
Were the boundary lines of my poetry
Horizons of my careless dreams

But adhesive stamps from the Gold Coast
Malagasy, Bechuanaland
Stuck to my fingers, my first satchel
And each succeeding travel bag

The kings of Siam and Samarkand
And caravans that knew their names
Caught my ears, riding underground
To school by the dark, unyielding Thames.

Frank Bana

Cat Scan Routine

Every four months I sit, patient
On such hard wooden benches
As are thought suitable for bearers
Of many kinds of cancer
Without complaint, in companionship
Waiting for a scan

Thinking of the days when
Pensions, even indigestion
Were issues of concern
When there were no prompts or spurs
To consider the golden nature
Of a moment, an embrace

When I was not yet impelled
To weigh the meaning of the past
To attempt to crack the poet's code
To hold life so lovingly
In carefully cupped hands, as if
Nursing a wounded bird

Every four months, a similar parade
Of thoughts, by now familiar:
Having no fear of tiny shapes
Buried in my photograph
And in my bones belief that I
Am plotted at the far end of the curve
On the standard graph of life and time,
So blessed, entirely fortunate

Afraid only to be not free
To be at distance from a dream
Held back from the soul's pursuit
Of what my eyes call beautiful
Of what would make a better thing
Of what we call the world

And now the round white tube, wherein
The music of the working day falls still,

Embraces me. I risk falling asleep
Until, with a trace of irony,
The recorded voice cries 'breathe! '.
So familiar a routine, I may forget
How deeply you remain concerned for me,
To thank you for all you are to me -
And so I do, most deeply

Aroused from peaceful states, I realize
Here may be found, minute and visible,
Some verdicts on the progress of my cells
The footprints of my homeopathic health
My hopes and hard intentions to survive
To be for long-lived purposes
Alive

Frank Bana

Caught Up In Magic

You do believe in magic
You can see the eyes that watch my sleep
The spirits that would suffocate or shine
The priest issuing from his hilltop shrine
Predictions and calls that bind my actions
Forces that navigate my warring factions
Unmasking the face of my tormentors
As I cradle deep in your incantations

You say you believe in magic
I have no reason to disbelieve
And every inclination to surrender
To spells of entreaty you cast for splendour
On worn stones that make me curious
As I sit at my healer's feet
Paying him to banish deceit
And to summon my reluctant energy

Because you are my magic
When I am bewitched, walking tightropes in my sleep
You are my architect of confidence
The amulets you bring for me to keep
In the presence of demons and accidents
Haunt me, but cannot spell defeat

I think of pain as magic
The torture weighing on our lives, suspended
Like bodies hung from ceiling rings
The load of being human, learning on this trek
That awareness is not wisdom
Fear is not unending
And the faces of angels
Do not always yield escape

I think of light as magic
And everything you show me, of who you were at birth
And all we tell each other, as ritual, repeated
Is for this light, for visions, in steady ancient eyes
That nearly blind, their images resolve

Within the heart that softens, lets us fall
Back into silence, in our depths transformed
Forgetting who we were, of only one thing sure
In the presence of this magic, whether in dark or light
Our fates remain connected and entwined.

Frank Bana

Ceu (Sky)

Hoje fazia 16 graus abaixo de zero.
O céu, vasto, estava azul e brilhante.
Eu o olhava bem de perto
E resplandecia a luz do mesmo sol brilhante
que lhe banha.
Havia um canto no céu, vazio e cinza,
em que você se encontrava.
Resolvi olhar para o vazio no majestoso céu,
de forma profunda e intensa.
Quanto mais eu me concentrava, mais você emergia.
E eu lhe encontrei de novo, no céu da minha mente
na teia dos meus pensamentos e sentimentos.
Atravessando continentes, eu lhe encontro
E o vazio do céu se dissolve e se transforma
na bela paisagem dos seus dias e noites
Em que a terra se une sob nossos pés.

Sky - Translation by Sonia Maria Davico Simon

Frank Bana

Chabi Of The Okavango

Chabi Maenga bought me a chicken. It took two, three hours to cook in the big black pot and was still tough as our leather boots. A goodbye gift to me, upon my leaving the district, leaving the passenger seat by his side.

Chabi had met me in Gaborone with a newly-issued 1978 model Toyota, a boxy thing that bounced crazily on the dirt tracks but was considered state of the art at the time. We drove north until the paved road ran out, then north east across the remote reaches of the Northern Kalahari to my new duty station in Maun. We slept half-way at Serowe, at the 'we are working together' cooperative hotel, under thatch. On the second day we skirted two of the four long walls enclosing the richest diamond mine in the world and tracked the elongated fence that separated buffalo, endemic with foot-and-mouth disease, from cattle. We swung north once more as we reached the side of the 'vanishing lake', Ngami, that in some years confirmed its presence on the standard maps, and in others was simply no-where to be found. All depended on the rains in distant Angola.

Chabi and I shared that front cabin, on and off, for nearly three years. 'Call me Chabi.. like Chubby Checker' was how he introduced himself. He was early 50s, salt and pepper in his tight thin curls, and I was 24... supposedly the boss, the one who signed the requisition slips and the log book for each and every trip. But Chabi was very much in charge.

The first thing he taught me was the Tswana language. After three months by his side I was almost fluent - a status I had not remotely reached in my two years to that point in the capital city. I spoke with his northern dialect: 'f's pronounced as 'h's, 'tl's with a silent 'l'. This marked me as a man of the Okavango, the Ngami, for the rest of my days among the Tswana people. Later my wife of the southern Tswana, and her family, would tease me constantly about this northern country-bumpkin accent. But what did I care? It sounded good to me and I was proud enough simply to be rattling away in SeTswana, however rustic it might sound, and to know more or less what others were rattling. In reciprocation, I helped Chabi with his English, when he was in the mood for it.

The second thing he taught was how to shoot guinea-fowl. He did this mainly by intimidation. Since he was putting in all the hours of driving - not only did I have no licence, but he was the designated official (although I did break the central transport rules more than once when his arthritis was playing up) - and it was me who had better take care of the supper. He would slow the truck to a crawl and I would open the window as we came across a gaggle of birds on the left

hand side, gesture for me to pick up his shotgun and cue me... 'ema.... ema.... jaaanu! '. And if I aimed for the centre of the crowd, and kept the gun fairly straight, we would be sure to get a couple of birds for the pot. These we would take to the local primary school and have any available hungry teachers take care of the cooking and share in the meal. This required some concentration to avoid biting down on buckshot.

But the best times we had were on the road to Shakawe. He was delighted, first of all, when I nicknamed the village at the end of the Delta, at the remote northern border, as 'Shake-a-way'. He found this unnecessarily hilarious and I backed it up with a cassette recording of the South African multi-racial band Juluka's song, 'Shake My Way'. In fact we played very little but the first few Juluka albums on my portable cassette player during those trips.

We loaded up the back of the truck with the necessary items: my metal trunk, bought from the Mazezuru (the impoverished itinerant white-clothed Jehova's Witnesses expelled from Rhodesia-Zimbabwe - as it was at the time of my purchase, temporarily - who lived by tinsmithery, also beating out conical tin tops for rondavels) , and filled with a few changes of clothes, a couple of books and plenty of 'tinned stuff', cheap imported meals such as chicken biriyani. On top of the trunk went Chabi's battered suitcase. And then the two most essential items, side by side: a barrel of drinking water, a barrel of fuel. And a prayer that the last of these should not leak or spill over anything else, along those bumpy roads.

If it was winter, it was plain sailing. The dirt roads were dry and firm and we could make it to Shakawe in a day. We would circumnavigate most of the villages along the way:

.... Sehitwa, within sight of the vanishing lake if it had not vanished, Sehitwa where an Irishman started a little fishing industry singlehanded, selling frozen bream fillets all the way down to Johannesburg, supplying my monthly 'Fishko' party... until the Lake dried up...

... Nokaneng, meaning 'by the river', but it was a river that had long disappeared with the gradual drying of the swamps that fed it;

... Tsau, a camp for road building, which had created about 20 kilometres of Norwegian-funded tarmacadam in about five years, supposedly an experiment in desert blacktop that in fact linked nothing to nothing;

.... Gomare, the district's secondary centre, with its massive 'community' school,

of which I was a board member, where the board had spent years painstakingly rounding up a few cattle and bags of sorghum to finance the first classroom. These efforts had been completely bypassed by the arrival of the World Bank with nearly a million dollars, more of which appeared to be spent on highly artistic walkways than on the new classrooms;

... Etsha, a new village settled by several thousand long-term refugees from the Angolan civil war who turned out to be impressive growers of grain, unique basket designers and weavers and secret brewers of palm beer (to search for which, Chabi would occasionally take us by alternative backroads) , by a handful of Danish medical students, and by one Welshman with scores of cats who marketed the baskets to tourists and the national museum;

... Sepopa... oh, what to say about Sepopa, a village like any small and remote African village;

... and then finally, Shakawe, a busy trading post hard up by the Angolan border, with a local culture, chieftdom and opposition political party all its own.

The trip was easy between dawn and dusk, in the cold dry season. In the summertime, however, a different question entirely. With the road camp at Tsau concentrating on its lonely piece of blacktop in the middle of nowhere, the rains and the traffic - such as they were, and they were always sufficient for this at least - churned up the rest of the district roads unmercifully. There were patches of known notoriety where we were almost sure to get stuck, and no way, due to thick bush linings along the track, to avoid them. Chabi, fortunately, was a past master at laying wooden planks under the wheels and using the 4-wheel drive to get us out...eventually. The journey took two days. The floors of classrooms in Gomare, Etsha or Sepopa became our beds.

The journey took us along the outer rim of the river channels that flanked the vast inland swamp called Okavango. And it was at Shakawe that the settled population enjoyed a true and vivid view of the river, there at the ingress, the inflow which fed the intricate waterways of the swamp, the high-banked and spectacular panhandle. Shakawe perched above those fast-flowing, pure, clear waters, which over the years had slowly diminished in flow for reasons no-one seemed to fully understand. It was often the place where we started our weeklong series of Kgotla meetings, village assemblies chaired by the Chief, and addressed by the young English district officer on the subject of the latest local government plans for the area, speaking a nervous mixture of Setswana and English (Chabi or a local agricultural officer providing translation) . This was normally followed by several hours of grandstand speeches by the assembled

males, rising one by one from their wood-and-leather chairs to comment on what they thought I had proposed. The meeting - perfect for total-immersion SeTswana training for the young DO - were finished off, sometimes, by an invitation from the Chief to the women, sitting on the outer margins of the throng, often with babies, to speak their minds at last.

Through many such assemblies, the oddity of my presence was remarked upon only once, by a slightly intoxicated monnamogolo (respected old man) , who approached the table at which the Chief and I sat, and called out loudly, I never thought I would see the little lady (being Queen Elizabeth, or her representative) at this Kgotla once again!

Once at Shakawe, there were three options for continuing our journey. To work our way back down the side of the Okavango, holding meetings in two villages each day, taking about a week to return to the district office and our homes in Maun. Or to head off west to visit the few remote villages - Shai-Shai, Nau-Nau, Kangwa - founded by Herero cattleowners, their wives clad in massive layers of German-inspired skirts, and their San (Bushman) herders, near the Namibian border, across which lay a land still heavily occupied by the apartheid army. Or, the most magical and exciting option of all, to drive onto the little ferry ('pontoon') and cross to the remote eastern bank of the panhandle, and drive down to the three villages that lay there, on roads that barely deserved the name. Only one trading store with the most basic items could be found in that territory, and no supplies of fuel at all. Once a month, a Baptist dentist arrived in his light plane to preach to the people, distribute Bibles, and then, only then, extract teeth. If you were stranded, and spoke politely, he might stand you a lift back home.

Snakes became caught under our wheels sometimes. Ostriches would run alongside, trying to outpace us, then following the trail in front of us. And once an elephant suddenly stepped onto the trail from its hiding place behind a tree. Chabi brought us to a massive sudden halt, and we waited, waited silently.. until the creature went on its way.

In three years, he had only one accident, and that was on the tarmac on the way back from the trip to the capital. It was dark, approaching Francistown.. and a cow had gone to sleep on one side of the road. It was a minor collision, but the government censured him anyway, after much argumentation.

When we camped in the villages at night his radio took over from my cassette player. First the Botswana news. Then the solemn reading out of those who had passed away. Followed by church music. Just right to lull us both to sleep.

Perhaps the last thing Chabi tried to teach me concerned the wizards of the forest. When, during the long hours of travelling, he would start to talk as in an obsessive trance about the 'baloi', the spirits, he would gradually enter the world of 'deep Setswana', and his meanings became lost to me. The guttural sounds of the language would become a backdropp to the noise of the engine. My lack of ability to follow him into the tales of the wizards always seemed a disappointment to him, but he never gave up completely.

Mainly, while on the road together, he and I talked like father and son, cooked and ate together, and often slept alongside each other. When back in town, however, we did not socialize. We became formal in our work environment, 'district officer' and 'driver'. Chabi never came to hear me entertain the office crowd from the District Council with my guitar on Friday nights at Le Bistro cafe on the banks of the Thamalakane river. He never invited me to meet his family or to see his home. Which is what make it all the more surprising when he turned up at my place, during my last days in Maun, with that hardy three-year-old chicken. The first thing he did was invite me to wring its neck. And not for the first time with him, I ducked this challenge.

Zimbabwe was already free and its freedom would continue for a while. The wars of Angola raged on, fueled from distant lands, while the occupation of Namibia intensified. My place at Chabi's side was taken by a young Motswana graduate, and doubtless later by another. And then, as if by a miracle, generated by the pressure of resistance in the heart of South Africa, the dark clouds began to lift across the region, and the peace that lay at the heart of Botswana began to spread to all its troubled neighbours.

Several years later, flying on the airline of newly-independent Namibia towards Zimbabwe, we landed for a few minutes in Maun to take on passengers. The village of 15,000 with its little strip of road had now turned into a lively tourist centre. I greeted the people working in the airport shed (which proudly housed an immigration and customs desk) and asked for news of Chabi Maenga. His name was well known. He had passed away a year or two before.... just as he neared his 60th birthday. How sad I felt. This man had kept me alive and safe, through many long journeys.

Juluka sing their songs of the search for the Spirit of the Great Heart. And there was Chabi of the Okavango.

Frank Bana

Challenge To Joy

That evening

I sat in weary happiness on the high marble steps
Of Grand Central Station, still hearing Dylan sing
Through the sweet-smelling air of the Beacon Theatre
As if the whole world's heart would be opening

As if white magic had taken hold
And for this night - or was it for two -
A remote transformation was possible
To a time of great joy, diamond-hard and true

That night

When I stood in cowhide boots, guitar in hand
Beside the slow-moving Okavango waters
The thatch-covered Bistro still echoing with songs
We sang to amuse the cattlemen's daughters

Everything seemed more spacious around
And inquisitive moonlight disclosed to me
The motions of beasts on the opposite bank
Pure in their nature, unmolested and free

That moment

When your beauty for the first time flooded my eyes
In a crowded red room at the height of a tower
Built by insurance on the Boston soils
Overlooking a wasteland of corporate power

The world seemed enlightened by your smile
Which spoke in radiance and gave no clues
To the pain weighing down upon innocent dreams
And the challenge to joy brought by childhood abuse.

Now joy surfs and glides on the waves of our lives
A singer harmonizing with a faint night breeze
A springbok tenses to leap in fright
Its joy proud and wounded, not captured with ease,
Wary of predators that haunt it always.

Cigarettes And Me

It's really strange to me, I fault the companies
Tobacco companies, Big Cancer
For their inefficiency. All my life
I never smoked a cigarette, not a single one
Nor even a sweet toke - in that respect
Hash cookies did for me, once and decisively.

My Mum smoked occasionally, sort of socially
But Dad, he never did, though he was in the war
I wonder what he did for comfort
To relieve anxiety and pain, when members of his crew
Disappeared without a word and were not seen again.

I must have had a rather stress-free life, how come
They failed to hook me, reel me in at school
No ciggies in the playground. Why? At college
I was mildly into alcohol. That didn't last too long
It was travel, close encounters with the continent
Called Africa that made me wild and high.

I ended up with Big C anyway
But I'm not coughing out my guts at least
Unlike the original Marlborough men
With damaged lungs, cancer of throat and tongue
I managed to escape all that, fell through the cracks
Neither macho nor gay, bohemian, sophisticate
And now it's so much easier. Every place you go

'No Smoking' signs proliferate. For me at least
They do not come too late.

Frank Bana

Cinnamon And Domino!

Can you believe those two, the whole day
Sitting by the screen door window
Staring at the sunlit green
Waiting for a gopher
To come darting through the yard?

One white, one bright like caramel
Solemn side by side
Their tails almost touching,
Heads in a steady line.

DVD players, I-PODs whine
Televisions whispering
In corners of the room behind
Smoky jazz and barbeque

And still they do not turn their heads
As if in shy Memorial
For brave felines passed on

Slowly the day goes by.

(Memorial Day 2008, Sharon, Ma, USA)

Frank Bana

Clouds Of Silver Rain

The heavy clouds build up once more
Accumulating vast array
These clouds turn up the temperature
Building pressure hour by hour
In distant corners of the brain

They make me thirst for the kind of rain
That bursts as if shattering a dam
At first in almost hesitant flow
Then leaping with abandonment
Into a freedom void unknown

Thick limpid drops in Africa
Thudding down on a metal roof
Drowning out all sounds and sights
All music of the village life
Urgent European rain
Hammering on concrete squares
Leaving silver rivulets
To lap at seeds and tangled roots

These darkening low-hanging clouds
That tighten nerves and muscles both
Trap me in a time of drought -
Body tense, brow under sweat
The prospect of release at last
Enticing more than trails of stars

In the parched savannah plains
To catch the early drops that fall
I long to leap as high as clouds
And rush into the arms of rain -
To bathe the rain in my delight
Inviting it to fall again.

You are the clouds of silver rain,
The rain is where I love you most
And where your love washes my pain
And makes me whole, complete again.

Frank Bana

Coffee Thought

They say coffee loses its potency
The more you drink

Maybe it does
But try starting the day without it.

Frank Bana

Colour My Soul

Colour me brown, next time around
To understand the pain of hearts
Measured by shadows in rooms of caste

To know the name of the goddess
And to touch her face, my soul
Lullabied by the holy river
Tasting the fruits of indentured labour
And trees planted in the sugar fields.

Bring me back as someone black
So none mistake me again for pale
Sufficient pitch to be collared for ships
To taste the lash - and if I survive

Forced to fight the Confederate side
Longing to cross each battle to join
The slow liberation of the North.

To be female, a spirited girl
Taught my honour and self-defence
How to take his blows of rage
And wake up like an untouched stone

To wear chador, or wrap sari
Flirting with hope, teasing destiny
Smiling for friends and relatives.

Make me anew, the kind of Jew
Who draws his skill from the ducts of wells
That glint with ancient tears and truth
Rooted early by the sacred texts
Forced into study and argument

Under a saucerous black hat
Heavy locks and gaberdine
The kind of Jew I could have been
Enjoined to recite and sway
And wear night colours in the day.

Now tell me if it's not too late
To see the face of goddesses
Give me devotions, sacred names
So I may serve as my fathers did.

Smear with hues my fugitive soul
Dark enough for divine hands.

Frank Bana

Come Closer To Me

Come closer to me, dearest love,
To secret homes where we belong
Let my embrace be all your world
Our whispers its most perfect song

Discovered as a woman, man
In unity by four hands bound
Joined in knowing timeless love
The silence of harmonious sound

Make me completed of your love
And I will bring to you my soul
Ecstatic of our myths and tales
The stories that our bodies tell

How profoundly do I find
The essence of your being now
Adoring all your womanhood
This man in me is offered up

To call across the spaces wide
Not to disturb the silent night
But yield to elemental love
The stillness that we reach tonight

I join with you beyond the hills
Your flashing smile is all I see
Where I kiss your desert eyes
And where your soul makes love to me.

Frank Bana

Coming Back

I returned to heaven
Walking down to Finchley C
Took the overground train
On a golden springtime day

I came back to Highgate
Tablet and Ribena in hand
The stations of the immigrants
My Crimean fathers' land

I am back in heaven
With my breakfast cafe song
The flavours of this paradise
Accents of the English tongue

Purposefulness in breathing
On the Piccadilly Line
Under golden springtime sky
Lifts my journey high

Touching the finger of a friend
With the blue heat of my flame
Don't do me wrong this time
I came back to you again.

Frank Bana

Commuter Train Blues

The roots are shallow and my skills are weak
The tunes look pallid and walk in their sleep
Poems are a language I stumble to speak

At the foot of the barrel, lying deep in the well
Love I once mastered, now a sweet gift from hell
Locked tight by kindness in a torturous cell

Nature's work done, there is now only pain
Where pleasure would come, the knowledge of shame
In desiring a soul that flies freely again

Don't wish to buy things they're so desperate to sell
Don't need to live anywhere they wish me to dwell
Nor care to think thoughts that are not mine to tell

I won't gamble on life with their bright red chips
At tilted green tables in a game that is fixed
I am running with luck on strong metal hips

With a wife and a child and a spirit that longs
For places I knew, alleys where I was wronged
That turned my heart wild in its hunger and songs

Some dreams become real in time - or they will -
Others fade slowly like mist on the hill
And some of those dreams I am longing for still.

Frank Bana

Concert Review: Dylan At Bridgeport, Ct, November 2007

The wide and unexpected space
The sixteenth song he had to sing
Not one word spoken until then
He'd only introduce the band
And leave the rest interpreting.

.
A crazy kid, darting in waves
Was close up front, the first ten rows
Were all stood up, beer-bellies left
For cups and piss, post-boomers watched
The long-haired raven ladies
With their warehouse eyes transfixed.

I stood beside the mixing-desk
Two guys in headphones and soft chairs
I gripped on the protecting rail
Within the void of smoke and howls
The figures in the distance, small
Were issuing E-minor chords.

One wish, one single prayer, intent
Belied by the prediction that
This man's last number never will
Complete the promise that he sees:
'I'll be released', and all our hopes
Were shuffling out to mist and breeze

Leaving just a hardened core
Waiting still, upon their knees
As if would fall a last insight
From tangled vines of ceiling light

But to the other ones outside
The keys were visible and clear
In each new-born mixed-race embrace
Their kisses lingering like chimes
Of freedom in the midnight air.

Frank Bana

Concord Of Thoughts

Stasis invades with light
On tiny spider tracks
Traces of tears
Linear in sand

The ceasefire of our thoughts
The supple mind lays down
Its weapons, all its heavy arms
And weights

Doors swing slowly open
To beckon visitors
Seeking common shores
Without demands

Words in barest motion
An essence of poetry
Blue heat fatality
On faces of a flame

Prayers ascending wordlessly
To a Love God listening
Attending in other realms while
We are barely here

The peace concord of thoughts
The subtle mind lays down
Its weapons, all its heavy loves
And hates

Sabbatical from toil
A day, an exiled year
In deserts that must burn
To regenerate

Weekends without concern
No ripples on the surfaces
Geneva, Annecy
Timeless tideless lakes

The heavy white-haired Alps
Dreams drained of energy
The silent watching mountains
Overtaking me

Stasis content in dark
Eyes closed, starting to see
The tiny ships that sail with joy
Into infinity.

Frank Bana

Conspiracy?

The coffee drips
I make the eggs
Put on my shirt
Slick back my locks
And go to work

I board the early morning train
On guard, on duty all the way
In case the angels come to call

A train too corroded
To carry me far
I await the second coming
Of the electric car

It's dark sometimes when I come home
Dousing the lights, hanging the phone
I leave the re-set button on
Going to bed with nothing on

But there is no transcendence
I ask, is this my sentence?
The dread sleeps in my stomach like a stone

Morning returns
The pinstripe men
The pantsuit women
Clutching red books
Chewing red pen
They board again
And hide their tortured looks

The rails take me down
Near the bankers' yard
For the angel of the sun
I was still standing guard

... when she finally got on
Her swollen belly shone

With stars and moons
Painted there upon

Like a good hit song
I'm dancing down the years
In which all my longing
Endures... keeps me strong
Although I'm never sure
Which terminus is home
They're kind to me
Occasionally
They set me free
To write a poem.

Frank Bana

Cultural Heyday, Usa

Date my Ex
Pimp my Ride
Trick my Truck

Culture subverts

consumes itself

and burps.

Frank Bana

Daisy Chains

Daisy chains, the children
In the morning sun, lolling,
Rolling on the lawn – eyes keen
For the Mr Whippy van
Scottie running for her ball
Holding hands they feign to fall
Wasps are buzzing with the bees
Home Service of the BBC
Rules the waves but not the clouds

that chase the kids inside for games
of Blind Man's Bluff and pick-up-sticks
while petals wilt in the failing
infant summer light of evening

Mother is watching them
Cold war autumn stalking them
Satellites of first design
Sprinkling dust on yellow lawns
Of daisy flowers and rainbow lives
Fading into darkening skies.

Frank Bana

Dark Heart In Retreat...

The lone dark heart is closing
Like a failing, blinking eye
A slow evacuation
Leached & emptying away

Its content rendered overseas
To tearful foreign emissaries
Or held against compassion
Landfill, in dark repositories

The klieg lights snapping shut
Household gods locked into crates
Rolling up the prayer mat lines
Chains around the clinic gates

The camp, the shining beacon
In sly, red-faced depart
They board down their Guantanamo
And shutter the dark heart.

Frank Bana

Death Of A Union Man

The dust blossoms from grass roots
The river in the arm of the town a healthy vein
Wind at night in the elephant grass and spider on the wall

Strength under torture – one or two man cell
Does it matter how he died in the hands of the State
Is this so far from a sleepy peasant town?

Not as distant as the stars are to the village night
But as vivid as they are, to the ones allowed to know
Soft wind – full moon – palm trees
Night of day making a mockery
Donkey road – tin can street –
Cans on rough grass –
Static – airwaves – faint hurried news:
Death of a Union man

We remain in times of plenty
With faith in history while riot stories grow
Confusing a simple hope
Confounding the politics of luxury

The warm winter nights caress terribly
Like a woman on the edge of birth
The river bears strengths useless to me
But sustaining for us all
Like you, overcoming the cruelty by shadows.

Frank Bana

Declaration In Flight

The aircraft in ascent, I swore
To write something of beauty, that would prove
Enough to lighten hearts, and cause
The world to celebrate, elders of Zion
& Palestine convert each other
To a peace of faith, the scientists
Of terror & martial machines
To dance together in the lands they freed
And donate to those in need. The husbands
Of war-widows be restored. The tortured
To return to the genesis of pain,
Smiling at torturers whose hands
Will not be raised again. The souls
Burning in loneliness of love be healed
By cool streams of compassion
Received without demand, given without aim.
The children born in poverty be lifted by
Abundant arms & those abused
Finding the shore
Where nothing will be fearful anymore.

Can some mere mess of words provoke all this
As if a Declaration, made to last
By desperate hope & stubbornness?
Can it hurt in the attempt? Advance
The cause of our humanity an inch, even a step?
It's a long and weary flight and there's
A baby by my side.
Give it a try.

Frank Bana

Deer (Ku)

3 baby deer
in the morning rain
too young and curious
to run

Frank Bana

Defiant Love

Born in the vertigo of love
Raised as we sped towards the sky
Shaped and discovered in the rush
Of primal waves, the passion fire
Created One of us from two
As poetry makes something new
We sat down by the roadside table
Bodies light as molecules
Held by the force-field of our smiles,
The soft portraits of painted eyes.

We drank our tea, stretched out our feet
To touch the warm African street.

It was easier when I was young
You'd fall in love and break a heart
That might be lost or might be your's
But strong and well disposed to heal
Whenever love had to depart
But now life trembles by its edge
And scars won't bind so readily
The sunset inched up to our thoughts
Of tearful journeys soon to start,
Defiant, gazing steadily.

We laid down books, pushed off our shoes
And made the love we never lose.

Frank Bana

Devotion

You can think about Trump
And consider compassion
Or obsess on his lies,
Those of Putin and Xi
You can vow to inscribe,
Catalogue all their actions
Or meditate on the love
Our world finally needs

When kindness is turned back
Truth falls in the gutter
When justice is prey
And cannot intercede
You may name deeds of evil
Invest all of your passion
Or start work on design
For the dawn we must fashion

But if you choose to labour
On these tasks in one motion
And afford them full measure
Simultaneously
You will work like a saint
With a human devotion
Realizing your power
To be extraordinary.

Frank Bana

Disambiguation (Jew Style)

Grotesque, misshapen, destiny bargained away
For normalcy - like everybody else, except - I am the Jew
Exceptional, yes, every person unacceptable
Or less than real, than how you feel I have become.

This Shylock I embrace, the twilight part I play
The hooded hooknose specter so beloved of the Nazi
Jews don't leave their young to starve their old to perish
In the cold, the wild, they make a shelter for their kin

The darkness here within. I will submit
To the picture frame, cartoon, the shame, but you
Will never purify me of the Jew. My works are poison
And so are the wells, wells of my cunning soul and eyes
My daughter and my son. Conversion not the kind of shame

Of which a Jew is capable, a pity this, there are so many
That I can perform, my plays sure to amuse and rouse
The pleasure that you take
But never will they expiate
The tales of terror in dark woods your mother would relate

It's cold here in the forest now, shrouded by the trees
The shadows fail to concern anyone
Nor my gratuitous loyalties. Counting Goldberg variations
And arpeggios I dream of spreading anarchy
And for the last light of the Jew in me, I long, I long.

Frank Bana

Distancing

You need to take care at the corners
There's a blind spot where you can't see
You never know who you'll encounter -
An Angel of Death or of Mercy

Please don't be hurting, don't be surprised
As you bathe in the sunlight, as I
See you coming toward me, way down the street
And cross over to the other side

I will greet you in any fashion
With a smile, a shout or a wave
It's because of an ultimate caring for you
And for two lives that might now be saved

We need to design a secure etiquette
A protocol that we agree
So no runner or walker takes any offence
From the space we establish between

To ensure special care near the children
Some too young yet to quite understand
Passing by as they make playful moments
With the future fragile in their hands

Now I think of our fellows, living in slums
Or as prisoners or refugees
I am humbled here into a gratitude
That we keep to our distance with ease

This distance was with us before this time
We walked down our side of the street
Do you hunger now with me for shaking a hand,
Does the longing rise in us to meet?

Frank Bana

Don'T Be Alarmed, My Love....

Don't be alarmed this night, my Love,
I just needed some time on my own
I needed to know how the desert looked
After the shy summer rains had fallen

I needed to know if stars touch the earth
As they arc across the skies of Maun
Wherein the moon brings its smile at night
To light the wildlife tracks of the town

Don't look for me, oh, not quite yet
I have gone to climb the rocks over Praia
To catch from the breeze the Morna song
Propelled from the heart of a singer's desire

I needed to know if the tides were strong
And if whales were still seen occasionally
If volcanic ash lay soft like velour
And the plateau women remembered me

So let me sleep for a moment, Love
Until dreams reach their end, as they must
Wrapped in the winter of August nights
Which cover my prints with blankets of dust.

23.00, the 31st December,2007

Frank Bana

Dream Betrayed

The child that from the corpse-heap rose
Nursed by the light of faces in horror
From the stumbling-on of devil's ditch;
Dredged of swamp and covered in ash
The cripples of the wire, now linked in arms
Hit out in extinction's fury, as locusts razed the fields
Where grass and fruit-trees shadowed the sand
Schools and play-pens built and ruined –
And barren homeland smeared with flowers.

The children spread, their brothers met in cities
Where newly-starred and ancient pushed for place;
In unalikehood found they middle-men to rule
In common proclamation, raising blue eyes to a heaven
Where phantom faultless ghetto fighters
Blazed ignorance of 'insects' they trod among
Spread nets against the honeyed hives of kings
That gave no home to brothers all.

In nation's mantles grew they, lonely –
Dust-loosened clothes they wore like wire
And, huddled in victorious despair
Their knowledge was of history, necessity –
Security of encampment and maligned.
Ministers spread the word of unanimity
And choked with new gospel the intruder
Who, in all but history equal, deaf to definition,
Destroyer with incitement became.

The child of wrinkled face, pitted by oasis
Held weary monologue with common aged;
Scarred by colour and distinction-blind
Eyelids smeared in chemical blood –
And walked the child with stinging feet the ghetto
And tripped on rocks and signs painted "garden".

Frank Bana

Dreams In Africa

In the mouth of the wide savannah
The air of the hot midday
Casts on us a veil of stillness
Undisturbed by the remotest breeze

Time hovers almost motionless
As weaver birds build their family nests
Their busy conversations all at one
With the crickets and crackling leaves

The high sky is a backcloth
To the baobab tree outlined on the horizon
The acacias adorned with thorns
And the numberless red ants under our feet

The trails we examine have no direction
No men have passed here in this century
Any danger is fast of foot
And unconcerned with our reverie

Wordless with each other, our eyes scan the horizon
And gaze upon the vastness of the bush lands
Our hands, our fingers barely touch
As we stand unthinking, veiled by the stillness.

In the hour of siesta falling
The bush surrounds our common dreams.

Frank Bana

Eggs

A cigarette end was thrown from a car window
It smouldered brightly in the road
Another car sped past giving an aura of headlight
Stealing it from the hands of the night
The butt showered orange specks around the lane
One landed on my shirt and tried to burn.
I do not smoke
I do not drive a car
Cracked eggs lay slimy on the pavement
I eat eggs.

Frank Bana

Empire's Heart

I had to live in Empire's heart
Like a slave who could not find escape
Drawn by magnets, bound with ropes
Swept by dragnets to his fate

And my daughter had to grow up there
On the fringe of passing luxury
Where for blessings of humility -
There was little, it was late

It was not the dark Congolese heart
Nor the dry sweet Kalahari too
Where fish-eating is taboo
And they do not drain the lake

Where the flood is coming fast
Bearing minnows, beasts away
She will hold tight to the mast
In the ruins of the day

Where it's not permitted to be sure
To predict or realize
If the Emperor or we will hold
The burden and the prize

Now my feet seek daily for the touch
Of secret garden dew
Bound in history to wait
For the peace I thought I knew.

Frank Bana

Empires Require...

The practice of empire requires
An ancient birth mythology
A dominant warrior culture armed
By martial ideology

A broken captive underclass
Incited to celebrate violence
A cruelly competitive atmosphere
That reduces discourse to silence

Collaborators and raw recruits
Manning the overseas bases
Consultants on call to design and sell
Hearts-and-mind embraces

The finance of empire encompasses
Tax probes of remaining protestors
Fine dining at the palaces
For major corporate investors

The bidding of empire is carried out
By gangs of intimidators
Assassination of characters
Tarred as domestic traitors

Patriotic cheerleaders
Singing stars and shamans
Harmonize the party line
Inflating the foreign demons

The sanctity of empire calls
For the coffins to be shrouded
Smoke screen information keeps
The air of reason clouded

Multi-coloured holy rags
Religious benedictions
And news bites of selective facts
Mask the contradictions

Maintaining illusions fondly-held
That emperors of deception
Are hard at work for the common good
And rule for our protection.

Frank Bana

Engineering Desire...

It's like playing games with fire. Desire is little understood
The energy on which its heart relies for food
Is liable to melt down from its own toxicity

Yes, with desire there's much that can go wrong
It can turn out pitifully weak, a hundred times too strong
Or reckless in its hunger for pain and publicity

It's a complex secret formula, so just be sure
To avoid the myriad mistakes that were made before
Like when they tried to build the perfect man

Maybe you could do it in the factories in China
They'll make anything out there and they often make it finer.
If you lack the means to buy it, they'll ensure you can

A few skilled engineers are working deep under the ground
To build a pure state of desire, from substances burned
By love's blue flame, contemptuous of surfaces that rust

But all the corporate alchemists can conjure up, it's clear
Is envy first and foremost, lust for curved metallic gear
Functional at best, corroding most of us.

Frank Bana

England Of My Heart

I'm feeling love for the England of my heart
I'm tired of those who deride you for unfixed teeth and boiled food
Poor drinking habits and guardian Queen
When you are better, beautiful in your what-the-hell
Of unprincipled tolerance and half-assed prejudice -
Too lazy to be serious and a whole lot better than the full-assed kind.

Well England, only a third of you actually voted for Thatcher
And still fewer would admit it now. Although as I recall
You did it three times. Well England,
You coined the delicious name, , when that bloke
Proclaiming the dawn of justice hustled us down the war crimes road
And I hear you embraced Joe Strummer and chicken masala
When fish and disco became hard to find.

Home of the National Trust, home to throngs of animal lovers
Constantly irritated by the sight of children. But you'll learn,
I know you'll learn to love 'em in time. You decolonized.
You never let us down.
I'm one of your happy Jews and
It took you just eight centuries to love us too.

This love for England grows in my heart
With every episode of East Enders glimpsed in exile
And with each new young nurse and African soccer star
England gathers in the talented poor, grudgingly.
The daily rags and politics play to the stands, but the crowd
Does not really hate the immigrant, it is more concerned
With flowers in the garden and neighbours down the road.

England holds its messy barbeques on impromptu summer nights
And exports beautiful games it is never very good at
Litterbugs and lovers sprawl in the glorious green parks
Half-listening to Bolero and the 1812.
England is no expert at either love or war
But wins your heart and saves the world for fairness and sports
At the last gasp, the eleventh hour, just before closing time.

England is a home with half-open doors, constructed with delays and flaws

But open to perfection, one small step at a time.
Who could not love an imperfect child? And who could not find
A pennyworth of love for my dear old Aunt
Who calls me 'duckie' when she gets me on the blower
Who curls her toes when I reply, across the pond,
'Hi there my love, my England fair and fine'?

Frank Bana

Everyone's Into Poetry...!

Don't come here looking for poetry
Who gave you permission to peek?
Who issued a licence to investigate?
I'm not hiding anything new or unique

Check your local library like anyone else
I'll watch Harrison Ford while you spin the car
Get some mileage out of the credit account
I'll scratch a list for you to check out
While I'm resting my feet and my literary star

I suppose you'll come back this way soon
The book depository went
But don't bother looking for masterworks here
Every soul is displayed on the web worldwide
Everyone's into poems this year.

There are landscapes torn, reconstructed by man
There are soft mystic murmurs of home
There are Saturday gods and Obama to hear
And the small weight of gold in a poem.

Frank Bana

Faith And Coffee, In The Future

I hear a call to celebrate this moment -
after a thousand years of fear
stalking our lives and shaking the flesh
visiting our houses every Easter, after
centuries of confinement by the winters
in the forests and the pale ghetto sun -

when we may embrace each other now
before the sets of blue and silver candles
and spin our dreidels on the floor, illuminated
by the green tree that our children have adorned
set with glowing angels, gifts bow-tied

and in the ages that our prayers imagine
when everyone has flown around the world
there will be prophets still, the walls
instead hauled down. Damaged or beset,
our descendants will hold yet with high regard
our Yom Kippurs and Ramadans
and celebrate Hannukah, Eid Fitr.

The child abusers, eaters of industrial meat
and those degrading others with their hate
will be consigned that day to distant memory
and shame. I'll kneel then close beside you
facing Mecca and prostrate
and you'll rise with me to sing the Amidah
as civilizations pass us, grasping hands.

Dead souls may raze the city towers again
or rend the olive groves with barrier walls
but we will still know how to love, my brother,
and I won't forget the kindness that you gave
me in the UN corridors, at your betrothal
in the crowded house and humid air
of the Swahili coast where we first met

And later in the book of all the ages -
in the bombed-out cates of Safat

amid the soft breasts of our Galilean hills,
the places for the pleasures of strong coffee,
apple cake and ceaseless conversation
which we have reopened and rebuilt -

at last, three stubborn faiths are sweetened
by the love of siblings, broken down
and what can pass for peace is celebrated
by the chink of tiny cups raised up together
loaded with sugar, heavy with grounds.

Frank Bana

Fathers Of Atonement

I saw Leonard Cohen on TV
slightly stooped, shining white hair
dinner jacket, black bow tie

it almost broke my fragile heart
to see him there, soft poet of white heat
go forth among a multitude

that did not care much for his art
and were not turned to wonder, nor to stone.
He called us to repent

I don't remember anymore
how to repent, or on what day
falls our Atonement, how I must atone.

I saw my father yesterday
in army gear, his green beret
bearing the red badge of the queen

on leave in an American scene
gunshots rang out, his heavy booted feet
fell on the hills of Israel, Palestine

before my father left
waving and headed slowly down the track
he turned his grey head and looked down at me

he said, leave Palestine alone:
after centuries of peace and rain
they will invite us to come back again.

Frank Bana

Fathers Of The Earth

My descendants rose in the dark of night
With sunken eyes and faces deeply lined
Mouths dry, lips cracking, they proclaimed,
'Great Father, we survive in burning times

On silted lands where technology has failed
We pray with thirst for a gentler sun
To guide us safely on the placid winds
That do not steal our homes and youngest ones

We beg the sky for half-remembered signs
Of ages of content, when we could grow
Our food on stable soil and breathe in sleep
And lay our living masks aside.'

'Father', they asked, 'why did you not protect
The goodness of the earth we share with you?
Did you not call for values to be weighed
Of elements that keep the planet whole -

The potency of open plains, the innate shield
Of natural diversity, self-pollinating seed
Translucent waters flowing, uncontaminated ground -
Seeing that their loss would cast a heavy price on us? '

And who, they wished to know, should be to blame
For gambling their inheritance, tearing up the roots
Of all our race depended on to grow - and to my face
They quoted honoured sages of our day
Who claim unclear returns for public good
'But who spoke for our interests, and who stood? '.

The Children of the Fathers are wandering the night
Sacred flags and portraits hang within their caves of shame
Empire falls to appetite, reason to delirium
Silencing the voices that would speak for those to come.

And still the final hour has not yet chimed,
At every moment possible, although it is so late

For messengers to bring courageous news
Of carbon tax, electric-driven cars

And continental railway tracks in geometric lines
As when this land was conquered first, while those condemned
For arbitrary crimes are freed to plant the trees
From which the generations will draw sustenance and shade

The news of species born again, majestic pachyderm
And Gulf Stream waters that return to run, lost shores resurfacing,
The vanished snows that gleam again on Kilimanjaro peaks
In skies of our Great Children, who with reproaching smiles

Haunt us through these nights of troubled sleep
With mirrors they hold up towards our eyes
Where we see reflected, when we look in honest mind,
The ruins of the planet that our Fathers leave behind.

Frank Bana

Fear And Fire

I pause before the Sunday news
Don't say a word this morning please
Let the dawn pass undisturbed
I'm like a rolling stone, my dear
How does it feel? So wonderful
To hear the Irish songs of love
The cobble streets, the ploughman's horse
The woman with the golden hair
Whose arms are open, waiting there

In another time than this
The wounds and chains, deep on flesh
Claimed me with their ribbon scars
And still I have a tender heart
Those stripes have never killed my dreams
I turn the music loud and fair
The dog comes leaping down the stairs
The morning in her infancy
Yet I've been writing this for years

Then crawling down the curtain rail
First comes fear, followed by fire
Fear and fire the wicked twins
Summoning smoke from the ash within
That smoldered since there was a child

A frightened child behind my eyes
Sometimes ashamed, seldom despised
A child that wants to cry and hide
Crawl into cupboards, escape to the wild
This child longs to dance on soft bare feet
To befriend the earth and protect itself
Not from worlds within but from worlds outside

This child breaks toys, wants to change its ways
Never finds the place it aspires to be
Saves old clothes and electricity
Works hard for a little prize and praise
Like a minor chief with no tribe about

Dreams of times both better and worse
Short-sighted, willful and perverse
Fortune a curse it can't do without

This child does not care what details you know
There are hiding places left to go
It's not about to transport you away
Too early for night and deep in the day
This child is no longer afraid of the fire
It's approaching evening time outside
Here must be done as the prophets require

And for me, there's times I'm still on my own
Almost unknown, no direction home
And it feels so great, but then I think it insane
To be silent in waiting for love again
And that's what I'm asking, and I want more
Than fear and fire, ageing and pain
I've served my masters, worked my fill
I've been keeping watch on an empty hill
Let me reach for the flame in the gathering gloom
And I'll witness you here in this darkened room.

Frank Bana

Fearful Dream (With Cluster Bombs)

My ancestors left Odessa on the Black Sea shore
For England, the USA, Australia
They unfastened the commandments
From their doorposts when they left
They did not abandon the Mosaic precepts
For the sake of Zion.

One dark night, I was plunged into a dream:
Terrain transformed, landscapes on fire with fear
They fired on us, we fired on them
Our children hid in shelters
While their children fled

And when the UN ceasefire was signed
The children came to their villages again
And through my sorry dream they wandered, lost
Looking for their homes and schools
And water safe enough to boil
Crying, distraught, the girls and boys
Handled shiny metal toys
That seemed about to comfort them.

Cluster bombs, deployed again
To save a politician's face
To paint him as alert and strong
To create his reputation
As the warrior-king of a nation

While writers who lost sons reflect
On innocence and self-respect
His electors cry and then complain:
The actions were inadequately harsh
The army was not sent in from the start.

Awakening in fear, I must reflect
That strength is not security
Until it works for common good
With men deployed to win a peace for all.
And any nation, any child

As Chronicles and other books attest
Must swim its tide of history, like the rest.

Now should be our moment to reflect
Upon the laws and commentaries again
To learn to know the faces and the names
Of those who live across the borderlines
To waken from our fearful sorry dreams
Lest we too end up lost in history
Less loved and less remembered than
Marwa, Sekneh and Hassan.

Frank Bana

First Base

Shower with a touch of gel
Shaving with the weather girl
Felons and stock market news
Coffee brew with cinnamon
E-checking on the mails
Numbers of the suffering
The memories and darkness
Questions of the mysteries
My legs are weak and ache some days
Most days my legs are strong
For life's burgeoning of loss
The freight on every train
Talk of shoes and real estate
Disneyworld ways of escape
Such torments don't distract me
I am writing for the cause
For the justice and the love
Sign-off from the 13th floor
And maybe from the one above

I climb this hillside every day
Hopeful and anxious as I sing
To reach first base, the very place
Where work for children may begin.

Frank Bana

First Crush (For Vanessa, Wherever She May Be....)

The desk on which I wrote first poems
Six-liners, desperately in love
The LPs carried down the street
In case we met, I might impress

Her with my fresh scrubbed face
I wished for glasses much less thick
And hair more so, and darker yet
Waiting for Saturday to come

Imagining with whom she'd leave
The taste of Kiddush on her tongue
For some smoky mysterious pub
Or movie house, or music club

She seemed so self-possessed!
Was she? Her poem said
Sometimes I wish I didn't see.
Living would be so easy.

Her perfect face, perfect to me
Swelled bosom, page-boy hair
Soft eyes, why did she wish
For blindness nonetheless?

Not a single kiss, in truth
Not even one caress! Just one
Slow dance in the shul:
So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright -

I still know every note.
And then she rode off for the night
And for the rest of time
She vanished in the world upon

Whose surface, in whose face
I would never find her trace
My friends, laugh all you can
I wonder if she made it through

And thought of me again.
I seek her still, so that we may
Compare our poems, our notes of grace,
And all the people we became.

Frank Bana

First Night In Botswana

I push Radio Botswana
It spills a kindergarten song
From the villages, call and response,
Into the hotel room

A floor below, and down across the street
The band and beer, the discotheque

But I have a newer freedom to support
To touch the fire-spikes of reddened flower
To breathe the heavy perfume
Of the blossom-trees
To sleep away in the desert
Woken by the bark of baboons like angry men
To watch the heron and the kingfisher
Near the dam of Molepolole

Away from the carrion sound
Of bands and domestic dogs
Feasting on the meat of modernity:
Just a freedom of the carcass scraps
Wanted and denied for long.

The radio is guttural with the story
Of an ox left lonely in the kraal
And the bass sax from the floor below
Is out of tune with the one-string segaba
I wonder which music I like to hear
Writing to the calls and harmony
Of voices from the radio.

Frank Bana

Fishes

I do not really know
If the little fish are hungry
Even for goldfish, they are inarticulate
And their silence so disturbs me

I am ignorant of the stories
Of the fishes on my plate
Were they raised up in Poseidon nets
Or dragged out by their lower lips
To this lifeless destination

Did worms burrow
Pathways through their faces
As they gasped their last
In chemical disarray

How can I trust the souls of fish
Whose eyes I cannot see

I need to determine why
This relationship is empty
I glance into the tank
I gaze on politicians
Who with fish-eyed calculation
Play cost-benefit with the planet

I remember a time
When a fish was a quite rare thing
Caught or bred with care
And put to death in beauty.

Frank Bana

Flesheater

One night in bed, I took a vow
To live henceforth on V8 Juice
And California Roll. It seemed
The nobler thing to do, not quite the holy
But as pure as circumstances would allow
Based on my factual understanding
Of animal pain in industrial farming
And admonitions of sweet Lord Jesus
Gandhi, Buddha and McCartney.

Well, they'll say, what about Hitler
Hitler was a vegetarian too. But no
I will reply, he ate Gypsies, he ate Jews
And that's not what I have done. It's hard
To find support in these corporate realms
To change my own domesticated diet
Where I cannot run wild, and all
The valid choices are reviled.

Lying in darkness, I slowly came
To visualize the cages built
For sleepless tortured FleshEaters
As me. What now? A move to Canada?
To the Poor World, where chicken breast
Would have lived a happy life and died
A rapid death, perhaps before my eyes
At a full-grown age? The prospect left me
Short of breath. Without so many years,
I now assume, to settle my accounts
With all the creatures I've consumed.

Frank Bana

Flying South

I never knew that flying South
Could be so long and wearying
I thought it easy to descend
Simple enough to reach the end

But it takes a life to find
The strong foundation of the mind
To put the fastened chains aside
To see sunsets with open eyes

The body not so perfect now
As if it ever really was
The daily circle on the wall
The evening rise and morning fall

Every minute on the clock
Is scarce, I have to make it count
Down beneath the yellow stars
While the time is running out

Imperatives of conscience call
Cheap translations don't suffice
Patches on my eyebrows thin
Girls pretending to be nice

They pin me wordless to my seat
Until I dare not turn my face
Fatal for me to compare
The lightening catches silver hair

There is a cot to sleep alone
Until the hurt begins to drain
Rebirth, rejuvenation starts
When I will kiss her in the rain

So long in limbo, hopes confined
Words and letters made in flight
Recruiting poems, tokens of art
To cross the bridges to her heart

For years we dream of one embrace
Celebrations we prepare
Flying through the hemisphere
Soon we will be meeting there.

Frank Bana

Flying Together In Mind

One hour until touchdown
To face the world again
And its so-called reality

But it won't compare
To everything I found
In the freedom of air

With you here
Beside me.

Frank Bana

For My Father

My father told me
I feel safer now
when you are near
when you come around

and he said in these days
we can be together
and not really have to say
too much to each other

After 53 years
we begin to understand
there's a moment's hope
that things won't turn out
quite so very hard

(Why then has it become
more difficult to sleep
when I remember
that I am a son?)

I cannot deny
this ache in my head
the things about my wife
you long ago had said

but you stood up after all,
stood up tall and new
my hand would not let go...
see how we grew!

and I will not deny
even if I could
the beauty that you are
within your fatherhood.

Frank Bana

For The Poem Hunters, Gathering In London....

our great city: magnet dusty
microcosm of worlds expansive
cultures meeting, lovers mating
in its hold of nerves ecstatic
tense with all its hopes and hatred

here in London, poets meet
hunters, posters, insight seekers
jokers, hubs and fair spokes-
persons for themselves and for all other
poets scratching for belief

light and blessings! in your smokeless
pubs turned into poetry corners
paths to gather forged and trod
by scribes who came of old
to town to be immoderate and bold.

Frank Bana

For Who Knows Loneliness

Pull back a long way, plant your feet,
Consider Loneliness from afar
Keep steady gaze until he grows familiar.
Your look eases the fear, your unease too
Falls away with Loneliness revealed
In his poor state of nakedness, a vagabond,
Transient and no more than your mind allows.

There may be no-one to appear
At the altar where you pray
At the parties where you look for friends
Nor does anything arrive to bring you joy
At moments when you most feel the need -
But the children grow and leave
For school or college overseas
And call you without warning, full of love.

Lying with your confidant in bed, was violence
A fear or just a threat? And aren't you glad
To be freed from that, suspicions and the mail
You had in common, shared address
And tangled clothes and hair, nothing for you alone.
No secret place to meet with Loneliness
Until you could embrace him and move on.

Wanting for less, your soul washed bright and clean
Beyond the reach of engineers of need
You confront his hangdog face, unblinking, without pain.
I know it's hard to loosen every fear -
Many have vanished cruelly, leaving silence in your hands
None have been as faithful or as true
As Loneliness, the one you wanted least of all.

Yes, you may sometimes be alone
Even in company, amid the human throng
So treat this man who hands you solitude
As you would have him treating you:
Welcome him in, upon a tight embrace
As if he were a friend embracing you

And he'll run screaming, far away
Not wishing to be known, leaving you well alone.

Now you begin to celebrate the senses of yourself
The multitudes within, the many you could be
The rainbows of your soul that shine in empty rooms
In hallways, in your mirrors, that endure -
The colours which you paint will be bright in other eyes
That gaze at you without desires or plans
For who you should encounter and become.

Frank Bana

Forgetting To Ask Why (An American Lament)

These dollar bills, dead personage revered
While men who asked the future fell
And do not show their faces here, nor at Rushmore -
Dangerous to whom, and how, whose money on the bullets
That tore their brains apart? Airports of exhaustion
Choked by sleek metallic hulks, and boulevards
Carry the caskets of their names, In Memoriam.

This nation, vast and vulnerable in wealth
Allows its memory to recede, faster than strength
As if heroes, assets could be fixed, wasting instead
In wars of folly, self-justified and made (and what was staged
In Tonkin; when was made, the decision to invade?)
Forgetting to ask why, like a pachyderm self-blinded
In the changed, rotating maelstrom of the world.

Old bridges are eroding, with no constructive will
The past is redefined by instant new design
The causes of amnesia and neglect
Run deep as well as proximate. And those who must forget
And lose the good part of their mind had best store up
Goodwill on which they can rely. Why the pursuit
Of happiness among the many idols to pursue:
Like justice, righteousness; like evidence and truth?

In times teased by disaster, forgetting will not do.

Frank Bana

Freedom Restoration

Land of the free
Where they know where your car is
Land of the free
Where they know where your cell is
Land of the free
Where they know your credit score
And they know your S.A.T.

Your calls are mapped
In the land of the free
Your Googles are tapped
(Well, you google for free..)
Indentured for life
To your college degree
In debt to your home
Built on pyramid loans

Free to roam the highways
With insurance approved
Free to travel the world
If your passport is not removed
Free to cover children's eyes
Hostage to advertising
Free to roam within your mind
While your soul stays in hiding

Sweet land of liberty
Whose ideals are poetry
Mouthed with no consequence
Or accountability
Built on the emptied lands
Of vanished Indians
What bears your burdens now
Land of the free?

The broken lives of felons
The broken backs of slaves
The immigrant families, torn
The toil of the uninsured.

The fat land chews the cud of lies
While liberty faints from hunger
And freedom is a homeless child
With no security number.

And now what brand of freedom
Is in such burdens found?
Would you consider restoration
At the roots and from the ground?

Frank Bana

Freedom Train (Part One)

The modest homes of the Borough of Queens
Are sturdy in their contrast to high Manhattan
Across which I saw drifting
The ashen smoke of the fallen towers
From this outpost of the city, a week after 'nine-eleven'

The tallest flagpole you could have imagined
Stands military-straight above a score of tollbooths
And the twelve lane thoroughfare of cars
Makes me feel like a visitor from a previous time -
But it's still that old union flag, however high it stands

Not a seat is empty on this sleek metal tube
That runs on its barely-subsidised tracks
Through a tiny stretch of the vast coastline
Stealing a peek at the brave Atlantic

A child concentrated on video games
Lends no mind to what her father sees. Around them,
Many tongues, ancestries, the faiths -
Fanaticisms held in check
By laws crafted for the needs
Of those who harness this diffusion

The airport which swallows the planes swooping low
Across the municipal towers of Newark
Is named for some primary notion of freedom -
But see, here is a passing Freedom Train
Gliding by the piles of industrial rage,
Seeking better ways and better days.

Frank Bana

Freedom Train Trilogy

Freedom Train...

The modest homes of the Borough of Queens
Are sturdy in their contrast to high Manhattan
Across which I saw drifting
The ashen smoke of the fallen towers
From this outpost of the city, a week after 'nine-eleven'

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But see, here is a passing Freedom Train
Gliding by the piles of industrial rage,
Seeking better ways and better days.

Train of State....

This train rides hard on buckled tracks
Through countryside so dark of late

Its owner's debt borne on its back
Its debtors all too profligate

Catch this train while best you can
During its long deceleration
Anticipate its sudden fall
Towards a deep degeneration

In service to an indigent nation
Consuming the loans of its eastern station
Secured by traded legislation
Without a brake on its destination.

Few hold great hopes for this railway system
Built by slaves of a penal condition
No-one predicts when the crash may happen
When the rates will soar and the misery deepen.

You boarded on time, the train relenting
To take on stocks. You rightly fear
You will not part so easily
Nor shed all your addictions here

Reassured by the strength of blind momentum
Plowing unrestrained across the plains
No plan on board for contingent moments
Only schedules of secret designs

The train a toy of moneyed ventures
Of who paid what to whom, and how -
Transactions in some currency
That shields them from detection now.

On pain of state investigation
I know I can't enquire, complain
Or claim the right to information
About the intent of this train.

Train of Dreams....

In the village called Mochudi, on the Kalahari fringe
Two sisters, Education Child and Miracle, carry their loads
Of elementary books beside the line of rail, climbing in neat grey uniforms
The hill to school. The single track
Awaits the daily train that hauls the sheep and goats
And owners to the north colonial lands
While in the dry warm hovering air
Infused by levitating specks of sand
Freedom is a perceptible dance

In the Pyrenees, carriages hug the snowy morning hills
Exhausted by the nightlong dash through redolent French fields
Now voices raise a chant in every silenced church
Invading like the lethal sunlight of a summer dawn.
The train descends for the embrace of Spanish plains,
The olive groves of Portugal, carnations from its windows strewn
And gathered by the thirsting wraiths

As the skirts of old Philadelphia unfold
The red-lined slums and drug-imprisoned zones
Snarl below the elevated track,
This line that finds its station
In a history of forgotten slaves, by the cracked bell of Liberty
Where Washington himself owned souls, where the Slave Trade Act
Of 1794 was passed in Congress, where African children
Apprehended from ships were indentured to education
And grew only to glimpse their freedom, to receive two suits of clothes,
One new, one old.

This train conveying dreams on every rack,
In every trunk, conceived by many minds,
Comes to halt in Pennsylvania, but remains primed,
While we its crew
In hope and servitude
Lay sleepers towards new frontiers and stoke
The engines of our dreams.

Frank Bana

Fresh Notebook

She bought me a fresh notebook
To write my deepest thoughts
Deliver up my soul
Daily to her

A hard serrated border
Thick along the spine
Designed to pay tribute in words

An opening address
A nod a wink
Initialed in my best
Invisible ink

I turn a new leaf over
Another page, far from
A new beginning
Or a new address

A naked page where I confess
My deepest wish
To sleep with you

On sheets of winter snow

One day I'll write
A sonnet for your eyes
Smiling like the cold sunlight
And close the notebook shut

Liberating me
From sharp parallel lines
And you will feed
Your hungered soul

On pages of my life

Frank Bana

Friday's Child

Friday evening comes again, the fading light
As summer falls towards the winter's arms
The birds adjust their song to Sabbath tones
From branches clothed in leaves just clinging on
To vestiges of life. You sit alone
With thoughts so nimble in their questioning
And dreams and longing looming large
But not yet smooth, the guards
Of all you wish your heart to realize.

An irritating child, again, is tugging on your jeans
The bitter taste on tongue offsets the comfort of your chair,
An orphaned thought that plays on every page
Across the screens and headlines of the day
The voices that call harshly to the air:
'What makes such evil beings out of men
Born into innocence and held in arms, but yet
Learning by day and in their secret nights
How hatred is perfected, intricate
As if all others of their kind were not the same
In bone and very DNA? ' Your child of thought
Fades with the light, as the weekend
And invitations to the family hearth approach,
Your ears caressed by birdsong, you fall soft
Into the arms of autumn and repose,
Believing tenderness can heal the heart.

Frank Bana

From Brighton Beach

That was the joyful moment
The seafront at Brighton Beach
Sunny, 7am, July
A Filipino couple, I would guess
Smiling at me from a bench
As I strode forcefully to the beats
And Zulu chants of Johnny Clegg
In English, Afrikaans and French

And it was the moment then
There came the jolting of regret
Like a lightning bolt at evening
When clouds are angry in the desert
I knew for certain as I walked
The Kalahari had wrecked my life
I knew Brighton, I could not return
Or remember who I had become.

Reaching for that instant of happiness
That blows away like a promissory note
Elusive, drifting out to sea
I can't be young like a disco-goer
Or feel at home in a shebeen
I'm sitting by the shores of Zanzibar
The rocks of Praia, the Skeleton Coast -
All the harbours my soul has been.

But this is England, here, today
And it is joyful in my eyes
The girls are careless, lovely
The children, Mums are beautiful
Everyone with a partner
Of a different colour or size
And I feel beautiful to be alive
The warming sea bathed in sunrise
Opens its arms for you and me -

And this moment is your's and mine.

Front Page Pictures (New York Times, 11 - 15 September, 2006)

Two huge holes sunk five years in the ground
A cornerstone is fashioned, left unmoved
The emptiness of compromised reply

The funeral of an Afghan governor
A bomber kills himself and seven more
The deadly chains of multiplying hate

Two sari'ed women talk while eating cakes
Beside a bakery counter in Chennai
Diabetes spreads among the upper class

A family cooks by flashlit dark in Gaza
Lighting candles when the batteries fail
Negotiators dance, until the power returns

Senators wrestle their provisions
For men four years in cages without trial
Plain facts lie obscured on marble floors

The wounded wombs, the gashes in men's hearts
Cannot be known or viewed in front page pictures
Daily, they require a look inside.

Frank Bana

Gerald In The Snow (In Memory, Dh Lawrence)

Trapped in the snow, a World War raging
Faint taunt of music, a modern club mix
He searched for himself, for identification
And froze without love, a broken crucifix

He began fair and strong, an industrial lord
Clutching company stock in his infant fist
He might have held safe in the tower of his work
But for lakeside seduction, the gathering mist

Invading the corners of his dark estate
A woman's hand sudden, like ice to his heart
Chilled him so deeply, her blows of sharp stone
Bloodied his head, tore his reason apart

Clear vision clouded, the lake filled with mud
Stirred by the stones she cast over his dreams
He was shivering, stripped for his exile and loss
Consumed by the engine of his own machine

Now the ages of ice are loosening their hold
On the blindness of lust and its procreation
Tenderness is withheld, you must be either/or
Love may not speak its name in this generation

It must keep to its place in the castles of men
Except those explicitly licenced to know
How love is admitted, approved and set free
To wander the night for his grave in the snow.

Frank Bana

Ghosts Of Mine

Revenant

Running through the spires like ancient ghosts

Leo

Relinquishing the castles for the poor behind the door

Baal Shem

Name and pipe-procession ripened to adopt

Pierrot

Fill the glass-house circus casting the first stone

Bethlehem

Axle-star that fixes love and frankincense

Jonathan

I die of fraternity I publicize a birth

Asquelon

Traces of the sandblind in the path of semite steps

Suleimon

Whispering memorial when drum and kingdom slept

Adam

Embraced of eve and unison upon the broken seal

Revenant

In all my forms original perfect the spectral wheel.

1972

Frank Bana

Girl, Lindsey, By The Sea

The little girl in floral bathing wear
stretched out her arms and laughed and tried
to influence the heedless tide
that tugged at her delicate ankles and toes

The English boys played soccer on the sand
Grandma gazed from a canvas chair
Two men, of Indian origin
stood waist-deep in the bobbing waves,

arms extended, as if to dispense
grains of rice upon the surf
the droplets in their bushy beards
flecked by mirrors of distant worlds.

Perhaps they harbour precious shreds
of ancient Sutras in their paunches
in the circling of hands above the water
unnoticed by the sporting hordes,

by the little girl scooping up shells
eager to invite her classmates' smiles
when she presents them, scrubbed and shined
in a pink box at her American school.

Frank Bana

Globe In Darkness

Almost round, outlined in blue
Too lonely to be understood
Intimate to her tenants' touch
The globe in space is effortless.

A bulb of light for the dim expanse
Rotating, hovering in grace
Her dance a step unknown to those
Who claw and scar her surfaces.

Scientists of restrictive laws
Know that life and sustenance
Flow only from her hidden core
To which all worshippers are called.

I touch her grass and trees with care
From her I learn that all I am
Will grow and eat and age and die
On earth and waters she provides.

The globe rotates her deserts of time
Where human life and love began
The oceans churn and come to rest
Where they meet the open sky.

Seabirds cry their panic notes
Coastal creatures seek the hills
While in a quiet island bower
A bee stabs at the buttercups.

By Pooh stickers and alphabets
A child spins her globe around:
'Daddy, I want to see Africa.
Can you take me there again? '

Enclosed in remnants of the woods
Spirit guardians recall
Her most intricate fish and beasts
The stories loved by childish hearts.

Her king of beasts known to be wise
But when wisdom is not his prize
Her soil that yields his daily bread
Is stained with red, his daily blood.

Saplings nursed in netting shade
Are planted stem by stem with care
In a yearly rite, on Sahelian hills
After the falling of the rain.

Semi-lit against the dark
With purpose through its daily work
A tiny brush restores the glow
To fading faces of the globe.

Frank Bana

God And The Dictators

Oh God, you're doing it again
One more dark war, the nightmare played
In blazing sunlight, on your stage
Of fertile soil, the fallen mango putrefying
Bodies in the cane
Limbs peeking from the elephant grass
Beneath the felled transmission lines
Village life and aspiration choked
By the spill of blood and oil
Leaching into, sucking out the soil.

Oh God, you will not stop
Your crony army, sunglass-dressed
In sharp Parisian suits, high office uniform
Where supplicants surround, bowed down
By levies that you load onto their backs
And suffer them to haul
Across the weed-stained railway tracks
Into your stores of bribery and gold.

Oh God, not come to shame
Or fear to face your judgment, on the day
You grace the church with presence, then the mosque
With patronage, the part time workers fix
The long sign of your name, the epithets and appelles
That children learn in school, under the scrawny trees
From teachers who rent out your books to feed their families
Your face on every storefront wall, beside the Cola sign
And green words of the Prophet and the State.

Oh God, you have not yet
Bent low the knees of dictators
In something more than pain, the chord and flex
Of deep acknowledgement, they sink
Down as the music stops, beside the frozen clocks
Of poor stunted constituents, rehearsing all
The prayer-like slogans of their penitence.

But which God has the right

To forgive them for the days they turned to night
The harvests that they burned, the lives they turned
To death and ashes as they drank, crowing delight
In all the workings of their years, the blight
Of fear, the corpses of all innocence
Left sacrificial in the fields
The tracks behind their heavy wheels?

Frank Bana

Grey Clouds

Grey clouds drift diagonal
In the lavish morning sky

Or perhaps some industrial plant
Is rattling blocks nearby

These cities, ready always
To spring us a surprise

Call for careful study
If you plan to stay alive.

Frank Bana

Hand Luggage

Always carry a new pair of socks
When you start on a long plane ride

Bring a book that is sacred to you
Herbal sleeping aids

A picture of your child
To put by your side

Between medicine and memory
You will find what you need to survive

In the pressurized hours
You will think of Dad's advice:

Remember the cost of every thing
Find out the truth about belief

If there's some religion that you need
Create it for yourself

If you want to build anything
Start right at the start

And just when the sweet world is winning
The lessons of life come at you hard....

That's when you wake up in your seat
In a sweat, spilling the coffee

Wishing there was a clean shirt
In your hand luggage

To cover up your heart.

Frank Bana

Help Me If You Can (Beatles, Grand Central, Bombay Mix)

'Can I help anyone? '

Voice thin and high, Asian-inflected
Female, hints of softness and suggestion.

'Can I....? '

Hid in shelves of poetry, journals
birds of Scotland, lesbian, gendered, jazz, New England
school house quarterlies

Unaffected where it matters, I don't look to her
Semi-resigned, someone will surely take her up
on it. Oh, she can't be serious

I pass on through
the Cheez-its and the Cheerios
the weeklies and the daily rags
dripping inky off the shelves

And step out, on my perfect guard
into the criss-cross hordes, how they
avoid collision, by
miraculous geometry

save for the woman, hurrying
who calls me 'Jesus Christ'
and not in unaccusatory terms!

Moving by stealth once more
intact in my intent to glimpse her face
but she's behind me now

Then some old Bowie song
passes its fingertips over my brow
and presses on the ache behind my eyes
'Why didn't I say, why didn't I say...'

The clutter and the trivia, ephemera of the store

and of my thoughts, the junkyard of my soul
the worn-out clothes, the gems, the Bombay mix

And she will still repeat, unvarying, note-true
The chorus of her storefront studio
'Can I help anyone...? '

Anyone? you mean?
Oh yes, you may...
please help me if you can....
I'm sure there'll be some way to help you too.

Frank Bana

Here She Walks...

Here she walks in the shade of solitary hills
Hair swaying, skin browned, cotton shirt upon her back
And sandals open to the dust, the camera hangs from her neck
And nestles on her breast. She frames
The silent frontier town that lies before her
With the living shutters of her eyes.

The crowds in the oasis know the name she's taken.
As one woman, child and man, they name her in their tongue
And with their gaze demand of her and whisper for each other
The reason for her smile, the playtime of her eyes -
A distant lover, transported? Or a letter
Delivered by mysterious means, unseen hands?

For she is smiling in the solid arms
Of her freedom at each step increasing. No man
Can raise his hand against her, not in rage
Nor with premeditation. No father now
Can make a servitude for her, no mother
Can turn away her face and and close her heart.

The sun freckles her arms and when it rains
The drops beat languidly upon her roof.
The watchman fans the embers of his jiko
To warn the jealous spouse beyond the gates.
The parokeet has learned to serenade the sunrise
And squarks the phraseology of love.
Witless or wise as she may be, the bird talks for me.

Like a young child, ready to show her kindest faces,
The future stands at the corner of the dawn
To beckon her to many of these pathways
To make each day more precious than the rain.

Frank Bana

Herr Hitler In Reverse

Now he is lost and gone, my friends!
He sleeps with Bronte, Gandhi, Tamburlane
I wish I'd been him, known him, held him back
From falling into dark, I would have learned
Right at his feet, taken his methods, table thoughts,
Applied them town by town and street by street.

First I free the Chancelry from debt
Berlin from Wagner, unemployment,
Calculus of churches and Leibniz,
I subsidise Kurt Weill, take lunch with Brecht
Establish the Spinoza Youth, with Ernst Roem at the head!

And then each part of Africa I free
From French and British servitude, creating India too
I liberate the Russians from the hold of Bolshevly
And gift unto the Jews their holy Palestine
I break their chains before the English do
So they'll sleep good and sound - Rest will make them Free!
And all these lovely Germans under me -
Deserve a shot at liberty. I've handed them to Austria.
Iraqis? Trusteeship for America. And on the side
I've founded the UN with one decree!

As you, mein Herr, as you -
All the things that I alone could do!
I order the farm animals let loose, close down
The abattoirs, I run V.W's
On ethanol to keep the planet cool.

As you, imagine what I could have been!
Newborn of Italy and Portugal
And all their conquered lands
Would bear your name
Never to be spurned
Nor spit upon at school -
Never to feel ashamed.

But you, you ruled us without love

Only with your power, in blood
You never learned to live without them.

You should have trusted down there in the trenches
You should have sired some secret love-child
To distract you from the failure of your art

I knew by all your mimicry and dances
As you orated, spat on Flanders, France,
That you were crying out for an embrace....

Now take him back, unrepentant and intact
Entombed, at rest under his shameful face
I'll do it all much better in his place!

And when they look about
For my longings and deficiencies
I swear I won't kill those who might find out

Signed,
I am the Jew.
And you?

Frank Bana

Hi Jean

You're very clean!
I've kept you awful close to me

You're the sheen
On my body.

Frank Bana

His Trip

The King of Spain
Slipped on adobe
While hunting
Elephants in Chobe

Had he not gone
And bust his hip
We'd have never heard
Of his careless trip.

Frank Bana

Hitler At 75

So Hitler came to power
75 years ago today

so what of it, really?
new Hitlers turn up every day

only with smaller armies
and rather less publicity

Maybe there's a Hitler out there
somewhere close to you

get ready to defend your life -
your personal World War Two

Frank Bana

Homecoming Traveller

Long branches stretched over the driveway
Felled by a summer storm
On the mailbox, a red flag calling
The newspaper late on the ground
Dusky foxes fled the fading light
And squirrels clung to the sides of trees
As he approached, with shiny shoes
Teasing the stones like hide and seek

Light flickered from the house ahead
A fairy cartoon through thin veiled lace
She sat by the table, alert, fair-faced
Lightly curled hair, eating slices of pear
Oblivious to the traveller outside
Who might come home at any time
From anywhere, destined to wander
Through the swaying doors of her life

As the day took leave, trees standing guard
He paused an instant to mark the reprieve
Fumbled his key and the old screen door
To receive her smile, by joy released.

Frank Bana

Hostage House

The house is vast to one like me
Who longs for small interiors
The lunch table the midriff of a tree
The ceilings high above the balconies
Admitting yellow crescent shafts of light.

I walk along the wired perimeter
The grassy garden left untrimmed
Except before the Eid. A goat lives there
Tethered, munching, ignorant of his fate
To be the guest most honoured at the feast.

I walk the gently sloping hills
Beside the moneyed walls and high-grown trees
The house still echoes silently
Even the dog, here since his puppy days
Knows everyone too well to speak
And strangers rarely come to talk
And friends more rarely still. I walk
The lightly trodden, often muddy paths
Moulded and crevassed by the season's rain
Cast out like Cain after his day of work
I stretch out every strand of time
Until the dark returns.

Only the tunes of walking blues
Are company for me upon these trails
As I trudge in empty shoes
I calculate the yearly, monthly rents
Exchange rates rounded in my head.
What would it take to contemplate
The drama of a swift escape
To flee weightless by taxi to reclaim
The tiny rooms of urban life
In which no man lives hostage
To his life, where friends and music
Even air still seems
Available and not yet crushed
By pure menacing spirits of

An empty house, far more invested in
Than love that drifts
Like smoke towards its beams?

I walk to limits of the dead-end lanes
And back again, awaiting the return
Of dark, the signal to resume
The drawn-out playing of concluding scenes
On stages bare of dialogue and dreams.

Frank Bana

Hotel Room Meditation

Because of some trick
Involving double mirrors
I could see my own ass
In the hotel room this morning

It did not look too shabby
I thought that you could love me
But you were very busy
Looking out at Lake Geneva

Frank Bana

H's Soul

I wonder what happened to Hitler's Soul
As children cursed it around the world
At breakfast tables, under hidden floors
And at the oven doors

Lovers cursed it in their ecstasy throes
Soldiers cursed it, spitting on their boots
Marching in life and death parades
As their mothers cursed him too

Begging his Soul to be damned in Hell
Consigned with Generals that cursed it well

Where did it go, that very special Soul
Was there a space, a prison cell
Padded by the silence of his screams
That echo in our darkest dreams?

Frank Bana

I Can Always Tell

when clouds fill the horizon
I can see the signs
I can always tell
when rains will arrive

there's tapping on the skylight
the deer run for the woods
you get up very slowly
and lay down in your room

then later
after many years
when all the wells are dry

the rain wakes the savannah
you rush into the garden
glistening and golden
your face turned to the sky.

Frank Bana

I Still Believe In Africa

Bikes and broken bakkies
Abandoned by a stream
Renaissance and rebirth
In the blood of a bad dream
I still believe in Africa
How she will rise again

Living with the virus
And determined to endure
She learns to use the remedy
While science finds the cure
City life spills endlessly
Upon the open plain
I will believe in Africa
And she will rise again

Bandits shoot the tyres
Desk jockeys steal the grain
The cream is scooped up from the top
The well holds tears of rain
Still Africa has never lost
Her morning sunshine face
And all the sins of history
Prepare to be erased

I stood so still on Otse Hill
As the birds passed by
And watched the distant lightning
Paint the Transvaal sky
The rain stops at the border
One night it will cross over
To meet the morning sun

And from the ash of cruelties
Her new rainbow will come.

Frank Bana

I Will Try

I will try
To dance for you as once I danced
Barefoot in the heavy summer night
In the heart of the Bamangwato lands

And I will try
To sing for you as once I sang
Blue cap shading my eyes, guitar in hand
For the stars by the Thamalakane banks

I will do my best
To long for you as once I sent
My longing out from salt-crusted rocks
Into the heart of Cape Verdian winds

I will try again
To write for you, as I once composed
Words of the deep self, bubbling up
From mystical wells that water the soul

I will do what I can
To be the man who once was young
Who dreamed so free and loved so strong
Because you have brought me to love again.

Frank Bana

Identity Theft

Pay attention to the news!
Coups are happening overseas
Soldiers lurk in the bushes here
In crevices of soil and trees

Bugs are slowly hauling off
All your easy liberties
Assured and so familiar
You scarce remember what they were

But you will miss them if they're gone
And your children will thank you none
When drunken agents of the law
Plunge their hatchets through the door

It's hard, I know, to be one's best
Living now and living here
Numbed, fatigued and short of rest
Distraught by loneliness and fear

But run the data through a sieve
And check with an alternative
Play close attention to your dreams
Carry no cash for others' schemes

Lest they steal your name and shoes
And trade your wages for their wars
While, dazed by entertainment shows
You let slip all that once was your's.

Frank Bana

Immutable

The beauty of an equation as it curves
Held in balance by the equals sign
The swell of breast, belly and waist
The joy of reconciling
As the ledgers fold
For one more year, on one more time

The books close on the vastness
Of an emotional life, loves met
Souls touching in the infinite
Mourned as lost, then found
Reduced by naked numbers
Through statistics and accounts

Unclothed, disrobed by binary
Sequence in the black and white
Where feelings dwell in secret realms
The complex duo-decimal
Swims in the algebra
Of all the love we make, more than associates
We are causality -
We cause each other to equate.

Science doesn't care
Or call for disbelief
It wants nothing of our faith
Like a cold, arrogant love
That exists immutably
Beyond futile contest
And all you do, to make some sense -
Submit and then accept.

The Big Bang lasted, so it's said
A fraction of a mili-sec
Sufficient nonetheless
For everything we have been in this world
All green, all growth, construction, birth and death

And for a tiny mili-sec

I was certain and I had the proof
That you loved me; it was enough
And is, will have to be
Immutable as iron law
From which it all proceeds henceforth

Or maybe not. Some scientists
Object to the power of inference
Claim limits to a proof,
They would deny us, even these
Small comforts and assurances.

Therefore: I hold that moment tight
And let that moment rule my life
So when you morph into a star
Leaving me nothing else betrayed
Deleting all the formulae we built
Assumed complacently that we had saved

I will banish every thought
Of our equations from my heart
Instead keeping a steady hold
On you in every atom of my soul.

Frank Bana

Impermanence, Acceptance....

Of life, there is nothing lasting in flesh
Of the greatest passions, of childhood games
The energy, acuity in which we delighted
Yield to the years and abandon us.

What endures of our living is made from dreams
The human, inescapable need
To strive in moments both foolish and clear
To protect foundations that erode with time.

I will know dreams as energies leave me,
My daughter venturing to explore the world
My brother secure in the house he worked for
The birds flying north to Canada.

I'll dream in French and sing in Spanish
Read the psalms of David, one each day
With time on my hands to save the planet
To learn the names of colours and stars

To kneel to the Ancestors on Black Sea shores
The plains of Judea, villages of the Nile
The Great Rift Valley, the house on the foothills
With Dylan's trilogy and the song of La Mer.

In older age we cling to inspirations
While the golden youthful sands, the liquid love
That freshened our hands and fell from our fingers
Are captured only by memory and soul.

Nothing lasts in flesh, and this is our blessing:
Moments of transcendence, moments of escape.
Impermanence, our acceptance of it:
The aspects most beautiful of us.

Frank Bana

In Africa's Night (A Lament)

Death in Africa's night, she's 38
They bear me from hospital grounds
Our home is empty, except for me
A rented shell where loss abounds

I read Psalm Number 121
Memorial closes the Book of Plans
They stand in line for a moment's embrace
She lies under embalming hands

The box with permits of expiration
Weighs in the belly of the plane
We fly over saltlands of Kalahari
I descend into the heartless flame

To the yard for the last time, laid out low
In the rondavel they had thatched for us
Here we laid on our wedding day
Here we come to the terminus

Women sing Laments all night
I fall asleep in the haze of dawn
Her swollen face in the coffin view
Her mother cries, not the child I knew!

The army pitches canvas halls
Mourners pour from the desert towns
Pots of sorghum meal and meat
Warm the nights they huddle around

The dreaded wizards laugh in the bush
Age-cohort girls joke in shebeens
We are beaten, they are waiting for
The burial of imprudent dreams

Trucks leave for the village shores
Their tails of dust rise in the eyes
Of morning's face, falling upon
Late drinkers by the riverside

Red rectangles newly dug
And how this earth drains soft and fine!
The sand so quick, the tears so dry
The crowd surrounds the burial line

The midday breeze lowers its head
The sun is cruel as mourners sing
Her tears burn on my eyes, my skin
The box falls, closing everything

A spouse carried her back to earth
Two children carry on her name
The dust would not be shed from skin
Until a love was born again.

Frank Bana

In Denmark In November

Small squeak of the coffee can
Small dish of bright brown sugar
Clean white envelope and typing paper
Oranges and candlesticks
Box of matches showing march-violets
Solarpowered pocket calculator
Reports on race and class relations
Shallow and stained
On a desk in Denmark in November

Condensation drips on newly-painted windowframes
Music by Brel and Becaud
A half-formed song and poem
I make for disarmament
Dispowering the atomsplitters –
This is the poem

Back at the heat, the beat is distant and insistent
For work, for a love-encounter, for a meaning
Supplied by modest guarantee
Of a future where to deposit
Such savings of energy
Caught on the offbeat

It comes from pubwindows
From the mighty jokebox
It pins the thump of your heart
On the way to the corner newsstand
It chimes more compelling
Than waged pullers of rope
It forges solidarity
With the heat of marching feet.

Frank Bana

In My Best Friend's Memory

Imagine, you alone know I exist
And I'm not sure you care enough
To pause and to imagine even this

My life-line, bonded in fragility
Together with the palpitating heart
Of worlds in which the living still persist

My dedicated number, postal box
E-mail address and names that keep
My last connections to the hosts remote

With no back-up, residual site
Except hard copy paper notes
You stuffed into the pocket of a winter coat

Imagine, I am known only by you
In this world, real and virtual alike
And I am weighed within your hands if not

Condemned already to your attic drawer
The tissues of a heart you left behind
A tiny scene in stories you forgot

However you erase or try to crush
The memories I scattered in this world
I will persist in calling you to find

These stubborn thoughts of me that will not die
That make my claim and furnish proof that I
Exist, or once existed in your mind.

Frank Bana

Inauguration Platform Song

Rebuild the railways!
See those bullet trains
Superheroes in the night
Scattering the leaves and dust
Speeding like arrows to the coast
Rebuild the railways!
Bring high-fliers to the land
Speculators down to earth
Investors make a killing
Passengers can surf
Across the virtual plains
Rebuild the railways!
Magnetic rails to rising sun
National spirit of Whitman
In the post-industrial age
Obama's legacy to come
Speeding through our freighted days
Don't be slow, super-conductors
Get on board, fire up the train
It's time to dump the fossil fuel
Turn destiny to destination
Waiting in anticipation
With pre-paid ticket at the station
Time has come!
Rebuild the railways!

Frank Bana

Insisting On Peace

Peace is said to be elusive!
But peace is not elusive really
When it is loved and prized

Above other desires
Peace is what we think of
When we hold our children's hands

And behold our futures
In a moment's contemplation
Of our deepest needs and plans.

Bread or rice or porridge
Garnished with some sweetness
And the relish still to come -

So is peace upon the tongue
A simple obligation
Daily duty undertaken

To preserve the space to grow
All we need to learn and know.

And for all the little animals
And the beautiful believers
And their brothers, unbelievers

Faithful equally and true
The little children too
And their own needs and desires
And the dreams they will pursue.

We will love the taste of it
As our hungry souls are filled
Oh, be patient and insist on it
With your friends and enemies
Addicted more to peace.

And since we have no powers

Of stop, search and arrest
We must crowd the hatred
And squeeze the violence

Let them feel unwelcome here
Unwelcome in our homes and hearts
Until they face the mirror
To renounce their brutal ways
To confront the violence of our days.

And by these necessary means
One by one, hearts can be claimed
And freed of all their silent fears
Our hearts employed as builders' stones

To raise up houses of ideals
Where hands can reach out unafraid
And wherein peace securely reigns.

Frank Bana

Irving And Ahmadinejad Make The Case

I'm glad David Irving is free
He should never have been on trial
Nor jailed on charges in Austria
Of Holocaust denial

I am glad of Ahmadinejad
And his conference on how many
Of my people were murdered
In gas chambers. If any.

Our Shoah should never cease to be
The ground of fierce debate
Its meaning for humanity
Its horror and its weight

They serve us, these provocateurs
To confirm we're hated well
To keep our vigilance, or be
Dispatched again to hell.

Reminding us to speak and witness
Not just for ourselves
But for all the persecuted
Peoples of this earth. (*)

Those who live among survivors
Know each Shoah is unique:
The depths of human cruelty
Are familiar and antique.

And concerning all the History
They would steal and then erase:
Their hatred and our evidence
Will forever make the case.

Frank Bana

Island Of My Soul

The island in the distant places
Of my soul is quiet and light
Surrounded by savannah lake
A small ocean of sand, acacia
Slopes and hollow reaches
Imperceptible to sight

Not so much from day to day
Takes place, small business to transact
The trucks roll weekly through and raise
Their feather-tails of dust across
My soul horizon's face

Then they fall, recession lasts
Another seven days, the mail
Is read, the yellow stars
And blue mouth of the morning sky
Are smiling to be on our side

Protected island, shimmering
Calls silently for me to shed
The business clothes, financial dread
- my life's detail disintegrates -

And board the tiny vessel crafted
Of bamboo and ragged sails
Propelled along the dreaming winds
To shores where peace prevails, awaits

To take me deep inside of her
Unshakable embrace.

Frank Bana

It's Not Flying

it's not flying that makes me feel sick
it's the bus driver in the morning
he's a crazy young man
drives like he was making hot-blooded love

we always make the train
just in time

Frank Bana

Jealous Moon

Increasingly, she troubles me
I'm seeing her lately as light blue
In an auto-suggestive state
Sometimes with a tinge of red
A Queen's Guard helmet on her head

And I can't keep track at all
Of the hours of her rising
Her weeks of wax and wane
Sure, you'd assume
That a man on a planet with just one moon
Would be capable of following her plane.

Yes, she troubles me
Even when she shines on me
Makes me feel like an alien
Misplaced in the city, sensing at best
That I'm not where I was born to be.

The moon can be dangerous, too
She can snare you with a tide
And pull you under, reach down low
Breaking up your wedding vows
As you slowly sink and drown
In dark pools of reflecting eyes

Not even wise
To try to write a poem about the moon
Her smile is concealing bad intent
And she's jealous of her font of light
Just waiting for something to condemn
In the affairs of boys and men.

Frank Bana

Kafkaesque

After a lifetime
of describing
things as Kafkaesque

I finally read Kafka
and discovered
he's not Kafkaesque a bit!

he's a lot more like Kafka
in fact
to my untrained eye

than his Esque
would suggest
or seem to imply.

Frank Bana

Kaiser Street

The summer clouds congealed so thick
My brain could hardly take the pressure
Elections for a constitution, a president and assembly
That would not matter anyway.
All was predetermined. It was clear
The old order had murdered too many
To stand for long, with nothing to deliver.

In the beer gardens downtown
The smoke of bratwurst hovered constantly
The gap-toothed and sun-wrinkled men
Drinking to the death of their colony
Laying bets on the failure of independence
Apartheid-wasted and inbred
The girls too listless for a proposition
Of even the U.N.

I walked home alone
There was no-one in town to meet
The passing of the night, the age
Down on Kaiser Street

I'm not sorry for what they lost
I'm proud of my little part
Oh, how they protested when we gave out hoes
And machetes for clearing the bush
But if we had wanted to incite a war
There were bigger fields to set alight.

Ziggy Marley flew in for the ceremony
As his father had come to Zimbabwe
Ten years before. I watched the proceedings on TV
With my sweet wife sitting next to me
The reggae beats flew over the hillsides
The world, the party, the blue army
Moved in, moved on, and life returned
To Kaiser Street - now Independence Avenue.

I knew a progressive Afrikaaner

He thought he knew best, what would work for the farmer
He seemed to see the approaching tide
And killed himself, rather than hide.

Beyond the shacks where drunken families sleep
Ahead of me, a contourless plain
And a single black tarmac stripe
Running towards Eternity
The shore that constantly retreats
Cloaked in old shipwrecks and mist

I sped towards the dark mouth of the coast
With a story that cannot hold the weight
Of everything I lost.

Frank Bana

Kalahari Butterflies

white blossoms in the air
one more spring in the exile I chose
that becomes addictive to itself

cold April London streets
and record bins in Soho basement stores
the damp smiles which invite me from afar

white Kalahari butterflies
the smell of fresh cow dung
the taste of ripe marula fruit is sweet

sitting by acacia trees
fingers in the shallow dusty soil
caressing Africa as a lover would

then she embraces me
like a soul in memory
an orphan child finding its mother's knee

to protect her now in turn
I witness her defence against
all blind and negative publicity

in the maelstrom of the West
that speaks no unconditional word
in generosity, be sure

a new thing each day is begun
as I fight off voices whispering
my life's work has been done.

Frank Bana

Kalahari Weavers

The weaver birds build homes together
Great thatch domes
They enter and leave
Circling in their thousands
Nests embracing great thorn trees
And no wisp or stalk is wasted

The weaver birds build commune homes
That stately sway in the breeze of dawn
Freezing under the midday blaze
Defiant in the cruellest evening storm

Tireless desert artisans
Peerless design skills
Resolved to live together by
Savannah stripped bare of life
And grasses of which few survive

If I had a week, a shade
And water-bottle filled
I would stay to watch them build.

Frank Bana

Kingsley Place (Personal History, Of No Conceivable Interest....)

Shining in the Sixties on the far side of a hill
London haze by day, stars in waiting for the dawn
Kitchen windows gazing on a garden well enclosed
Bedroom looking down upon a white carpeted lawn
My Soviet speakers shaking, rumbling in stereo
Tchaikovsky, Leonard Cohen, hadn't heard Dylan at all.
Sinatra down the hall, Benny Goodman on the patio.
My brother banged his little fists on the dividing wall.

Being asked to be a boy was tough, in some ways, I would say
Thick glasses, hair and nose in the ancient Jewish style
Writing tiny poems to the girl down by the junction
Where I lingered like an actor on a stage a mile away.
Every line composed by the haunted lights of London
I walked on down to Soho in my short pants after class
And lingered in the basements of second-hand LP stores
Imagining who I'd meet, who could sweep me to the stars.

Then off went Mum and Dad to the country, or to France
I invited my few friends around for cooking and to dance.
Then Heaven broke its barriers. David came first, of course
Turned right on the one-way, smashed up his sister's car
And then my schoolmate Mark, stoned on something fine
He was working in a chemist's shop during his spare time.

And after all the partying, only one was left:
A Danish girl named Lise. I made breakfast for us.
Black coffee, steak and eggs. It's lucky that I did.
We needed all the strength of it, on the white carpet rug.
She was my youthful teacher, already brave and free
To peaceful strains, Sibelius, long second Symphony.

The first among the many times, but I was bound to miss her
Light in her hair, deep in her soul, and our inaugural kiss
And I grew up, in stranded heart of wild metropolis
That weekend that my parents left, supposing no mischief
No party, passion, stimulants, no such ecstatic face

Or glowing, burning bright red eyes, at 30 Kingsley Place.

Frank Bana

Lament For American Progress

America messes up the Middle East
Leaves itself beholden to dictators
And Chinese communist creditors
Its public schools are largely a disgrace
And she may not notice but the
Mutilées de guerre
Are almost everywhere

America never gets anything right
Not since World War Two and the rebuilding of Germany
Spends its common treasure on foreign misadventures
And on handouts to political
lobbies and contractors

And then wonders why there's a weak dollar
And a financial crisis
Corporate execs walk out from the rubble
Smiling deep into their bonuses
One hand greases off another

Builds useless walls with Mexico
Bans drugs criminalizes the black male populace
Builds weapons to threaten from space
Never builds coast levees high enough
Or accepts its role in global warming

Loses 2,000-plus souls in a terror attack
And spends the next seven-plus years
Disputing the design of a monument

Thinks the definition of civilisation
Is carrying a gun
Can't be bothered even to understand
Its own Constitution!

(Look up the second amendment
And read the whole paragraph -
Not just the convenient part!) .

The gross malfeasance
Of those in government
Never gets punished
So is constantly repeated
Congressional investigations mocked and defeated
Senators found guilty of a crime
Can't even summon the shame to resign!

America never gets anything done
Blame a corrupt power elite if you will
The party hacks on the laps of the lobbyists
Instead of the people who keep right on
Voting for clowns and crooks or don't vote at all
I won't blame you.

America sure got one thing right
His name is Obama
But if history is a guide
We should all be afraid

For America never got to the bottom
America never got to the truth
And soon stopped demanding
Or even asking for the truth:
Who shot John Kennedy
And why
Who shot Robert Kennedy
And why
Who shot Martin Luther King
And why

And who is protecting
The President now?
A President who understands the stakes
And the reality of the Power

Health care reform
Is the eye of the storm

People elect an honest man
Through the electoral industry
And then the mass corporate interests come

To ensure he gets almost nothing done!

Frank Bana

Lands

I've seen lands sunken by sun
In yellow and the pools of saltbush
Change to pavements swept in restless
And magic powders of snow

I've seen my body change with lands
From a free-swaying gazelle in the heat-wind
Into a suit of warmth, woven by my lover
And the drink in my hand from juice to coffee

And I've wondered how a tropic people
Would wake to receive a snow-covered land
Or a virgin morning's people's government
Unviolated by the footprints of power.

Frank Bana

Lands II

I was riding the track to your mother's lands
And the donkey was growing tired
I came to a camp by the falling day
And sat by the fireside

The black pot was cooking between the smoke
And the men were collecting wood
The split of the branches called into the night
As the women bent over the food

I asked what it was they stirred in the pot
That drew the little dogs so near
The meat was left over from a wedding feast
The corn was brought in by the bride that year

They said, our daughters have left the land
Our children are scarcer than rain
The youngest is married to an Englishman
(And that life seemed so near again)

The lands were empty when I came next day
Your boy and your brother were gone
I drank from the gourds and lit the lamp
And waited for you and the dawn

I woke to the sound of a 4-wheel drive
Pulling a harvester along the track
So I took to the donkey and left you a note
Wondering if we would ever come back.

Frank Bana

Leave The Queen Alone!

People, leave the Queen alone.
Did she do you any harm?
Unintentional it was, I'm sure.
Are you a tax contributor?
The squad in Basra probably cost more
Last year than her entire brood did
Horses, dogs and sons included.

She's been up there all through my life
Guarding the oral constitution
Reminding me of my dear old Mum
Keeping a united Kingdom
Staring out abstractly from
The coins of daily transaction.

She's seen the PMs come and go
Shown them their place and put them there
Even budding authoritarians
Got nothing more than a distant stare
Maggie, for one, kissed her hands
Backed off, humbled and resigned
Turned and ran home anxiously
To invite dictators for cake and tea.

Now I don't stay up wondering
Who Elizabeth truly is
(Or whether Shakespeare was Shakespeare
Or some other kind of genius)
Who she thought she might become
When she was innocent and young
Or if she laughs on winter nights
With Phil the Greek and Elton John

She's Queen, that's all I care about
Sitting there, portrait-like
Smiling in all her galleries
Upon new dukes and citizens
Seeing us through long dark years
Waving tirelessly through our tears

And at the new Millennium

She knows just what she has to say
The words to use, the time of day
Squatting like a paperweight
So my bill of rights won't blow away
And it's long hours, must be hard work
Being nothing but a Queen
There aren't too many breaks
That you can take behind the scenes

So let's admire the dramatic skills
She's practised to perfection
The fine suspension of belief
That ensures her warm reception
She's growing old and must be tired
Leave her to rest in bed
Say a prayer for Liz, and thank your stars
She's not a President instead.

Frank Bana

Leaves (A Song Of Exile)

Leaves fall across the pathways
Like a steady blowing rain
On the old ranch houses and new MacHouses
And it's cold in Connecticut, once again

I hear it's cold in England too
I am less than American, after all
I don't drive & scream for the Yankees
I remember how leaves of Autumn fall

I'll never learn all these written rules
Of shaven lawns and cleared debris
As if there were something innately flawed
In designs of nature, the heart of me.

Frank Bana

Let Us Unify

Let us unify in search and experience
Let us not be fragmented by the fragmentation of experience
In our modern century

Let us recall a union of solidarity
On which we base our seeking for truth
On the explosive, shifting ground
Of our modern century

Let us form alliances across the categories
Of class and race and gender
That an oppressive system of profit
Imposes and aims to make essential

Let our understanding encompass
The morbid symptoms that arise in our fellows
Resulting from the time the old order
Takes to die

Let our love be a force for radicalism
And our fertility a force for the birth
Of the new society freeing all possibilities
From the limits of the bottom line.

Frank Bana

Lisboa (1983)

Lisbon

How life runs quickly by
The painted flowers fade on the walls
Of Avenida de Liberdade
The flowers of revolution that were sown in blood
Of Africa seized by your ancient rulers
And leased to your moneyed class
Subleased to your southern farmers

Lisbon

Burst into bloom after the fallow of centuries
Freedom to sing in the streets, to withhold labour
But life still does not cease to worsen
For your Africans and poor
At work on every street without machine tools
Laying and repairing each small stone

Lisbon

You welcomed the crowds at Restadores
Massing to support the young officers
And to paint the stone where martyrs fell
Today there is no scarcity of politics
But the same men control, the same women keep clean
The sheets, the workers far from home
Sweep clean the streets of worn election posters

In Lisboa to learn Portuguese

I keep a red carnation fresh in water
In the window of my boarding room
The rain falls gently on the traffic below
The flowers that the singers hold are new
Those in the hands of practiced leaders
Are petals that discolour one by one.

Frank Bana

Love Letter To Poland From One Long Escaped....

I gazed across the continent
From where the lines of footprints came
Red blood buried in the soil
Topped with winter frost and all
The rivulets of sweat and screams
That tore the life from childhood dreams

The migrants knocking now again
Another band of fugitives
Stand exiled at the swinging door
Piteous and proud, the young men's faces pale
With tools and attitudes, muscles for sale

Torn tongues and morals frayed, running
From times of terrifying choice
These migrant armies, partisans
Drawn to the scent of money, not the cause
Their brothers left without a voice
Performing all it costs them to survive
And cling onto the ledges of a life.

Leaving a land where romance is defiled
Indifferent to suffering
Where poets lie with no translation
Fault lies in another place
The nightly search for solace
And graves to desecrate
Where hope strikes nothingness
Full in the face

Where the victim never can be sure
That heart and blood are his, are pure
Fearing the phantoms he conspired
To conjure up, the ones that stay
To laugh at him inside his mind
Demons appear, deny him breath
Too fleeting to be caught and put to death.

Love Song For Hamas

['In Gaza, Fiery Insults to Jews Complicate Peace Efforts' - New York Times, 1st April 2008]

['Here lie the killer and the killed,
asleep in one hole' - Mahmoud Darwish]

So Hamas think(s?) that as a Jew
I'm a pig
I don't think so, for pigs don't think
Ho Ho
I take more seriously
The charge that I'm an ape
It certainly bears thinking of, not least
By a Darwin-loving ape like me -

Darwinian Jewish Ape....
Darwinian Ape Jew?

You might be on to something there, Hamas
You can whip my back
And kick me in the ass
If I'm ever on my knees.

Most eloquent and serious of all
Is the Hamas (is that plural?) claim
That I as Jew am 'enemy of G-d'
Well, in my Porcine-Simian view
Her Existence is not obvious
What kind of enemy would I be
Doubting his foe's existence?

And if G-d is, then I'll be
Her wholly faithful animal friend
And give thanks to the Almighty
For making me a Jew
For creating this 'Hamas'
To ensure that I'm reminded of
Exactly what I am.

By the way - or centrally
I'm sorry on behalf of Jews
For occupation of holy land
Of Gaza, shootings of civilians
Destruction of their homes and olive groves
Imprisonment of brave and foolish men

And for driving them to murder and to hate.

Clever of apes and pigs to do all that
Not wise of them, not nice at all
And just plain wrong. Sorry for that.
It could have been done another way
Once we had gained the upper hand.

A big mistake was made, it's clear:
We're working on some new designs
For cages which are open-plan
To better share
This zoo or grave of holy land.

From your enemies of G-d
What more do you expect
 Hamas, my dears?

Asleep together in this hole
That has never been Visited
Nor Blessed nor sactified

You have lost all memory
For the good or ill
Of which one was the killer
And which one was killed.

Frank Bana

Lovers Of Peace

What does it take
For a land to be at peace?
A mineral in the soil
A truce upon the streets
Natural defence, a desert or a sea
Alpine protection or great barrier reef
To keep the force of hatred in defeat?

Where fathers to their daughters, where good hearts stay connected
Politicians answering to those by whom elected
Where death and life are sacred
And the moon not forced to hide
Lovers of peace will stand together
Fearless
Side by side.

Frank Bana

Magic Man

Yes I know a man
Who with his quiet magic hand
Can turn a room of quarrelsome heads
Snarling for each other in self-regard
Into the running, tumbling, laughing
Children of 4 that they once were

Yes it is his gift to them
Sprawled unconscious to themselves
And for this one chance they must yield
To him the knowledge they have been
To play in wonder, freed from thought
And careless for an hour again.

Frank Bana

Map Makers

[We were not born critical of existing society. There was a moment in our lives (or a month, or a year) when certain facts appeared before us, startled us, and then caused us to question beliefs that were strongly fixed in our consciousness-embedded there by years of family prejudices, orthodox schooling, imbibing of newspapers, radio, and television. This would seem to lead to a simple conclusion: that we all have an enormous responsibility to bring to the attention of others information they do not have, which has the potential of causing them to rethink long-held ideas.' - Howard Zinn]

There was one Italian cartographer
When this storyline began
And a hundred million children of nature
Running barefoot over grassy plains
Their innocence claiming the land

There was one John Dillinger
Robbing banks in the Mid-West
And millions of families silenced
Hostages to both guns and laws
With no protecting hand

There was one Woody Guthrie
Singing for the dispossessed
And a few who picked up his old guitar
There are Dylan, Seeger and Springsteen
And the millions without a star

Voices from the old slave trails
Lament the original nation
But you never hear too much from them
On your corporate radio station

There was one Howard Zinn who said
You can't be neutral on a moving train
He wrote so our history made sense
Researched labour rights and LaGuardia
But you won't find his works in the classrooms
Standing guard over ignorance

There was one Allen Ginsberg
Who used the maps drawn by Whitman
To document his self-liberation
On every trip he would undertake
He gave the gay and the spirit-free
A little more space to create

And once there was Vespucci
Who put America on the map
His name forever here to stay
In the daily pledge that falls from our lips
While our maps are stolen away.

Frank Bana

Maputo, By The Sea

Bandits on three sides, the ocean on the fourth
The city sat sparkling on its coastal berth
The sun rebounding from high windows and tin roofs

Apartments rising up thirty-three floors
Overlooking endless velvet sea
With creaking lifts, sporadic electricity

In those years you could walk around the streets
In safety all night long, but not set foot
Beyond the unmarked limits that were widely understood

With great excitement, I found that I was lodged
Above the national institute of records and books
But their stocks were all in Russian or by Marx

Neighbours living across the dark hallway
Brought me pastels and cakes on Family Day
And asked for eggs and sugar, once or twice

Walking to work and the foreign-currency store
With no furniture at home, refrigerator bare
Until a fisherwoman came with fresh shrimp to the door

The people's market empty, a single butchery
Streets devoid of traffic, a hundred thousand families
Living on donated rice and tomato puree

Planes approached the runway in a corkscrew dive
To avoid heat-seeking missiles, while armed convoys
Made the run from Swaziland to bring supplies

Then the presidential jet veered off course one night
And dived without warning into a foreign field
A successor negotiated a slow end to the siege

He called upon the spirits of investors from abroad
The streets filled up with produce, cafes reappeared
Business men and Party men held meetings of the board

Refugees came home to reclaim ancestral lands
Title deeds were traded, now the dispossessed remain
The city sparkles still, beside a sea of tin and cane.

Frank Bana

Marc And Me Are Free

1973. Your bright spring of fame already on the wane
Careless descent into the dull machine begun
Accidental death beside your child's mother to come

But I was still young. I ventured out Saturdays in platform shoes
Tight red tank top, cheeks glistening in the summer night
My corkscrew curls freed by your inspirations

Clawed from the years obscure, dwelling in bedsits
With Hobbit books and Elvish poems and Tooks,
Happy endurance, no doubt, until your season

Of discovery arrived, borne by a white swan's wings.
And all your rivers of melody and funk flowed easy
But for so short a time, the well dug shallow

And not easily refilled. How you strained
To find a bridge to bear another verse
And seemed to yield too easily, to the mirror,

To the tedium of fame, the moments of transcendence
Before the fatal crash. Barely registered by me
Or others you gave courage to be free.

Yes, you painted a star on the sky. Now fly high
Upon the dragon's back, you need be chained no more:
No longer bound by words or simple chords.

Frank Bana

Memories And Dirty Knees

A straight-backed bike
Bone-shaker, with a broken chain
Sunday p.m. at the Rabbi's home
For Hebrew hour, just down the lane
Buried deep under the twisting vowels
Waiting quite patiently to see
The Monkees singing on TV

Loud boys invade the bus from school
After class with 'Fish' and 'Ning'
Rugby games, warm winter showers
Wearing short pants and dirty knees
Latin midweek, on Saturdays
Futile dallying with Greek

England from her goddesses estranged
Rude, she begs to be refined
I study her peculiar ways, as if
Infatuated by a witch
Who draws strong circles, cleans the spring
Carves wood to make her sticks and broom
With all her boys confined in thrall
And to a clammy reading room

He thought I'd be a diplomat, the Head
And he was right, that was to come
But now, merciless tickling
Over a Master's knee, and in
Some circumstances more extreme
A cricket bat across the bum

He must have kept high hopes for me
But little did he know of lands
For which I would turn traitor, of
The soil I was to hold and tread
But all through time, England remains
I wonder, would she take me back
And have me for herself again?

She dances with her sadness in the sky
I watch, holding my leaves of literature
The Isis Morning smiling in the dawn
At me and my examination gown
After May Ball, her memories, a look
To bring me consolation, as exile
Holds me within its ever-stubborn hands,
The pages of a foreign-language book.

Frank Bana

Migrants And The Breeze

Upon the shore by Goree Island,
The Green Cape's western coast
Senghor's spirit of poetry
Perfumes the evening smoke

The night vibrates to duelling drums
Youthful fingers point to the north
To trace a path for emigrants
By bearings that the slaveboats took

The breeze is a playful character
Dancing a funana with the trees
Teasing, arousing the rushing waves
That grasp for home on the narrow shore

Great masks guard the coastline from invaders
Insisting on history that Africa owns
The Wolof spirit exceeds the present
Beachwalkers hold the future close.

Boats of refugees are impounded
By the naval forces of Senegal
Halted in search of the Canary Islands
Impelled from home by poverty or war...

... this message from the western coast
Arrives too late for young lives lost
But as these words and people pass,
And all of us were migrants once

We know the human heart will seek
The dignities of wealth, degrees
Elusive as the breeze that plays
Where shore and sea are bound to meet
And never know to rest.

Frank Bana

Mirage

Dust circles in motion
Heat dance on my shoes
Haunted by search and memory
Taunted by Kalahari day
Thirsty clouds break through the skies
Cricket armies start to hum
Pula e tla leng?
When will the rains come?

From the skies no word arrives
No echoes from the koppies
Only canopy of blue
That covers both the truth and dust
That would envelop me in lies.

A brief caress of breeze
On dry leaves of Acacia
But no relief for me
Perpetual on the desert ridge
Which overlooks but cannot reach
To freedom's sharp and subtle edge

The breath dies in the vacuum.

I reach out one last time to touch
The face of liberation
Before it disappears for years,
A mirage of the desert sun.

Frank Bana

Monstrous To The Core

For Russia or any nation state
To 'claim' the North Pole to itself
Is monstrous. The riches of
The natural world
Are Heritage to us all -
Humanity, the other creatures
Of the earth and air and sea -
To be guarded with great diligence
And managed carefully
For the welfare of us all.

Yes, to claim a piece of earth
For one tribe, clan or gang,
Species, or National Artifice
Is monstrous to the core
And one of many things
This marvellous, morally able
Sapient species
Should have outlawed to itself
A long, long time ago.

Frank Bana

More Of What Remains

Viewed as a glass half empty, not as a well half full
It is a small disturbance to the mind
To manage all these desert hours, with consideration
Of inheritance and legacy. And I'll perhaps be glad
When later there's no time - for none of this

Thus stalled, I'm forced to gather poems together,
The fragments into handfuls, adding shards and hues
Most tenuous and temporary, like the pebbles
That are gifted in a velvet pouch at a mystic wedding
And spill out in shocked disorder, lost years later

Insisting by this duty that something remains, despite all that is known
Of flesh is grass and solid melts to air –
That someone passing comes to rest, to take the edge from thirst
While charting a direction in the dry savannah plain,
At these thorn-bush lined, pole-buttressed wells.

Frank Bana

Mugabe's Man (Tales Of Everyday Torture)

I am one of Mugabe's street men
I cut off the feet of activist wives
And tie up children of the opposition
And leave them in burning houses to die

I am one of Slobodan's tigers
I nail Bosnian men to wooden doors
And rape their daughters and wives on the floor
I get good press coverage for that manoeuvre

I am one of Heinrich Himmler's Kapos
Herding Jew cattle into the coffers
Filling the ditches with twisted limbs
While gold teeth are pulled by my underlings

I am one of Uncle Joe's investigators
Working dark hours in the Lubyanko
Extracting every tortured confession
As if it were the gold tooth of state secrets

I am Ian Smith's police overlord
Scorching the earth of Shona villages
Smoking out Liberation vermin...

How come you're looking so surprised?
Can't you tell when you meet a smart guy?
A smart man always works both sides

Yes, I'm high on Mugabe's list
An honoured veteran of his service
We pacified the Matabele in '82
I'm looking out for my pension soon.

Frank Bana

Music Of Bill Fay

One day it simply happened
I stumbled on his songs
Thinking I'd never heard him before
In fact a song was already there
Buried in my MP3
But I had never listened
Until the day of my 65th birthday

That's the day I fell
Into the music of Bill Fay
And cried as the first unfurled
Waving to someone never met
But always known, in some place silent
Songs of Peace and god
Seeking redemption of the missing love
Unlocking the new language
That new-born worlds will soon require
Now that the time of time has come
And flowers must arise from stone

Reclusive in North London
Stored with a dusty piano
Ripe with gospel balladry
Waiting for an invitation
To roll that circle melody
Out onto the ghost-filled streets
Where I too ran and grew
Searching for this kind of art
At the crossroad of Dylan and Drake
Weaving in notes of Leonard's grace

Sunlight reflecting on itself
Music singing to itself
A call for our survival
Acknowledging the life
That his songs set loose
One repeated note away
From silence

Welcome in my life, Bill Fay
Your core soul-singing seized my heart
And I will surely not allow
Its tender grasp to let me go

Frank Bana

My Black President

Act One

In the footprints of Mandela
On the ladders of the King
He comes and from some sides hosannas ring

Untinged by darker powers
Unhinged by fate and fame
He brings to us the light of hope again

Construct your own Obama
Create your daytime drama
Make our world a bit safer and calmer

He overcame the odds
Not fathered sometimes mothered
He had the courage to campaign while colored

And now may he complete
All he will represent
Our brave and beautiful Black President.

Act Two

Eat your mortgage bills
Eat your plastic card
Eat the things for which you work so hard

Eat your pistol's prey
Eat your hunting gun
Eat the things that really bring you fun

Eat your own McCain
He was tortured for your pain
He'll make the world safe for Empire again

He'll keep the empty stares
On all your dollars white

And have you dying for new wars to fight.

Finale

The world evolves much faster
The strength drains from your hands
No longer master of your sacred plans

It's simpler to embrace
The lies, forces of hate
Much easier to tear down than create

And when you vote your fears
Dreams fall behind Reality
About a hundred years

So see you maybe then
Back in the dreams you sent
My brave and beautiful Black President.

Frank Bana

My Childhood Temple Song

The winding melody fell to rest
Upon the word Shalom
Small intake of collective breath
The doors of the arc slid apart
Brocade of Torah shone

Children taught the ritual ways
Led forth by the hidden choir
Known only to The Name
Taught through repetition
In rabbinic tones mellifluous
What may be interpreted
What is kept the same.

I kissed the hem of prayer shawl
Never coming quite so near
To the girl beside me, while
She was my young heart's desire
The language that could reach her
More distant than the ancient one
We practised as we stood to sing
Side by side in unison.

That's maybe where the Rabbis erred -
To found their synagogue
Upon prime real estate
With cricket fields opposite
To mix the girls in with the boys
And the adopted with the old
I would perhaps have stayed close to
A dress more modest and less bold.

The temple cracked and was torn down
Raised again far from the grounds
Where crowds, leather and willow play
The melodies refashioned
While the words remain unchanged

And by their threads I find my way

Through the maze of hidden years
Back to the rows where I once stood
And sing them as a child would.

Frank Bana

My Death (La Mort)

A rosy cross held to the face of my death
For death is moving in here with me
Better than to drown in my summoning tears
For with tears you showed us how to be free
I advise us now, while listening to Brel
To dance with the waltz of joy in the heart
The addicts of suffering, the tango of fate
Boasting of how he tore us apart.

Where are we now?
You ask well, Davy Jones
You who sang death's song long ago
And know these defeats in your aging bones

Closer to us though death will approach
The arrow will slow as it nears to its mark
I found dew by the sands of a land without rain
I brought honey for eyes that were flooded with pain
And here in the shade of the shadow of death
Your hand reaches out from the screen of the dark
Caressing the face of a clock that says yes
Staying its chime with an infinite breath.

Frank Bana

My Execution

Facing my execution
Unsure I was the one
Found with the smile, holding the smoking gun

The hooded hulk
Weighs me up and sighs
Deep delight is dancing in his eyes

He knows so well
Arousal and the swell
Anticipates the snap, the fall, the void

While I look back
At the wide door of my cell
From which my life has suddenly emerged

Regretful or ashamed
Who do I have to blame and who
Have I betrayed? As they abandon me

To the moment's agony
Enough to know which years
Paid for the prison, which were
 falling
 free

Frank Bana

My Meatless Year

In my meatless year
I failed to eat an aggregate
of 17 turkeys, fifty-nine chickens
a dozen cows
and a litter of pigs

I could hope that they're happy now
cared for and alive somewhere

and did not meet their end
on somebody else's plate
trampled in their pens and cages
decomposed in a landfill in Delaware
forgotten victims of our failures

so a Happy Better Year
to my fellow surviving
sentient beings

those who are
and those who might be.

Frank Bana

My Parasite

I'll keep myself in motion now
I'll find some things to do
While my parasite is feasting
Devouring me clean and blue
Rank with her visionary sight
Burrowing in my heart to feed
Sucking it dry bleeding it white

Lost love can never sleep
She has no peace facility
Travels by day and hunts by night
Eating from the darkness
Bad magic and black water
Carrying blood from skin to skin
My ruthless parasite

The one I cannot exorcise
Carried in my mind
Harnessed to the memories
Of my distant twin and I
Hell's untamed parasite
The relentless disciplines
That I do not dare deny

Assuredly I don't lay still
I deploy the herbs and fan
But her fever will return
My parasite slips through the net
Where my suffering began

As I run the course, I lose
More innocence each day
Learning while I pay
For every happiness we knew
I had always heard of this
The preying of a succubus
Nourished by the weaknesses
That I confessed to you

But I had never understood
In all my schools of love
How I could be haunted so
Once I had let go
And claimed back from the dead like this
One vial at a time
Until under the earth we lie
My parasite and I

Frank Bana

Nazir Behind His Gates

My family home comes to assume
hidden gates and padlocked doors

My home has now become my room
and if I had a computer,
a small but steady flow of cash
and electricity

Perhaps I could resume
all my studies here alone
far from the rowdy campus boys
wearing their amulets and rings
who I can trust no more.

My father was a businessman
who now desists from travelling
even over town

My mother was a healthy woman
sturdy, cancer-free

And I was carefree in my turn
with urban cruelty less strong
than this dictatorship of fear

That leaves no public place
no lecture hall or intersecting street
clean of murderous air.

Behind the whitewashed walls I wait
for foreign armies to withdraw
for hope to stand its ground or be restored,
security to win its bout with hate

With stocks and patience running low
five times a day I pray
and genuflect for peace

I wonder if exile provides escape?

For if I stay, it will be easier
to open up these gates, admit defeat

And find my last solution
with the gangs that own the street.

Frank Bana

Negligence

I have neglected sacred duties
The future punishment of my soul
May yet be more severe
There were too many days
Visiting with laughter
In songs and cries of ecstasy

Without a sigh, a bow or sway
Towards the murdered millions
The children thrown to metal jaws
The women into seething lime
The old ones without stones above their heads
To guard their peace in eternity

I should not have forgotten thee
The spirit of the people
So deeply perished in my birth
The martyrs of the ancient books
The heroes of the alleyways
Abandoned to the wicked woods

I am to blame, I am to blame
My right hand all too busy
My name become a distant tongue
That does not call upon nor claim
My heart for Israel. I am lost:
A life unnoted by the scribe
A death by mourner's prayer unsanctified.

Frank Bana

New Administration

The new administration
Will introduce a hostile environment
With hourly disruptions
To your most trusted assumptions

Unexpected crises
Of the dear leader's devising
You will not have time to breathe
Nor more than dimly perceive
What is really being done or being hid

Incompetence and indecision
Or intended chaos as manipulation
It will never be quite clear but you're
Required to smile, signal allegiance
For the great good of our nation

Happy again and glorious
If not for the dark deeds of the traitors
Who let us down by questioning

My friends, don't question anything

The leader says he knows what's best
Applaud his lines
Take up your place
Stand patiently
He's in your head
Without him you'll be nothing

Without us you'll be dead

Frank Bana

New Orleans Solo

The swirling music stops within a moment
The banjo cuts through heavy scented air
Its high-tuned strings ring out into the darkness
High water and the flood are everywhere

The music cooled the flood of '27
Spirits rose on high from burying grounds
The levees once again lie breached and broken
Upon the deep resistance of this sound

She lacked the holy places for protection
No-one embraced her with a masterplan
A city stripped of all her antecedents
Concessionary purchase, sold again

Shadows perch on annual celebration
Jazz is heard, but playing on the screen
The smell of money dampens oleander
Homeless and poor left scattered by the sea

.
Free passage for all those with eyes averted
No Joan of Arc to lead a cry of rage
The tall oaks echo to the banjo music,
New Orleans solo, naked up on stage.

with thanks to B.D.

Frank Bana

New Year's Day

New Year's Day

you have the money woes
You hide them very well.
Wall Street got you down? Bones
Broken on the wheel? You disguise it
Really well. My outrageous aching neck
Protesting what befell. The promise
Of deducting all the sixty floors
From which you lately fell.

The basement flood brings down the house
Your engines poisoning
The air, the atmosphere
Leaks in from the garage. You did not switch
From gas, electric green
For pussies, red
The glow of your slow-
bleeding life

The angry child, the loud
Angry & unrequited wife
Her wide demanding mouth, barely
Domesticated claws. The pleasure is all your's.

I'm sorry for it, every bit.
For I, my friend, have known it all
Before I got out, New Year's Day
On the swift heels of my resolution
I don't know yet if I'm alive
If I survived
To witness and enjoy
My own final solution.

Frank Bana

New York Atonement Day

['For the sin we have committed before Thee
for not working for peace... grant us atonement'.]

I decided I could not take it any longer
Something had to be done - and by me!
People complaining I was on a downer.
Morose, they said. Horribly testy.

So I took myself by the 'scruff of the neck'
With my silver star dangling down
And I threw myself onto the ground
In front of the flags in coloured array
Along the facade of the UN HQ -
And I commenced to pray.

UN Security with their badges and blue
Came running over to see who I am
I showed them my Pass, in between Baruch's
They frowned, and decided I was best left alone,
Just another staff member gone mad.

It went so well, broken Hebrew and all
That I decided to try it out once more
In front of the Israeli consulate
On Second Avenue. Sure, they would get it.
It was just a little more difficult there
With the concrete blocks and the close-up stares

But no-one bothered me overly much.
Gaggles of tourists were snapping away
A cyclist screamed, 'get out of the way! '
A man in fatigues called me 'crazy mo-fo'
(Well they have a tendency to, you know) ,
Then came a Hasid, who said, 'brother please,
Enough with all of that whining for peace'.

'There's a war on, or haven't you heard? ', I replied
'And it's been raised up to Permanent Status.

And that's what I just can't stand anymore
The lust for and deification of War
The day has come for us each to atone
So I've hauled out my books to learn Hebrew again,
The multiple names of G-d and of Man.

Join me or leave me, I need to rehearse
To recite expiations in double-quick time
To kneel on the sidewalk, to sway as I pray
Knowing the cops will be soon coming by.
And they don't want to find me down on my knees....
.... or do they? '

'Mazel tov', he said. 'And have a nice day'.

Frank Bana

New York In Sunlight

New York in sunlight
In the One World century
I see it all
From the 14th floor
The blue hidden tribune
Flowing past the national flags
That the diplomats hoist high
And from metal poles remove

It is too much you ask of me
To justify my work in money
And make a meaning of it too
As if a living soul will care
About anything I do
Once the millions depart this Isle
And survivors are repaired

Music was made in churches
People's songs and pagan poetry
Down this river you could smell the blood
Taste the dust of exploded flesh
Watch the smoke rising for days
Wait for songs to rise again

Trapped here by the passing years
The rooftops empty down below
Empty of their gardeners
While the blossoms and Tudor leaves
Grow and fall
Fall and grow

I call to every circumstance:
For this you do not need me
I was not born like this to burn
I call on you to free me
From these ruled and empty lines
I have promised to return
Set me free and loose upon the world.

New York Morning, Glimpse Of Beauty

Sunrise, and I read the New Yorker magazine
its poems not of the city, even might
have written them myself, it seems

The heat grows, I toss out the New York Times
Vade Mecum of commute, tired of the weight
of business and estate, pages that I never use

And now the New York streets, unforgiving
red-light-jumping cars, pedestrians running on
adrenalin and wheels, upending

all the slow, a boy on crutches
baby carriage
scattered in their haste

to steal a march upon
the New York morning sun
And even those possessed

of lifetime wage employment can't resist
the caffeine-driven New York state of mind
the traffic cops, tabloids and terror plots

I tell myself, look up, construction in the sky
precise design and accident, human-conceived
magnificence, the fragile towers, peaks

beloved Chrysler spire, a beauty glimpsed
at last, the New York windows to the sun
and clouds where passengers no longer fly.

Frank Bana

New York Morning, Glimpse Of Beauty (Alt/Beat Version)

Sunrise, discarding New York magazine
poems not of city, even could
have written them myself, it seems

Heat grows, tossing New York Times
Vade Mecum of commute, tired of weight
of business and estate, pages never used

Now New York streets, unforgiving
red-light-jumping cars, pedestrians running on
adrenalin and wheels, upending

boy on crutches
baby carriage
scattered in their haste

to steal a march upon
New York morning sun
Even those possessed

of lifetime wage employment can't resist
caffeine-driven New York state of mind
traffic cops, tabloids and terror plots

look up, construction into sky
precise design and accident, human-conceived
magnificence, fragile towers, peaks

beloved Chrysler spire, beauty glimpsed
at last, New York windows upon sun
Clouds where passengers no longer fly.

Frank Bana

Night Star

I saw a shooting star, a falling star tonight
All green and gold, a peacock tail
(Perhaps it was a satellite)
Anyway it made a sign
Impressing the silent night upon me.
And I knew only that I loved you
That I was in love, that I love you -
All my knowledge deriving from that
I could be young and brilliant again
Upon the flight
Of falling full in love
And rising still, once more
To live beside the solemn sign.

Frank Bana

No Answer

We once knew the power behind everything -
Admit this much, Sweetheart, to me
Humanity's humans, the substance of souls
Our footprints all over the sea

Do you remember the Spiders from Mars?
It's safer to stick to the moon
All of our nightmares are roaming the earth
Or partying in the back room

And if I dare ever approach you
As ruined as you'd want me to be
Would you take me back into your darkroom
And chain me there naked for thee

You said that you loved me ... so f- much
When we lived in the Castle of Swords
That was fitted with basements of torture
Wearing wounds that were mine, then were yours'

Ah, it's never too late to go backward
Nor to conquer a million souls
These days I'm so used to your silence
That I'm shooting myself full of holes

We could meet at that corner Bodega
The only place we never planned
But I know that our love wrote no answer
In the note that you hold in your hand.

Frank Bana

No Memories Of...

I wish I had never before seen snow
I want to know it naively
Each time the winter comes, in each snowfall
To stand with sodden shoes and heart in flame
Tasting the flakes upon my tongue, my eyes
Singing to the moulting skies
As if for the first time, I'd be
A creature with no memory of snow.

Also, I wish once more to see
A woman for the first time. Buxom, nakedly
Touching me how and where I never
Knew of touch before. I want her name
To be of foreign origin.
I want to hear the original song
And sing it to the movement of her tongue
That laps the innocence from my being.

Or.. my first day at work!
An office of my very own. The buff and bursting files
Of memorandum, savingram. Trembling, unaware
Of how to order them, what they were for
I ask the ladies in the typing pool, they call me
Their own little boy, and I race joyfully
Down shining lanes of linoleum
To meet the permanent secretary.

Blank paper, not a line. A lonely
Morning bird. Out go electric lights
With the approaching dawn.
Pregnant pens with thoughts
Of all the years and journeys gone
The places that I love and know.
I want no memories of them
I want them new again as snow.

Frank Bana

North - South Road

Two-lane blacktop in the night
Breeze across the plains
Are there parades of beacons
On the low hills of Mochudi
Or stars with blinking eyes
Marking the quiet graves
Of those who died so young and fine?

Be careful, little child
Listen to the cowbells low
As the white relief trucks pass
Step back to the thorn trees
For sleepers hold the wheel -
Stand back from the tarmac-side!

Are those the sounds of Kwela
From the bars of Mahalapye
Refugees and swallows
Asleep in Francistown?
Are those human echoes
From pitiless Zimbabwe?
Asks Motsumi from his solitary
Rondavel in Maun.

Kudu leap the ribbon
A soda-can procession
Lines the roadside
Glares in moonlight
Winks up to the satellite

The North road leads to Cairo
The South road to the Cape
So I hear returning travellers tell
I am just a builder
On the midnight shoulder
And I am standing very still

Still between the headlights passing
Cricket melody unceasing

Is that the Marula fruit
Raining from the trees?
Don't walk the narrow line, my child
Too far with burning feet
In case your life becomes condemned
And never finds its peace.

Frank Bana

North America Internal Combustion Engine Era Diorama Rant

In a smoky diorama, under glass
At the corner of the century, 100 million were asked
To choose between a facile man, who presented himself cleverly
Hiding his real designs
And a complex man, presenting himself poorly
Hiding his hopes and dreams.

As I peered through the screen
They chose the latter in their numbers. But
High office was awarded to the one
Who played a better legal game.

I shook the glass in disbelief, put it aside
Waited for a while, and picked it up again.

Four years on, the facile man
Was widely understood, to believe
That the problems of his nation
And of its interests in the world
Could be solved by war
And by threats of war
Economic pressure on the poor
And a heavy gag of fear.

This time the masses chose him, by a narrow margin
Or so it appeared, depending on
Assessments of mysterious reports
Of polling station irregularities
From somewhere called Ohio.

The glass steamed up
Got really murky
At this point.

I called in our resident anthropologist.
She studied the little creatures
And the chaotic scene they made

And she kindly interpreted:

That appears to mean that 50 million creatures
Adults of the species
Who live complicated lives, seem smart enough to survive
In an unforgiving system, to educate their kids,
And get their families fed
Somehow and nonetheless,
Expect a facile man
Who serves the combustion machine
To bring solutions to their table, even after
His comprehensive exposure
As a creature deluded by grandeur
And a heart of malign intent.

It must be in the packaging, the machinery of fear
The smog that obscures these tiny figures
And keeps them apart from each other.

Then a faint voice spoke, barely audible
Amid the constant hum and babble
From the margin of the tableau

'Screw this. I'd rather discuss the environment
Or the legacy of Vietnam, the finer points
Of human rights
The poverty trap and the soul's escape
With his opponents any day
Over a glass of wine.

I guess it's just me, and the other 50 million.
Unfortunately
I have some fixed ideas
That I can't shake from my head
About how imperia should be run
And for whom.

How does it feel, Colin Powell?
You could have been the first real black President
An American Mandela, who knows what potential you were hiding inside?
Instead, you will go down in the history
As the one who lied about mythical weapons

To enable an illegal war.
We'll always remember your absurd props
Test tubes and grainy spy photographs.

How does it feel, Colin Powell?
And all the rest of you sacrificial fools?
How does it feel to be played
By a man so unremittingly shallow
That it's news whenever he reads a book!

Of course I'm part of the non-gas-guzzling
Internationalist, humanist, French-speaking
Liberal elite. I live in exile up here on the coast
Judging y'all. Bien sur, I think I'm smarter than you.
But it don't matter who I am, or who might be screaming this.
Your crimes will stand, and with them you will fall.

All your imperial Presidents, your Secretaries of State and Defence.
Lucky for you
That you chickened out of the Hague Tribunal.
We'd have witnesses up to testify. Iraqi mothers
Whose children were slain by your 'shock and awe'.
Chilean mothers, Guatemalan, Salvadorean, Nicaraguan mothers
Angolan, Mozambican, Vietnamese mothers, whose children
Were maimed by your proxies, your landmines and your bombs.

We wouldn't have hung you by the neck, as you did Saddam.
We'd have you listening to their testimony, day after day
Until all your victims had had their say, for all the years it would take
Unless you die of natural causes first
Their voices echoing in your dreams
And through the soil of your graves.

And how does it feel, American mothers,
Last but not least, your sons and your daughters
Dead in their bloody uniforms
Crippled and maimed
Traumatised by their violent dreams, for the sake of a man
And his murderous team, that force-fed you with lies?
Let him know how it feels to you. It's your right
And one thing that he can't take away.'

That's what we seemed to hear through the glass
Rabbiting on without end, it seemed
A faint and lonely voice
Or was it two, or several. Couldn't tell.

Well, my patience is not infinite.
Bored with all this parochial talk
I threw the little box aside
The glass screen cracked on the sharp edge
Of one of my many garbage cans
Scattering the millions of figurines, all across the floor.

Oh well. Just too bad.
Someone will have to sweep up again.
And I resumed
The construction of life in other times and worlds.

Frank Bana

Not Driving, But Steering

I don't drive and
can't see out
the corners of my eyes
don't want to bring a harm to
any being, any child

it may be cultural
maybe physical
a self-effacing symbol of
my impotence, or quite simply
the laziness in me

and like those who won't navigate
the higher ways of politics, the
mazes of morality
fuel standards, petrol tax

there are some vehicles
I recoil from, stand apart
and greasy steering wheels
which I just won't grasp

and some for which I reach
with two hands held in hope
to steer my heart, to keep
my energy and sight
for the next rest stop.

Frank Bana

Not Human

I've never felt more scared and vulnerable
And so betrayed, I do not feel betrayal
I do know there's a number
Tattooed upon my back, sensors and rings
In places where I cannot even see.
So why have they visited this on me?

I am a person, one who is not human
Not born for the amusement of someone,
A sleek and shiny beauty my misfortune
That, and my weaknesses for play.
So here I sleep and breathe in crap
I need, as they well know, to roam the sea
In skies reflecting blue, unbounded by a pool
Tasting the salt, dawn in my eyes
Calling to the sleeping sun
Chasing the little fishes and algae
Leaping and making love with new companions.

I've had enough - ever since day one
Of dancing for the hordes of needy children
Around this grubby bruising little hole
They dare to call a humane dolphinarium.

Frank Bana

Of Loss And Gain

Like pouring whiskey down a sink
Spilling coffee beans or ink
So do I drink my deeper life away

With papers laden on my knees
And fields to cross before I freeze
I sharpen up the millstones every day

Scattered seeds on smoking ground
Clattered keys of pianos sound
White on dark, turning black on grey

Cracking eggs upon one table
Casting notes as I am able
Let me out, I'm soaking from the rain

Kept by restlessness from rest
Tempted by childhood regress
Into the cage where songbirds go insane

Here the shadows toss the leaves
Winter hearts stand still to breathe
The shallow air, the things of loss and gain.

Frank Bana

Of Necessity

You need me, and it's true

I live where clouds are low

Descend to kiss the honey

Of your body, very slow.

So very much you need me

And in all my years of heaven

I have never known a need

As from you to me is given

Between us in the sheets

It is perfect seduction

Conceived in smoke of loneliness

Born beyond this wedlock

Out of this necessity

Chained here to the earth

To this Love we chained ourselves

Knowing what was needed

With your Cohen and my Brel

We spoke one and another

Lyric language poetry

Re-positioning our limbs

As prepositions for each other

Joy and Peace we named

The children of our unity

The milk and honey of your breasts

Flowing from necessity

Of water stored

Of stars and mud

Of bread and rain

Of milk and blood.

Frank Bana

Olympian Disgrace

Even for a poet
It is difficult to evoke
The disgrace that are these 'Olympics'
The disgust I feel, that in some way
You are certainly feeling too
Because you are human
And literate, I assume
You know as well as anyone

How Tibet is occupied, these 55 years
Minorities suppressed, births controlled
Beliefs circumscribed, Inquisition-style
All those dissidents on trial
And the students in the square
(Has the Party apologised?)
Complicity in Darfur
Labour camps, all set aside
While athletes are being glorified

I'm not evoking Berlin,³⁶
Nor the Soviet Moscow games
Nor the vicious oppression of minorities
In London Town (we'll come to that, no doubt)
I'm dealing with the here and now
Sports and games of the vainglorious
Corporate profits quick and furious
And the nausea in the air
As the smug and sly regime
Expectorates its justifications
And fake-righteous indignations
Into our faces, time after time.

Ashamed of the weakness of my voice
I will exercise my little choice
I won't be watching a single second
Jump or muscle-twitch or race

And to all the companies
Raking in dollars from backs bowed down

I know who you are:
You will not get my dime.

Frank Bana

On Christmas Day

The economy is in the tank
And all the tanks are in Iraq
Whenever the pump price falls further
There's a run on Hummer's mail order

I can't remember if you liked
Leonard Cohen before we were fans
Or if you ever really said
That one day you had met Jacques Brel
In dreaming moments we held hands

But I'm so very certain now
Of one thing I long to do -
Halve this avocado with my hunting knife
And share the gentle flesh with you.

Jesus was born, Harold Pinter died
Humanity climbed up from Olduvai
And on the day the children grew
I paid my debts, burned the credit cards
In surrender to my last desires
And returned to the cradle where love was born
Under the Eastern, African star
To subsist for all life long with you.

Frank Bana

On Clinical Trial

Prednisone, Deltazone
Coumadine, Compazine
Bactrim, Cytosin
VP 16

costly cocktail of chemical war
remedial armies
seeking to engineer
the nauseous statistics

the kindness of treatment
the allure of cure
the punctures in the catheter
switches just beneath the skin
short scars spreading
where tissue is taken out and entered in

the routine challenge for significance
in an open and diverted time
of search for long remission -
a term of judgement and science

a treatment I consent to choose
and tactically look to use
but did not allow to become mine
do not agree by this to be defined

the claims of remission:
disappearance of symptoms
forgiveness of debt
a last release from sins -
and further kind regimes

so caught the while
in a crude philosophy of treatment
that is placed
with me
on clinical trial.

One Day (A Song)

I never expected to live so long
In those shell-shocked years when lymphoma came
In the proliferate shadow of the nuclear bomb
With wars fanning out like toxic flowers
It was hard to believe and grow up tall
Without a shield or a place to fall.

I never thought I'd live to see
The days of crowds so dense and wild
In processions of liberty
Nelson Mandela strolling free
Lands governed by people, not big men
Exulting the power of ballot and pen.

I'm still waiting to walk that country of dreams
Where no child stays hungry, no baby weeps
While the waiting is longer than it seems
The poems in my head will send me to sleep

I never thought to live so long
With the taunts and screams assailing us
The acts of violence carrying on
And it threatened the heart, to look around
And see the mass of impunity
But I held my immunity, tight and strong

In the certainty that you would come
And one day listen to my song.

Frank Bana

One-Off (Xmas Turkey)

I ate meat
After nearly two whole years
A whole plate of Christmas turkey meat
Brown and white
Free Range

Next day my body just rebelled
Felt like a post-war zone
A wounded combatant
Consuming itself
Flesh eating fowl eating flesh
An animal
A cannibal

This must be
How all carnivores feel
Unknowingly

Frank Bana

Only Words Fly

Only words fly
And about two planes a day
In this debating-hall of race.
Realities remain on earth.
I wish my mother were the sea
So I would weep for the faraway
Troubled sea on the crushing Cape shore
But I think I was of desert born
On the steppes of the city.
Desert meets me everywhere
With her spacious inspiration
To make love and create.

I am not afraid for children
The world is younger here
And would not haul them down:
This flood of time is still.
Rains chill me bad
Sun warms me up and pierces me
Where I am cold and sad.
If I were not awaiting you –
Not expecting, not expecting –
This would not need to be.

Frank Bana

Only Write

Only write
Give it a try
See if you might
Catch a bluebird's flight
In some far corner of the sky.

Frank Bana

Our Tenderness

Put aside all the springtimes of Paris and Rome
There are none of your secrets you need to confess
Lock your dangerous dreams in the closets at home
All I'm wanting about you is your tenderness.

I don't measure the weight of commitments in gold
My fingers are not wearing your promises
No flesh of my heart can be purchased or sold
All I'm offering to you grows with tenderness.

I have no master plan for all you might expect
There is no art of love designed under duress
Show me maps of your islands I need to protect
With my arms of defence, weapons of tenderness.

Now if I must disrobe every truth of the word
And if you demonstrate just what works for you best
I'll insist upon nothing, whatever you've heard
Only bargaining with you for your tenderness.

So return those Millennium dreams to the store
And hold over your masks, we can play fancy-dress
Draw your hand down the lights, throw the rug on the floor
We'll explore all the borders of our tenderness.

Saint Valentine's Day, 2008

Frank Bana

Our Time

Dying is our crucifixion
Our time enduring on the cross
A juice-soaked sponge
To moisten lips and gums
Our time of thirst and terror
Of silence where night comes

And then at last, arrival
To a tiny exhalation
Of cease and expiration
Letting go of breath and pain
Freed to let go and fall
Into the all in all

Brave and beautiful, we are
To make it to the end
To place our self in deathly hands
Relinquishing the choice
Resting on the mercy
Of the cold and merciless

Praying for luck, to come to death
As a whisper in the night
Someone to take our hand
Someone to lead us home
Rising each day in memory
Our time to walk in light
And finally be known.

Frank Bana

Out Of Fashion

99 cent New York pizza

I've no taste for it at any price

I'm happier over there in England

With the hopelessness and irony

And the peerless Vindaloo (on rice)

You know what they say about me?

That my best work is behind me

And is clearly out of fashion

Yet some notable from Yale

Writes to me - quite reverently

Citing my 'towering reputation in the field'

I was not aware, my darling

I had no idea, I swear

I just work now to survive

Thousands of colleagues saving lives

Child death rates fall, that's all I care

These working years are almost gone

This is written for the one to come

Who might some day be wondering

What her loving Dad was thinking

In the evenings he would leave her

For the late night flight to England

For a sweet taste of the sullen atmosphere.

Frank Bana

Pass It On

Even, perhaps long before my death
The ashes and bone fragments of my life
Were scattered across deserts, deep in seas
Defeated in the stakes of gravity.
My father solid, stubborn in one place
The bones of his stability at rest
In England's damp and cosy arms
'Neath Lincoln green and local cherry tree
He knew, he used the maps of death and life
But I, with my credentials, published words
Swirled up into the never-ending sky
Descended to defeat and to defy
A follower or child to lay me down.
United still upon this lonely sphere
Helpless in the weight of our demise
Knowing we are living for a death
Or live a death already realized
We tell this to each other for a song
Father to son, we lightly pass it on.

Frank Bana

Plants Of The Desert

Proud-standing in the sunlight
Hairy whisps around your ears
Abundant rain has loved you well
All through the best of years

The birds have nibbled gently
Not ravaging in swarms
As they assailed your ancestors
While children stayed at home

On an April day in autumn
I walked among the ranks
Of tall seed-laden heads, bent down
Beside my cap and flanks

I thrilled to nearly disappear
In the thick of broadcast stands
Where teens would lose their innocence
And old lovers hold hands

Imagining the girls and boys
Dug deep in porridge plates
Treacle swirls on steaming crust
The school luncheon awaits

The winds of winter sweep across
The Kalahari plains
Your ancient stems all taken down
The last fermented grains

The village children hunger now
For maize and urban trends
The tall protective sorghum plants
Abandoned like old friends.

Frank Bana

Poem For Marius Schoon

The Boers blew up Marius Schoon
His very own people turned traitor on him
He was activist teacher and volunteer
Well maybe he was a communist
In those days they blew up communists
I'm sure sometimes they still do

Except it wasn't Marius they got
Exiled in Angola's own deep south
His wife Jenny little daughter Katryn
Were the bodies splashed around a room
By the blind force of a parcel bomb
Delivered to his infant son

He was tense all the time shaggy and bright
Poet hippie-like curmudgeon
You better not cut up the supper meat wrong
He called me 'f-ing liberal' in rage affection
And never cursed the names of traitors
Even when forced to flee in the night

Cancer caught him in the long run
After the walls had been torn right down
He had known prison exile family loss
Democracy sweet in all its tasks
And all through the hearings commissions of truth
With his killers he would not reconcile

And I never thought for a moment he should.

Frank Bana

Poem For Men

Men were sent to war
Beasts corralled by shame
Crouched deep in the trenches
Knelt in blood and bare
Of reasoning and name
Men saw prison slavery
Years of death without reprieve
Stowed away by press gangs
Without a tailwind or a breeze
Men were born in labour
Lashed and fastened to the plough
Scratching their small acre
To put a harvest into store

Men lived immune but not before
Many were embraced by AIDS
Men were tortured on the rack
Torn and hung up by the neck
Blackened in the press and grave
For one idea they had to say
Strangled by conformity
By high priests of the day
Men were lately called upon
To slay the greatest mastodon
To break their bones on the castle wall
To make the sacred pilgrimage
To take the mountain and the fall

Men were unmanned
For remembering they were boys
Broken if they dared
To learn to write beatitudes
Or speak lightly as a girl
Men were exiled in transportation
For stealing a crust of bread
For stealing a deadly kiss
Daring to think of love and dreams
Daring to read a poem like this
And still they are

You look around and look at them
Men are still afraid
Men made to be human
Men made to be brave

Frank Bana

Poem For My Father

Father

His face is so soft in the picture
Gazing at his one-year-old son
His features unlined at the wedding
The bride hung in white on his arm

He took me to lunch at 85
Fed me scraps of tales from the War
We sat in a park where English swans glide
Peaceful in all that we saw

There were years when the fruit was so good
Decades when I rode the air lines
Days of the week we forgot how to speak
And weekends we shared the fine wines

I had never known just how he loved me
Or why I was large in his eyes
'Till we sat there alone in the sunshine
Finding ourselves in each other's lives.

Frank Bana

Poem Of Peace

There is much peace in this young planet
Whenever we're amazed and silent
There is more silence than yet encountered
Where we command our traffic to a halt

More energy than we have manufactured
Is generating in our resting
The music to affirm our species
Is infant in the frets on our guitars

It will be a necessity, a hunger, to embrace
And occasionally to suffocate, the chaos
To dream new revolutions, smarter
Than the ways of fragmentation in which we're led -

Revolutions weaving all complexity
Into a fine and trusted net,
Of safety, method and community
That is simple, and at peace, at last.

Future children and other people:
You may not realize this peace or hunger,
And as I am no seer, I propose
In one day, or world, it will appear.

Frank Bana

Poets Of Uganda (1976)

Whatever happened
To the poets of Uganda?
In the meantime –
We were as perfect as their bones could predict
We could not squander what they did not achieve
They heavy dead
We light and loving

Too human for politics
Deaf to abasement, to dictator's fame
To the cackle of the fisted man
In the hours of giving

Please live with us, they say
Please touch us lovingly

I will be a husband to my brothers
Give you passion gently
Dwelling at your beauty
For all our poet-sakes.

Frank Bana

Post-Apartheid

Those with healthy limbs and years of school
Those sheltered under plastic sheets and tin:
Life starts with heartbeats, really nothing more -
Apartheid of the wealthy and the poor.

Those with jobs providing ARVs
The child denied a basic welfare grant:
A random act becomes a lasting fate -
Apartheid of the bureaucratic state.

Those who were slain when soldiers crossed the line
Exiles surviving to return and vote:
Some felled by sudden shots in gambling rooms -
Apartheid of the lucky and the doomed.

Those knowing love and sunlight in their days
Those sleeping in the cells of solitude:
The loneliness within a life apart -
Apartheid of the hurt and healing heart.

A woman traces childhood scars and tears
A man cries, 'liberation once was pure!':
The wounds of rape and cruelly selfish schemes -
Apartheid of the lost and living dreams.

Frank Bana

Present At The Feast (Praia, Cape Verde,1983)

The family battalions massed nearby
Waving their napkins of white lace
At the heat, around the flies
That hung above the pig's glazed head
The salads, Cachupa and rice

The diverse plates, upon display
For clearly a sufficient time
To leave impression on the guests,
Removed again, we took our seats

The paterfamilias rose to his feet
Looked across to me (accusingly?) -
Young stranger, long of hair and pale
And began to take aside his girl

Mother took his elbow urgently
And whispered to him in commanding style
So every single guest could hear:
'Sta passionado cu Zaza! '
And even if not quite accurate
My social shame was now complete.

I slipped down to the humid street
While up above the empty stores
They displayed the little feast once more
To honour Zaza and womanhood
As African breezes fled the sea
To play in her dark curly hair

And but for a glimpse, at the post office
From the far side of the plateau square
That was all of her I would ever see
No other messenger would bring
Invitations from her family.

Frank Bana

Pretensions To Solitude

A thousand and ten pages
Of Allen Ginsberg's writings
Bound in heavy solitude, squat beside the bed
The window sheets are white, Leonard Cohen's monotone
Harmonising to a Casio
Sweet Angel Words, unfinished poems and rhyme
Are sown in leaves of magazines
Strewn on pull-out, tear-off sheets
Inviting your subscription, although you have subscribed.

By snow surrounded, cornered on all sides
The taunts of immobility
Wild animals and ice, neighbours hover out of sight
Sensing blood and vulnerability
Resentment of the rentiers
Who integrate the drive.
So leave alone
Don't raise up or speed-dial with the phone
Do not disturb the sacred private life.

I wait for Monday, when the bus will run
The ice must melt, under the dawn's red sky,
Trace a map, create a pathway
For unseen escape
Into the world, white-collar crowd and crime.
Monday delays, ignores the laws of time
Emboldened by the sun in the skylight
Aspires to melt the white encrusted coat
That cloaks the silence in a lonely sign.

Frank Bana

Progression

If every day we know one thing true

Or know one truth, deeper than before

If every day we meet someone who

We never saw in the mirror before

And recognise we can only know once

The first time for standing face-to-face

And go on to accept we will never know twice

How we arrived to this moment in life.

Frank Bana

Prometheus At Dawn

The train is his prison
metal grey funnel passengers
contend for seats and dignity
Alpha males, pole mountaineers
bitches, drunks and criminals
addicts to purchasing and gain.
Canines put down, the dogs devoured
by those who learn to sit at heel
show up on time, scramble aboard
present their tags at crack of dawn.

The train is his asylum
madmen perform, plastic wires
waving like tentacles from their ears
rock to the disembodied voice
calling on Boss and Babe and Spouse
hands by their toy machines, the keys
proudly caressed, his body tamed
by power, all of life squeezed out.
Sliding and shuddering to rest
tormented, bound by claws and pain.

The train feeds daily on his soul
disgorging him, restored and whole
with brothers less than strangers, into
fields of darkness underground.
The train his only freedom now
riding on a plain of fear,
stealing the fire, shielded from flame
by cells of anonymity.
Beyond the morning intimates
of final rescue and escape.

Frank Bana

Promised To Return

New York still in sunlight
In the one world century
I can see it all
From my 14th floor
The hidden blue tribune flowing
By the flags of nations
That our histories hoist high
And from metal poles remove

Is it too much that you ask of me
To justify my work in money
And show meaning from it too?
As if a living soul will care
About anything I do
Once the billions depart
And surviving souls pass by

Music was made in churches here
Pagan songs and poetry
Down this river you could smell the blood
Taste the dust-storm of exploding flesh
Watch the smoke rising by day
Waiting for music to be born again

The helicopters sortie
In solitude I see them fly
Trapped here in the passing years
The rooftops emptied out below
While the blossom leaves of Tudor Park
Grow and fall
Fall and grow

I call to every circumstance
For this you do not need me
I was not born be held here
In the cradle of this city
I call for you set me loose
From these ruled and empty lines
Set me loose upon the world

Where I promised to return.

Frank Bana

Promises Of Golden Fire (For Leonard, Again)

You wrote your book of longing
Took down the songs of mercy
Every style of tenderness
Was in your verse exalted

Go you now to write
The last song of redemption
Before it is too late
To sing its vast refrain

You old bastard, Leonard
You faithlessly transcribed
The sacred rhymes and litanies
Of holy damaged lives
Leaving us to seduce the ones
Whom you long abandoned
At second hand, with only
Your creations at our side

The poems with the raven eyes
And songs that stare from telegraph wires
Lured me into darkness
With promises of golden fire

I'm sorry to hear you lost your mother
And I know you miss your father
To be alone is always very hard
Will you leave us orphaned now
Drowning in laments
And pieties of priests and prison guards

You were right about one thing
They always lock up the wrong men
And we are still at war
With the religious and the carnivore
Chauvinists and feminists
And all who wish to strangle love
Of its final poetry and breath

You were right, I'll give you that
I bring you this, an offering
A poem you never sought
And will never swear a moment by
From a man so cheaply bought
And still enslaved as I.

Frank Bana

Promises Of Golden Rain (For Leonard, Again)

You wrote your book of longing
Took down the songs of mercy
Every style of tenderness
Was in your verse exalted

Go you now to write
The last song of redemption
Before it is too late
To sing its vast refrain

You old bastard, Leonard
You faithlessly transcribed
The sacred rhymes and litanies
Of holy damaged lives
Leaving us to seduce the ones
Whom you long abandoned
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And will never swear a moment by
From a man so cheaply bought
And still enslaved as I.

Frank Bana

Pursued By A Bear

Will the trains still run on time

Will there be cherries at the stall

Will the sun rise, at all

.

They are insisting we must be prepared (for what? And how?)

To lose our trousers and our shirts

But do not bet against us

(Even naked, even now)

I ask about the Little Ones

Daddy where did it go wrong

Why can't we see the neighbours

They won't talk our language

Do us any favours

Will there be bandages

Will there be tea

Words to close the distances

Dividing you and me

Are there lights down in the tunnel

Smell of whisky in the air

Boots on my street, the sorrow sweet

The exit labeled fear

Frank Bana

Rainbow Aisle (Song)

Way up on the rainbow aisle
Where the many colours sing and the children smile
I saw you cast a silver net
Onto the wet seabed with the winterfog overhead

There are silkworms black and white
On the concrete floors and the fields of night
Caught between the truckwheels and the hoe
And the sound of Weather Report on the underground radio

And I was crawling up to you, just like that
Between the crumbling cliff and the ledge where you sat
And where was the greater danger
In the moment when you turned around and called me a stranger?

In the concert halls I felt alone –
Jacques Brel and Charlie Chaplin gone on home
And that's where you're joking about now
Where you're half-gone, anyhow

And I talk to the winter children
Getting no mothers or machines to feed them
And I'm dreaming in a language I can't speak
While the streets of Europe fill up with autumn leaves –
And bookshops on the cheap.

Frank Bana

Raining Light.....

Sun pours through the skylight
The feline shadows play
On countertops, across the walls
The bowing heads of trees contend

Amorous in summer wind
The counter where I cook is bright
And it is raining light.

Frank Bana

Red Box

Hard to believe where it went down

A red telephone booth, the enclosed kind

Worn and smelling of decades of use

ER or VR fixed in iron on the wood

And where it stood: the Channel steps

Down at the sea at Brighton, yes

There's one still be to found, still standing there

They must have left it for the tourist look

At the boardwalk mouth of Brighton pier.

And it was spring and sunshine as I watched

The indo-anglian families from the hotels

The old and toothless hangers-on

Who sleep under the stars at the low tide

Pale London lovers in their innocence

Pass by, with candyfloss and cigarettes

With jellied eels and biltong

Bears and foaming beer

From the shies and rides. I called

From the air-deprived confines

With card and coins in hand, across the sea
To fasten tight again the narrow strand
That holds our hearts to us, the line
We do not mean to fall, unwind
When the moment comes, we cried
We found the words that fasten up
The knot, the tie that makes it bind.

How old the narrow box, how obsolete
The ways we still communicate
Remain in their insistency, the stubbornness
That floods the line, that will not let
Love die, before the end of purchased time
In just the place, in its confine
The ages left for us, there by
The sea, the pier, the stony beach

The setting sun, the crowds dispersing
Anxious for some other kinds of fun
To make the day complete. I watch them leave
I'll stay, until the final light recedes
Hearing your voice, the plans

Entreaties, vows, existence spans

All echo here, knowing this

If I can reach you from this booth

Then I can reach you anywhere.

Against us there were frowns, and miles

A world that didn't want a joy to live

The cruelties of arbitrary life

Converged in their conspiracy

To pull these little fingers well apart

But still there stands above the beach

One weather-beaten box of wood

That holds the line and stands upright

Where once again and for a while

We did not fall from day to night

Into a frozen sea.

Frank Bana

Relative Poverty

In Ethiopia they sometimes say
How shameful and unethical it is
That people eat well and drink
In the super-luxury Sheraton Hotel
While children in white rags and mothers beg
Outside on the Addis Ababa streets

As for me I sometimes think
How shameful and unethical it is
That people eat so well and drink
In Europe and the USA
While children in white rags and mothers sleep
Outside on the Addis Ababa street.

Frank Bana

Resurrection Of Desire

I was abandoned
By desire
Sure the subcutaneous rumble
Continued its silent tango
With the subterranean ache
But desire in her true glory
Overt and unashamed
Deserted me
Surmising I guess
That I deserved her mercy
Less than I did before
Even less

G-d should forgive me
I wrote
For the failures
Of my daily resurrection
And of my poems of praise
G-d will not forgive me
According to your note:
The cure lies with you instead
The cure that can be mine
At almost any price
You will care to name.

Frank Bana

Returning To Jerusalem

Once we could be justly proud
Our place marked in the human maze
By devotion to the sacred books
And diligence of prayer, upon
Steady accretion of analysis

Once we could be satisfied
To live by what we understood to be
Identities the Lord bestowed
Upon our humble lives, our lines
Measured by the centuries

Once we were made wise
By sufferings in wide variety
Borne in reverence for His Name
Consolations of our family embrace
And the long perspectives gained

Once we almost were content
To speak the name Jerusalem
A love beyond reproach and reach
To which we would compose our songs
Of praises and mythology

And once then we were slaughtered
Not sporadically, but by an awesome
Purpose and intent. Surviving,
Many could not make from this
A tolerable weight, the burden

Of our anguished discontent
And a God we never met. And now
With final knowledge of the hate
The world can bring, we will accept no more
To live at any distance from our dreams.

So strong we have become
Dealing in death and pain

Sanctioned by some authority unnamed.

And yet there are survivors still who hold
A Liberation Ball each year, saying
We'll dance as long as we are here

While others shout in bold
With land and borders to defend
No longer free to know who they once were.

I hope we can return with song
To praise Jerusalem
When time to claim our history has come

When we have sadly learned to see
That what we think is strong
Grows frail, as if to fall eventually.

Frank Bana

Ruins Of Great Zimbabwe

Porcupines hunted by eyes in the forest
Big men have made off with all the pangolins

In Masvingo, eggs and bacon are served
The last tourists leave, pursued by secret police

The hills of Chipinge were once green with coffee
The plains of Mozambique lay fallow beneath

The Sheraton Hotel was built golden and high
The Party HQ rose up higher, nearby

Desperation seeks refuge in the arms of neighbours
Each fugitive branded a traitorous child

Newborns dying, babies stunted if surviving
Immunity lost, reverence misconceived

What father, once loved, devours his children?
What parent, in madness, eats its own young?

They were all his soldiers, his devoted veterans
Giving bodily fuel to the state-run machine

Good old Uncle Bob, the colonials sang
To put their trembling daughters to sleep

He understands, with his good heart and plans
Under the mask, wants the best for the land

But Bob Marley was wrong, prophets need not be sung
The moderates are revolutionaries in the long run

Now prosperity's tides beach on empty shelves,
Presidents building wastelands to themselves.

Frank Bana

Russian Family History

I was born in a peaceful time and place
My father just out of uniform
The draft and ration books thrown away
Abundance grew in our English garden

The empire was dissolving but its ties
For worse or better would long endure
As a future traveller to many lands
I would discover and learn to explore.

From the port of Odessa they had come
Leaving Smorgon village, carrying its name
Settling down to toil, in London's East End
Never to talk of Russia again

Jenny, Louis, Violet, Peg,
The children of the ships of 1904
Building a platform of support
For the generations to follow them

Trotsky left town, Mosely came by
To beat on their doors and smash their store
They had out-run the Cossacks, how could they yield
To bully-boys imitating Nazi hordes

And sixty years on, summer of '91
A great-grandchild of those who sailed
Sat with his parents at the TV set
Transfixed by a ballet in mid-pirouette

Gorbachev confronted, then overthrown
The Empire and its collectives torn down
While Nizhni-Novgorod, from where forefathers fled
Lay poverty-soaked, children dying and dead

Now the earth has opened its secrets so far
The danger is that it will all split apart
Its passengers spilled from the side of the Ark
Butterflies, mammals and cities alike

It's a pity we remember less than we forget
For as a child, learning from the Rabbi's tongue
I had a small sense of our history's ballet,
More agile than empires in the long run.

Frank Bana

Sacrifice (A Song Of Auschwitz)

I clung to your hips
As they scourged us with whips

I kissed both your eyes
As they shut out the lights

I kneeled by your breast
As they stripped off your dress

I told you my prayer
As they cut off your hair

I gave out my heart
As they dragged us apart

I bargained with hope
As they massed in the smoke

I gave them my name
To keep you from the flames

My interrogation begun
For the life of your son.

Frank Bana

San Pedro De Alcantara

[An orange on the table
Your dress on the rug
And you in my bed
Sweet gift of the present
Freshness of the night
Warmth of my life
- 'Alicante', Jacques Prevert]

Clothes strewn on the table
Juice stains the floor board
He rises above you
You journey beneath him
I watch from the window
Cold in the night

Lemon tea on the dresser
Seed of pomegranite
Adorning your belly
As he falls above you
You draw down his kisses
Warm essence of life

Stranded at the station
In the cold of the morning
My bed for your sleeping
The rug for your dress
In the warmth of awakening
Dawn your caress

Lemons on the table
You make up by the window
I lie in my bed
Unable to watch you
The night steals the freshness
The gift that you left

Now I lie beside you
Emptiness on the table

Your hem in my fingers
The gift a deliverance
Your presence a memory
Warmth of the past.

Frank Bana

Seasons Of Zimbabwe

The country newly-born, we were younger still
Jacaranda blossoms paved the stone under our feet
We drank the bittersweet coffee of the Chipinge hills
By the roadside in the glow of Independence

As we explored the central park's every hidden corner
The miniature Victoria Falls, the botanical treasures
And the open-air soapstone sculpture displays
You told me tipsy tales of Mzilikazi

We rode the flying bus down to the old Zimbabwe
And walked among the peaceful ruined walls
As peacocks strolled insouciant in the gardens
We climbed the fortress to view the rolling plains

The corn was white and tall the month we married
In an improvised bare office filled with laughter
Animals graced the hills above our reception
Music drifted to the border with Botswana

We made love in the wedding suite, high above the city
Embellished by the gentle blues of Cape China
With joy I entered you as your husband
And sunrise filled our window with its glory

Today we're not so young, Zimbabwe is much older
Its splendour is revisiting its ruins
In Namibia's childhood you were lost, your sweetness
Is held only by the warm earth of Mochudi now.

For we have all been claimed by our addictions
The richest topsoil worn down into powder
Dreams of liberation have been stolen
And seasons of young love are past their flower.

Frank Bana

Seeking For Your Shore (1974)

Northern men of ice and story:
Lay your shadows by the sand
Our mouths have closed for want of kisses
And now deny what you began

Southern men of moon and music:
Weave us sandals from the grass
Our skins have tightened since the summer
Too dry to breath in nature's dance

Heir to the histories of your loving
I guess no culture holds a cure
For the free and landless alcoholics
Ever seeking for your shore.

Frank Bana

Self-Determination

I will spring the closing trap
And jump the disappearing train
Shaking loose the dust of time
And distortions from my brain

I will dip my legs and toes
In rushing tides of history
And in the shallow lakes and pools
That hide the deeper mystery

I will punch a hole of light
With my tightly-wound brave fist
Through the walls that rise into
The hollows of the gathering mist

I will touch the soft damp soil
That once was witness to my birth
And pour the vials of sacred oil
Upon my father's native earth

I will place a smooth round stone
On my late wife's burial mound
And would be more widely known
Before I'm scattered on the ground

I cannot be long constrained
By mere shyness of the will
It is time for me to write
A self-determined codicil

As the sun touches the east
And the storm clouds lift again
I resolve to speak my truth
With a voice and song unchained.

Frank Bana

Selma Makes A Hard Sell

Among the cancer centres and the property adventures
Nests a promotion for liqueur
The full-figured woman
Black-dressed and unblemished
Makes her frontal, direct sale
In half profile, a man looks on
Self-conscious and aware

Is it her breasts, roller-coastering
For which he stares enraptured
Or the bright red bottle, matched to her lips
(Set off by her dark fabric)
Perched on a table by her flank?
No, those impossible swells and pitches
Reduce the product to secondary rank

Their waves ensure the shipwreck
Of his curved features, vainly sunk
Into her brave geometry
By shoulder straps and jewels, aligned and hung
As perfectly as vessels calmed at sea
The centrepiece of her display, the peel
Of fruit concocted in with cochineal

The red gloss of her fingernails,
They brush the table, they caress
The edge of gems, unmounted, strewn perhaps
In homage to allusiveness
The page is turned, the drink is downed, but she
Remains posed in her rapture where
He thirsts for her captivity.

Frank Bana

Sermon From The Plain

We thought ourselves godly
Taught ourselves how to fly
Now our engines are grounded
And birds rule the sky

Just one more species
Climbing high but to fall
Inventive and heedless
Mortal souls after all

Creature of singing
Contemplation and art
Educating our children
In the ways of the heart

And creature of cruelty
Plundering with no need
Killing sister and brother
In our prisons of greed

When we beg for survival
In the suffering crowd
We must live by compassion
And speak kindness aloud.

Frank Bana

Settler's Song

I tried so hard to make it to a place where I was sure
I made myself a shell on the sand but the sea was insecure
I washed the pain in the summer rain, but the clouds were moving north
I turned the page on another age, but the people starved for more.

I went inland and wrote in sand of the birth of the aeroplane
I sang to the bush of the city confusion, tightening the pain
I danced to some thumb-piano and drum, before I fell to faint
The hunt was loud and refugee cloud was gathering again.

I left the rhyme and the travel of time to the hungry and depressed
The hunters hide and the sailors cry, for the game is emptiness
For the seeking man doing what he can, for an hour in the dust
Of the wasted warm electric storm, your love held me in trust.

Frank Bana

Shameless

His wars have failed
His soldiers die
No-one has ever
Seen him cry
His torture cells
Wiretaps exposed
His secret prisons
Will be closed
Approval ratings
In the lurch
He dare not show
His face in church
His self-invention
Crumbles, dies
His promises
Transparent lies
He smirks to shield
The criticism
Poisoning hope
With cynicism
Kids uninsured
So what the hell
The earth can go
That way as well
Scorned almost
Comprehensively
His pious screed
A travesty
His creed one of
Incompetence
Self-satisfied
With ignorance

Without respect
To justify
He shows no shame.
One question:
Why?

Shema

The hidden sound, the spell under the tongue,
Hints of our truth revealed. Behold, Shema:
A doorway opens from a dwelling of despair
To speed the fate of birth and teach
To wear death's sudden mask.

The bodies of our ancestors, eroded by disease
Unnamed and unconfined. Vital organs inflamed
By domestic plague, blamed on foreign clime.
Limbs torn by canon, severed by sword,
Lives cascaded into waters, in armour drowned.
They carried in their recessed minds
A fragment of the sound, beyond the language of their time.

The colleges, hunched passageways of stone,
The worn and lettered tombs by which the students pass
Libraries rebuilt on wooden beams
In the sunlight of stained glass.
Illuminated minds renew
The stunted frames of ancient words:
Their syllables extend
Towards the hidden sound.

Frank Bana

Shylock As A Man

As if taking possession of my loans
They took my daughter, lured her to climb down
From this high casement, whereupon she sat
In service to my books and solitude

She left by night and closed the window soft
Against a father's soul, opprobrium
Seeped in to douse the waxy candlelight
That has flickered, fragile, in these ages long

I stand robbed of my wealth and vital strength
Of all that keeps me whole and makes of me
A lineage, a man, all I am left
Exposed, red-hatted, chastened and bereft

Myself I can transform beyond their powers
Through wiles and skills that centuries provide
To anticipate the ways of thieves and lawyers
And walk within shadows of the divine

The tugging of my beard, spill of my debts
The soil of phlegm upon my gaberdine
All this was little to my face, compared
With their public seducing of my name

Another would resolve to stay his hand
Convert before the Duke's Venetian court
Would not have so insisted on his bond
Or drawn his corner tighter than before

Would graciously have modified his terms
Demanding one small tooth, and not an eye
Would have foresworn the fall of merchant blood
And would not have survived until this night.

I will not kneel while I am in the right.
Don't seek to justify me, turn me pale
Stubborn in choice and raging sacrifice
Not as the Jew, but Shylock as a man.

Frank Bana

Silent In Forest

Set on my hands the gift of silence
Lift the pressure and pain of my hips
Trace your ice on my aching shoulders
Then draw the heat from my frozen lips

For I have abandoned myself to wandering
Too far from quiet places, the evergreen
Where swords were drawn by malevolent spirits
And my scars carved by the night, unseen

You found my scraps of despairing verses
The prints and knee-shaped hollows I left
Fearful, you searched the earth untrodden
Insisting no pain could be expressed

The music has fled from my songs, my verses
Are stripped of their words, I bite down on stone
My hands by your fingers are bound to be emptied
Of all gifts of silence, until I atone

My rags were stripped, weeping, from my body
As I lay abandoned, hearing the leaves fall
I cover my limbs with comforting fragments
Awaiting the light that Dawn will recall.

Frank Bana

Sixty Years In The Shade (The Sheltering Green Flag)

Rushdie wrote of the concept and effect
Of shame, how it binds the feet and controls
The lives of families, pushes girls to arranged
Marriages, where fathers keep them bound
To face the violence of their husbands
Fuelled by power behind doors, in the closet
Of domestic life, escape rebuffed
Hardly able to see sunlight or emerge for air
Where relatives insist that they remain, terrified
The side will be let down, shadow of shame
Falling on and darkening the family name

Reviled if they should leave, try to take
The children with, criminalised if they
Are violated outside, God forbid, or fail
To deliver sons and heirs. All this from soil
Polluted and defiled with dirt of shame
And Pakistan, another midnight child, delivered
By partition, supposed by some mapmaker
Home in London to be workable
Wedged by careless pen between the mountains
And the coast, breathing with two lungs
And walking on two legs, eastern and west

Was sundered soon, before it ever found
Its feet, into four provinces, backwoods, hill tribes
And the elite, the leaders educated in the Oxford
Lexicon, democracy, Jinnah's successors
Jailed and hung, or overthrown, charged for corruption
Exiled, killed in airforce accidents, self-inflated
Little men and daughters rising in debating clubs
And all the while the earth trembles under the feet
Of the propertied be-medalled equine-breeding
Polo-playing, mother-lost and -loving
Cricketing, well-tailored and bespoke elite

Poor, burn victim, little Meena does not
Go to school, her mother small, born underweight
Stunted by repeated bouts of diarrhoea, she cooks

And cleans for her grandfather, glancing furtively
At books, divides the mango that he buys her once a month
With several siblings, learns from village boys
While all her skills are taught for naught but to prepare
For a day of marriage, the dowry she will bring, the chant,
The prayer, the ring, the henna on her hands and in her hair

While up on the frontier, far from Karachi's crush
On the chaos of Kashmir, the mullahs thrive, the hatred
Of the West, America and puppet shadows spreads in a slow burn,
The military cracks down again, the secret services
Employ intelligence for business schemes, not strategems
For progress, peace or poverty's release

So many threats crowd in, the Hindu neighbours, infidels,
Devout and angry students of madrassa
Who foresake the failing public schools. How long
Will narrow edifices stand, hasty conceptions last,
A modern nation state, founded on religion
Under sheltering green flag, outrun
The shame, the pain of women and
The deluge of the past?

Frank Bana

Skin

I'm just the medium kind
A furry ape-like creature
Thankful for my legs and smile
Thankful to you all
And for everything on me
That won't bruise too easily
Things that work quite perfectly

I got this clear light skin
That I hope to stay within
It's pleasant and it's smooth
After I've been shaved
I always get this longing
To walk again in England
Where my body once belonged
To the place that I come from

Aircraft bore away my life
Ways of escape destroyed my life
Foreign films messed up my life
The quest for love meanwhile
Africa conceived my life
New York once more destroyed my life
I could have kept my name
I could have built and settled down
Somewhere near Bromley town

And now my skin breaks out
Like a chronic haemophiliac
- Burning tattoos of your name
In places I can't see
Emerge random, mysteriously -
Always the thought that counts

My teeth will need some fixing
Before they come around
To etch the numbers on my skin
To carry out what's left of me
Before I'm forced to say

I never found the answers, but
There was no other way.

Frank Bana

Sky

It was 16 degrees below freezing today.

The sky was blue, bright and vast.

I looked more closely at the sky

And it was suffused by sunlight, the same bright sunlight

That you are bathed in.

There was a corner of the sky that was grey and empty

Where you usually are.

I resolved to look more deeply, more intensely

At this vacant part of the majestic sky.

The deeper I concentrated, the more you emerged

And I found you again, in the sky of my mind

In the tapestry of my feelings and thoughts.

Across wide continents, you are here

And the empty part of the sky dissolves

Into a rich portrait of your days and nights

Where the earth beneath our feet unites.

Frank Bana

Slaves Who Painted Dreams

The underfed lions in the Emperor's palace
Pace behind iron gates on the Hill of Spring -
The pachyderms die unwatered on the banks of the Zaire
River Zoo as generations of war machines parade -

The wildebeest corpses piled and rotting on the wires
Strung up to guarantee well meat for Smithfield market -
Enclosed, mortgaged, incorporated, the hills and streams
Of the Namib, in the power of men who would own mountains

While in survival style, the market boys
Who line the treacherous tarmac heading to Mpika
Hold up puppy-dogs and rabbits by the ears
As the WaBenzi roll their big wheels by.

At rest, I see in outline, the shade-net nurseries
Of saplings watered in their plastic stands
Awaiting the Sahelian rains to soften the soil
In the perforated hillsides of Santiago de Praia

And "green diamonds" from the Gaborone dam, sold side by side
On Saturdays, with batiks from the Roll-the-Blanket museum
And the sandals from Pilane that will wear for years -
Those old tough tanned cow hides.

Awaking in the year two thousand, seeing again:
Old children in displacement camps on the Limpopo
Freed from indentured rebel service, faces distended,
Eyes not alive. And more than this. The rows of skulls
In a church of memory in Rwanda.
And I remember reading of
A father in Bosnia nailed to his front door. A man
Dragged behind a Texas pickup until he too was dead.
And a kid from Senegal, reaching for his identity,
Blasted with bullets in a Bronx brownstone
Until he too was dead.

When I was a child: A Turkish "radical"
Was burned to death with acid on a hillside. A newspaper photo.

Accusing image, the open mouth, without an accompanying word.
A poet-singer whose song I did not know, not then,
His fingers were broken carefully, before he was shot
In the Santiago de Chile stadium. I lost count of it all
Somewhere in the 8th decade of the twentieth century.

Does someone remember every name, and every crime?
Is every insult registered somewhere, an injury?
Are we learning to own the count ourselves,
Lest we be slain once more with numbered forearms?
Will we renounce before it starts again, tomorrow?
It's about time - about how we choose to run this race,
Which has kept us barely human.

In the slave fort of Elmina you can tour the basements
Where the captured were held, and women were raped
At Portuguese (or any colonial) pleasure; the slits in the walls
Where humans stepped out on the causeway to the ships.
You can hear the flowing, urgent words of the Ghanaian guide
And the pain in the throats of visitors from Africa-America

In 1996 in Elmina, I stepped away to one side,
Considering this diminished animal, raised out of Africa,
Who painted dreams and invented such words:
"Suffering", "Ordinary", "Loving", "Cruel" -
Remembering so many other killing grounds.

I was praying, perhaps; calling to the ancient sky:
"Renaissance, arrive to claim your time.
Speak for your own name.
Claim it now".

Frank Bana

Slight Melodies

There are some on this earth who write so fast
that the world spins before them, the real world shaken
by the strength of their fiction, the elements disturbed
by the power of their creations and the churning of their talent.

I am not one of them....

No thousand-page novels teaming with characters
loving on the beaches and in the backstreets
with heartbreak, robbery
and the agony of families in need.

Yet my eyes burn with the same tears
when music is alive and pulsating in the night
when I think of a beautiful woman who may dance with me at the ball
where I stand against the wall with my orange drink
while the winds blow across the Achada
and the children climb on the rocks
when I sweep up my imaginings and throw them to the winds

when I begin to know how I will be ashes
in my little box, or under the salt sea
when I think how the folksongs are more permanent
than I, or my singing of them
how they so surpass my creations,
as they rise like mist
from deep wells of experience.

I cry pure tears unstained by hope or sorrow.
Sea breezes come to collect the moisture from my lashes.
And from these perfect small experiences,
not even to be aspired to,
Come other gifts to their existence –
Poems from a cheap pen
slight melodies from an expensive guitar.

Frank Bana

Smorgan At The Don

Without a note of music
Or ancient ballad to recite
All throats too dry to sing
Dried of sound and spit by fear
Of lice, disease, the ring of weaponry

Without the prospect of discharge
From terror of unspeakable dark nights
Or a moment of release
From service to the deathly iron head
The logic of extinction, sacrifice

Without a golden finger for my hair
Ears shattered by tin hymns of motherhood
The comfort homilies of rabid men
Who die upon the front lines up ahead
Or cut down the deserters from behind

In every hour that passed for sleep
I saw the Volga burn, the city turned
To barren stars. His men descend
To caves, armed with what's left
Of teeth and fingers, gouging holes
Crouched inside protective smoke.
Then suddenly the earth awoke and shook.

I thought of my young distant cousin G.,
Whose fathers paid to sail the ship
Resting in his island air force base
On sheets, plied with one egg a week
The comfort of his crew, only
A one-in-three death rate

And of our enemy, Nazi in times of war
Christian between, like us, before we came
New men of sense, of international clay
Boyish at heart, whose heart itself is led
To place its thin white body on the fence

At night between the volleys, mortar rounds
Horizon flares, we write on scraps and bark
To those whose home devotions
We cannot quite embrace
Nor yet withstand, tracing despair
With what remains of one good hand

Without a book of poems, however slim
Approved or banned, the dawn approaches
With no sign or prayer
I write as if this action were the last
To be survived, clearly aware
An unsound verse could silence me
Or keep my voice alive.

Frank Bana

Snow Makes Everything Silent...

Snow weeps into the silence
The snow makes everything still
The traffic is muted, passing on air
Children play on, unaging

In the white moments of snowfall
Wild creatures perch on their nerves
Ploughmen and mailmen, pause unaccustomed
To know the effect and the call.

Simple, imploding in song
Unknowing of its disturbance
Transformation will come... but here in its time
Snow makes all that is lonely, belong

Frank Bana

Snow-Ku

Feathered flakes of snow

Miniature sky-divers

Humble are poets of winter.

Frank Bana

Soft Rain

The applause is like a soft shower of rain
He steps out every night in breaking storm
Where the music builds, is suddenly torn down
His musicians recall the notes to play
Among the very last of their profession
Who labour through the years to shape their task
Apprentices to scales from oral time
The scales that human voices climb
On the ladders of his song

He knew the one, the very one:
The song that lays the pathways for the first morning of spring
The requiem for final autumn leaves
He sings, he draws the murmur from the vast contented crowd
Their shower of applause the soft dark rain
For the chorus of his last encore:
'Let this exile end', he sang
Voice husked from all the failing harvest years
'Oh let this exile end, my friends, at last'.

Frank Bana

Something To Hear

New music! It came from Amazon
The old-fashioned way, through the letter box
Ringo complaining loudly at the invasion
But this way, it's more fun than s
You wait beyond a day
And open the pack with plastic gloves
Disinfect the table-top
And then you're set to play

Elvis reappears, and just in time
With years gone by, brings something new to hear
With Bacharach! With Carole King!
And one by one, I unwrap each track
In my low security kitchen
A box of sweet surprise, good news

He sings each song from a female point of view
He glides on strings, he tries to sing in French!
That new wave heart, still beating strong
And mighty like a rose, and true
The chords frolic in many ways
The phrases slice through buttered tunes
I'm sure I shall embrace the songs like friends
Like in the old Get Happy days

I play them in the garden
On repeat throughout the house
Copy to MP3
To savour on my sanctioned daily walk
Melodic dawns renewing endlessly
Never without music. Something we share
Although it can't compare to being there

Now the e-papers are saying
There's a new Laura Marling
With a song about her daughter
A sequel to Alexandra Leaving
So I think I will forgo the price
Of a safe delivery of wine or beer

With thanks that music's rivers flow
Softening the daily news
A little, and can still bring joy
To the lucky who are living and can hear.

Frank Bana

Something Warm

Suddenly, everyone's parents were dying
Falling down stairs and crashing the walls
Tumbling like the leaves outside
Wilting like weightwatchers gone wild.
Funerals, eulogies
Kaddishes were sung
In tearfilled voice by trembling sons
Children not so young
United unexpectedly in grief

By stealth, with little warning
In the age of global warming
The generations come to pass
Fathers and canes bearing red medallions
Mothers in nursing uniform
Neat and tidy in their rows
Eyes right
Eyes front and down

The generation passing home
Some ranks are silent, some alone
Others are holding hands, waving goodbye
To their world Forever England
To heavens behind the hedge rows
Their pea-soup Jerusalems.
Their absences seeped out
Began to flood the land
We reached for something warm, and dry
And human that remained.

Frank Bana

Song For A Child (2008)

Each little Child a queen or a king
learning to reach for the bright blue sky
In every child moment, you more become
the owner of dreams, the holder of light.

Each Grown-up extending a hand
for your innocent, searching fingers to find
responsible to you, to never let go
or let you be falling, abandoned behind.

We will respect you in all your discovering
the flowers and branches, trees that surround
the courage of all your unchained imagining
the swans and porcupines seen in the clouds.

We leave many words of shame, here behind us
for the gardens we give you, untended, despoiled
we owe you the foresight and skills you'll require
to clean up our mischief and start to restore.

And while throughout the centuries passing
the Child's delight was Our delight
we affirm here and now: you were born with the right
to all our protection, to dreaming and joy.

Frank Bana

Song From Otse Hill

In dreams I watch the desert plain
As the light fades from the scene
My gaze towards the borderline
Where the parched fields turn to green

Held steady by horizon lines
The dry savannah yields to gloom
Summer lightning strikes the earth
And the herdsmen rush for home

Shadowed in the evening light
The kids are safely home from class
Thunder gathers, then descends
To flood the flatlands into glass

Here was lost a clear-eyed youth
I return in older years
In life's defeat to Otse Hill
Weighed down by ordinary fears

Let me see you one more time
In these raindrops thick and warm
Your thirsty flowers are opening
To catch the remnants of the storm

I will keep watch upon this hill
While the women greet and call
To the teasing, dancing clouds
For the summer rain to fall

I sing to praise this sacred hill
Where banished lovers fled to die
And yellow birds that saw them fall
Broadcast their stories where they fly

I sing to tell you how it was
When nations and the world were young
Clear skies of ancient memory
The blue notes of the desert song.

Frank Bana

Song Of Mother Africa

The old man sits beside the Council Chamber, stretches out his hand
The officers pass by, their minds on paper
The small shields of security drawn around him by the month
Don't protect him from the night and dusts of winter

The land used up and over, cattle die up to their necks in mud
Choppers cross the border to machine-gun ivory
The villages have lost their trees and cannot nurse back any
So many children science left, to mothers of this Africa

They wait within prefabricated words and walls
For the big black pots to fill with food of conscience
And when the meal is over, the bells of cities ring
For shifts of building bricks in export industry

The shopping mall is crowded when the pay is out
The queues of supplication jumped by family or favour
The dust of town is somehow of a much more bitter flavour
Than the early morning milk of Mother Africa

And I'm singing of the beauty of her eyes -
I'm thankful for the way she changed my life -
Of stars that fade as people rise and build their fires
In the early morning mists of Mother Africa.

Frank Bana

Song Of The Chobe River

You were a song in my life, a short time in the singing
You taught me the chords of your being, you found me listening to the words
Together we made rhythms, and our beat was nearing harmony
Until the sheet music was torn, and papers turned in the wind
That took them back to fire and ash.

Your song is a slow echo in my being. It may be early morning
In the dawn of waking, or twilight in a sudden second, when again
I hear it. I need to place and sustain it
But cannot figure out the key, or construct the right arrangement.
I guess the planet vibrations carry it back to you,
Waiting in your house and life, listening to the village songs,
Town telegraph – as you always did.

I praise the song you gave me, and drink the tears you left me
Fallen on a round stone table, high beside this river
Which is a vein of Africa, an artery of your life,
Where languages and tributaries meet.
I will make a new song for you, because your love has asked me -
It is broken and uneven, it will seek our faded harmony
To be faithful to the river, to be sung.

Frank Bana

Soul Music, Food And Wine

Soul Music, food and wine
For the hunger of our days
Expression of the mortal and divine

Stevie Wonder, Lauren Hill
Seize and sing the moment when
The loving heart becomes sublime and still

Curtis, Marvin, bass and horns
Cast protesting visions high
Into the stormy sacred sky

O'Jays, Dusty, Frieda Payne
Romantic love on a peace train
Incited dreams while the Supremes
Washed my senses in the rain

Now when I was a boy I knew
No black and white - only blue
I knew the charts by heart
And sang the songs at night

Recording off the radio
With my reel-to-reel machine
Alan Freeman's pop picks
Every Sunday night at six

I asked Sam, not knowing he was slain,
Where's that change that's gonna come?
The little tent of freedom has been down so long

Then I met up with Kool and the Gang
Down by the Okavango Swamp
Most of the village dancing in a celebration stomp

Waking up to rhythms fresh
By Marley when two sevens clash
My baby said to stay in bed
And there Jah music kept me fed

And now Soul Music, R and B
Alicia,
Hang my mind out in the sky
On a second happy high

But there's no need to call
All the great names on a roll
Just let me hear the songs instead
And vocalise inside my head

Hearing as if for the first time
Seeing that the world in this time
Needs to keep the Gods impressed,
Fed with soul food at its best.

Frank Bana

Speak To Me

Speak to me, Aloneness
You so demanding, with no
Whisper to suggest
To this bubble-wrapped heart
That aches to summon you

Tell me now, Aloneness
What do you expect
When the time comes in life
To enter solitary
Where the cell is nameless
One of a thousand in
Prisons without address

For I know only to speak
To the cells of emptiness
But there is no one listening
While you perch in silence.

So typical of you
To prevent me getting through
To turn aside this voice
Deeply faded though it is
What is that you said?
Only nothing, once again.
It's just another day
On the blade of an etched calculus
In which I'm so very glad
Not to hear from you.

- Now I taste the awful rumours
In the sourness of my gruel
The massacre of innocence
Desecration of the school

That's how the stories come to me
As teardrops from the dark
The terrifying history
Of the tortured human heart -

Of course, there's someone else:
Please to meet my Brother Cancer.
Cancer lives here too
He is silent too.
Here comes the Executioner
For the last who is to leave
See - I am not alone. Aren't you jealous yet?

Where your voice, Aloneness?
Your last-minute reprieve?

Frank Bana

Springsong For Anyone

Each morning I see
The springtime coming near
I look forward to welcoming
The sunglow on my skin again

The deer and all their young
Will take the stage once more
In soft light of the dawn
Squirrels will run before the fawn

In fear towards the stream
I feel like calling out to them
I want them to stay close a-while
To celebrate with me

The turning of the page
The coming of the spring
The reason that I make this song
For anyone to sing.

'Anonymous'

Frank Bana

Steel Rails Hum (Song For A Singer)

If it should happen like this:
That one day you are gone
And I myself still hanging on,
I will break down in tears
When I hear the news
I will be listening one more time
To your ragged song.

I will sing lightly, gliding on
The quiet thunder of your voice
Not diluting your expression
Nor can I forget a word.
Melodic phrases mount and ride
Valley descants, rising hills
As steel rails hum, we sing along
To hard time working blues.

Soul companion for so long
But I will never come to know
The weights and daily burdens that you raise.
And if one day you will be gone
And I'm still standing in the rain
I will not claim to know you, nor say to anyone
That I caught you in the distance
Reaching out to recreate
The delicacy of your song on stage.

But for myself I take the stand
And trust in all its certainty
To recognize the hum of rails
Vibrations of approaching trains,
The metal wheels that churn your mind
Intoning their redemption, sighs of pain.

And I will harmonize with them
While I remember, just as long
As I am standing by your tracks -
If ever you are gone.

Stepping Out

In some future day I'll step into the light
Maybe next spring, at 5am, wearing faded jeans
And a white-face mask. How warm it will be
When the winds have come in from Africa
And our lungs are mostly virus-free
I'll ramble the meadows randomly
Towards any horizon, the vastness of green
Embracing me, as she would do
In a new country, my little Kalahari
Where English wildflowers sway in bloom

Emerging not as if from war
Nor from the loneliness of slavery
Emerging from wantonness and cruelty
Picking my way through death's debris
Imprisoned by flesh, nervous government
Bound to the sick, the elders and young
And to all for whom reckoning has come

On that day in baby steps rejoicing
I'll blow you a kiss from the corner
I'll raise my voice to greet my neighbour,
Dumela Mma, Bom Dia Senhora
Hello Dear, just like it used to be
Before we stood in driveways, banging pots and pans
Our discord waking up the night
And blending into a harmony
Of something more compassionate, more kind

They heard it at Stonehenge, rock-bearers
Suffering ghosts beneath the load
They heard it behind metal fences
In research labs at Porton Down
Working their science to keep us from harm
Until we could open our doors again
And wave and shout, take each other in
For cups of tea, in hope reborn
Stepping softly, stepping out in light
After the emergency.

Frank Bana

Sugar And Gold

Columbus sailed for riches
Pizarro and Cortes sought gold
The living slaves, the dead of Haiti
The Aztecs and the Incas
Haunt their testimony and
Historical foothold

Virginians mined tobacco
Brown leaves lustrous by the fields
Cured by branded bodies
Newly broken in
The sweat and joy entirely
Extracted by the sun

Jackson pledged to the Cherokee
The land would stay under their feet
As long as the grass shall grow
And the rivers run, his promise held
Until the white man with his dogs
Came running to the smell of gold

Heavy leaves of cane
Lacerate the children's hands
As they strip the stands
Working without cease
By heavy furnaces, consumed
By sudden leaps of crystalising flame

Things we may not see
When gold is hidden plain
Sugar underneath the tongue
Sleeping in the cold
Evicted by the company
Imperial Tobacco Road
With time to mine
The provenance of gold.

Frank Bana

Summer Fever 2008

The night is colder since the rain
The light is dimmer than expected
Wet leaves clinging to the window-pane

Inside the 1950s house
A madman hunting Mystery
Wonders if the world will question him
Or pass him by completely

The girl's red ball was tucked inside
The garden's crooked arms' embrace
Flecked by rivulets at noon
Like teardrops drowning in a face

Mother is often out, about
Gas stations dry, so many
Switching their accounts
To Walmart back from JC Penny

Small feet running, light and swift
Apollo is a girl who sings
But there's too much sugar all around
And corn in everything

Election ads are revving up
On the screens indoors
Contesting in the living room
Wrestling on the bedroom floor

Two phone lines are humming hard
Quick multitudes of bees
The mail box is flooding, someone
Voted in the primaries

Pale heat, mosquitos and the fear
Of rain, the fever rising
On air, the rush of more than blood
The whitening of teeth and hair

Obama and adrenalin, the hopefulness
And lies. Truth a prisoner at best
Of the fight for power
With arms folded on its chest

The Jewish African US girl
Born upon the day
Of the Great Stolen Election
Rushes with her ball to play

The summer fever fades to fall
She bounces the red ball
Until the cool of voting day

Her eighth birthday.

Frank Bana

Sweet And Ripe The Avocado

Ripeness is all. From which vantage
To view this curving orb
Tapered to a finely rounded waist?

Honey mustard, soy sauce
Combined and smeared on inner flesh
Yielding up its most exquisite taste.

The largest I have known
Are grown in Swaziland, each one a feast
An entree made of firm and fibrous fruit

Berries maturing on the tree
Fall hard and heavy to the hand
Potent pear of high and low repute

Avocado in my bowl
Provocative, the dark presence among
The oranges that brighten up the room

I wait for you to soften
A little more each day, becoming
Sweet and ripe and ready to consume.

Frank Bana

Sweet Nick

Sweet Nicholas, your handfuls of song
Endure and echo in the thoughts of some
Who look to deeper lives once more, in England and beyond

The damp tones of voice strewn on guitar, the steady pick
And falling strain, are clear as rain upon hard trodden ground
And grow more sturdy through the fallen years

Your generation lost in the abandonment of dreams,
Its hope and thirst for dreaming both erased
By monstrous waves of violence, foregone the force

Of persistence born in calm. Still, you watch and wait
For Betty at the riverbank. Your burial field
Is tilled and sown by seeds you left for her to find.

Half-boyish demi-smile, long slender hair
And frame, by Hampstead and Cyrano's coffee bar.
Near to invisible in the air, you hold to youth with fingers fine.

That blue guitar is strung across a pink-edged moon
Your life a gift extreme, a quietude of love
And fragile voices heard much further, later, now.

Nick Drake, 1948 - 1974

Frank Bana

Taking His Life - The Execution Of Saddam

If you think
There is any lasting meaning
Justice or fulfilment in taking the life
Of any human being, even the worst mass murderer

You have not thought
What life itself signifies
And why it is inviolable, not given out
For anyone to crush, even those most needing vengeance

Taking his life
Gives his methods just a little more validity
And treads in the first footprint of his deathly ways.
You should have trod more fitting paths of justice, even for his case.

Frank Bana

Taking Out The Trash

Twice a week in break of dawn
While the stars are outstanding
I screw the plastic lids on tight
Moles and chipmunks might get in

Summer in my shirtsleeves smart
A chorus of derisive birds
Winter with my overcoat
Frost and mist, dismissive words

The plastic, glass and house discards
Out by six and standing proud
Proclaiming waste and affluence
Of which we do not speak aloud

Who has the skills to sort this stuff
The piles we evacuate
Who can recycle or degrade
The trash we have thrown out too late

Nothing to rescue or be claimed
Once items pass their sell-by date.

Frank Bana

Terms Of Childhood

She rose, interrupting her 3am sleep,
To place a rough stone on the pavement
In the long queue of stones, marking her mother's place
In the morning line for government bread

She stands in pink at the school-bus stop
Faded satchel on her back, her eyes contained
By some slight terror of the daily world
Of the diesel clouds and traffic waves

Tending the family stall, she chases the flies
From small triangles of garlic flowers
On the metal-lined shelves of the mercado
As soldiers and inspectors deal their gains

On the evening southern Kalahari plain
Her brother said, "there are 17 white stones".
He was jumping from one smooth top to another –
The stones that ford the stream at Kanye

I met him playing on the day
When 42 young and grown children were slain
By a death lottery apartheid raid, an act
That histories would rapidly disdain.

The soiled dictator rules out his contenders
On general terms of fear and pain.
Would there be a lifetime
By which this deal was altered -
And something close to childhood came?

Frank Bana

That Messianic Feeling

I am not waiting for a messiah
This is not a messianic age
Delightful though it is to live
Among nuclear devices primed
With climatic catastrophies
Set on automatic dial, and where
Ten million infant lives each year
Could quite easily be saved

But this is our collective will
Our tragic play in aggregate
Not providing proof of revelation
Or demanding divine arbitration,
The intervention of a saviour -
It's just the end, inexorable,
Of bad human behaviour

And there's no coming absolution
We'll have to deal with the mess we've made
And not be lazy or too proud
To bend down low to sort it out
Unless with characteristic grace
We just leave it for our kids to face.

We'll be talking in the aftermath
Of brotherly love and how to live it.
Now who knows how to live like that?
Prophets of the god above
Have led us very long. Find me the ones
Who illuminate the human path

The ones who have the energy
To create the human song -
To protect the wispy spiders' webs
Clinging to the autumn leaves
Who smile during the harvesting
Embrace the winter cold, and those
Who guide the youthful flocks
Into the springtime fold.

Sure, I've felt like saving the world myself -
The one that needs saving from itself
But then, another false messiah
Is the last thing that this stage requires
So I think you'd better not change your name
Or take that road to Istanbul
If you're waiting for anyone
To perform the passion play again.

Frank Bana

That Would Be Something!

It would be great and I'd love to see it
Once in this short lifetime
I'd glue onto the cable news
Lie on the sofa and kick off my shoes
Spread some flowers on the street
Talk to strangers on the train
And carry a broad grin and peace sign again

The tide is up for America to change
For change of change itself to begin
A differential calculus wherein
Perceptions are unchained from their station
Running like kids around the place
In the pale and unbelieving face
Of a dazed, unraveled nation.

It would be something, quite a joyful ride
For a Black-, a KENYAN-American
To preside
Let all the doves come home to nest
The chickens roost in peace. We'd fly
Mandela to the Inauguration, be
More peaceful with the world outside
The tide
Moves with us when we swim a wider sea.

Frank Bana

The Beatles Are Bright....

I remember it well, that morning at school
When another 8-year-old boy enquired
Did I know the names of the Beatles - the who?
John and Paul..... who else left to know?

On the top deck of a big yellow bus
Somewhere down near the southern coast
I was singing Day Tripper with the other kids
Unaware of the hidden dirty jokes

Stuffed in the back of a Golders Green van
The front seat radio began to play
A beautiful song ... but before we knew,
We were scooped up and deposited
At Bloom's kosher eatery.

Here, there and everywhere
In case you were wondering,
And about a year later, at summer camp
I met a boy I would call my best friend
We sat on a hill singing Lucy in the Sky

Riding in my Dad's car, a hammering sound
Something magical, weird and embarrassing
That became the jewel in John's triple crown
The Walrus, soon banned by the BBC
Because she 'let her knickers down'.

Thirteen now, with Dad hard at work
Trying to win the Queen's export award
Taking advantage of the plummeting pound
I was lounging by the turntable
Still wearing my summer shorts and tie

He rushed in my room, brandishing
Something shiny, slippery and white
It folded open to reveal
Black vinyl, a green apple at the core
That spun as the three guitars chimed.

For language exams, studying hard
I rode a train through Holland and France
Serenading a gentle Welsh-tongued girl -
Afanwen James, pretty as her name -
With all of Abbey Road's second side.

I thank the Lord for the courage of George
Refusing to give up that Sitar
The barely sufferable arrogance of Paul
Dropping by the studio, around the block
To take the Winding Road once more.

So much that only just reached the light!
Tapes that could have been erased
Pills and disputes gone down the wrong way
Notes so close to being mislaid
By the pilots or in the engine room.

And I - left to grow in a land less a-glow
With the solo albums and my steel guitar
With Elton, Marc and the folk clubs, of course
But nothing compared to those pre-teen days
When a Fab Four single hit the stores.

And although I've hummed a thousand times
'Love you forever, and forever,
Love you with with all my heart'
The Beatles are bright in a childhood dream
And I can never get back that far.

Frank Bana

The Benefits Of Chemotherapy

No hair to cut, blow-dry or wax
No eyebrows screaming to be plucked
No vanity to cultivate or tend.

No weight of desire, secure against
The blandishments of an erotic age,
Your energy too low to run your debts.

But there's sufficient time to clear the mind
And, while statistics do not speak as one
Your life might be prolonged, you might be saved.

Yes, time to figure out a lobster roll
Time to write a more reflective poem

To read the history books you choose
To discover where and who you've been
And trace the future hidden in your skin.

Time to call lost friends and greet
The people in the next-door chairs
Make promises to meet again next week.

You can watch the spectral votes being cast
And lost or stolen on TV
And study all the details in the press.

You can stay indoors, indefinitely
Avoid the draft of mendacity
While studying a Tennessee Williams play.

Whether any one of us is cured?
Who knows, maybe yes, we all are.
Statistics are ambiguous, like I said.

Just ensure your nausea Meds are good
Allow yourself comfort. Be reassured:
There is so much more to life than death.

The Big-Game Room

A proud and upright huntress
Seated in her big-game room
Surrounded by hectares of dead stuffed flesh
Wearing a later-life rictus smile
She has opted for anonymity
Due to "threats from animal activists"
And as for me
I never thought such a room to exist
So now she can count me among them

Antlers, antlers rise everywhere
And hordes of tiny wild cats
Snarling, fleeing, seated stilled
Arranged together in curlicues
On rugs of other animals' skins
And up beside the Texas brick
Two brown bears rise majestic
A Mexican jaguar, but even these
Are not the proudest centrepiece
Would you believe, she flew to the Arctic
To bag an off-white polar bear
Who balances with just one paw
On some sort of iceberg fakery

Metal cowboy statues on the mantle
Possum posed alertly at her feet
A turkey rampant in the corner
A turkey! Incongruous within
This death-montage of incongruity.

She says, in drawl to the magazine
There are people who hunt, I have always said
And people who don't, who usually hate it.
Well, not quite so. It's the huntress herself
And not the "it"; we're inclined to hate:
The complacent huntress. The state of mind
That supposes the slaughter of creatures for game
Finds justification in gross display.

(New York Times Magazine spread, 27 May 2012)

Frank Bana

The Brave Ones (And Mugabe)

So the African Union hosts Mugabe
Ian Khama sits down with Mugabe (*)
Thabo Mbeki sits down with Mugabe
John Kufuor sits down with Mugabe

All the great democrats
Polite & cordial diplomats

The Food and Agriculture Organisation
And other organs of the UN
Welcome Mugabe back
To the ruined halls of Rome

The European Union
And the delegates of its Member States
Sit down with Mugabe
To discuss trade deals in Lisbon

No country boycotts
No delegate walk-outs
No-one shouts in anger
Throws a can of paint
Or deigns to speak a truth to the dictator

Babies' legs are broken
Infants starve in villages
Where folks were brave enough to vote against him

Men and boys are slaughtered
Women raped and tortured
For the courage to uphold the opposition

And those who think they work in honour
For development and peace
Perform their rituals
At the same old tables
As if no beast sat in their midst.

* Note: Respect: Ian Khama has boycotted the latest sub-regional summit in brave protest at the continuing presence of Mr Mugabe.

Frank Bana

The Bring-Down And The Fall

On this rough pole, your grip is tight
Your hands are chafed and torn
But if for just an eyeblink, you let go
You will be keeling back, a gravitational pull

How far you seem to fall....
The absent landing ground
The barren farm of what is left in store.

For no-one is secure, the ropes are frayed
The nets are stretched beyond capacity
The passers-by withholding their concern
The money-lenders' period of grace

The judge brings down his hard robotic fist
Directed by the law and lobbyists
It is time now to go down

To leave children and spouse behind
No use to beg - do not pretend to mind
You were selfish, after all, in your ascent
And later you will trace their eyes
In ridges of the wall
That is all you have to exercise your mind

And if they let you rise
If your limbs are ever sprung
You will not be walking out so tall -
The sky will be much higher
Than your senses can recall.

Should I counsel you with hope?
Would it moderate the pain? Or be clear
About the limits of parole:
Not to borrow, lease or vote
Or enjoy your work again
Once you let go of the pole
For the first and final fall.

Around your ears, the wind is cold
Drops of rain fall from your locks
Bruises on the fabric
Of your coat and uniform
Fingertips burned raw, by acid waste and ink

Remember, when they made you lose your grip?
Your family gone, the payments late
No inspiration for escape
More incisive in their strategy
Than you could anticipate -
They planned your ruin
And brought you down with it.

Frank Bana

The Cage

On the cusp of reformation
By the brink of understanding
Near the edges of the dawn
Through the doors of transforming

the reality that holds us
in our cages of identity
with a chance of confronting
the ones that we were meant to be

By the tip of the wing
That would carry us to recognize
Unities of which we sing
But ignore before our eyes

while extending our hope
to the surface of a fingertip
with one moment left to touch
or forever let it slip

Through the void of our lives
Mired in passivity
Too discouraged yet to rise
Even though only an inch away

Too pliant and too meek
Forgiving feels too fine -
The design, the tools, the hand
That build the cage, are mine?

Frank Bana

The Chief (The Last Time)

There was a time when we all loved The Chief
We brought him our tribute in baskets of grain
Each man a cow, each woman a son
To call forth his smile that conjured the rain

We captured alive his pangolins
We brought to him songbirds that flew in the wild
And then one day came his strange new demand
For body parts from a murdered child

From that day his eye-shades were darkened and tight
Our sons sent to war with no reason to fight
His justifications always the same
The magnification and praise of his name

We mirrored his glory, named babies for him
He melted our gold into his offering
He chased out the immigrants, minority tribes
The brothers and sons of the former chief's line

He took all our cattle, tore fruits from the trees
Conscripted our children, the women his prize
Through old and new moons, we stood quietly aside
Repeating his pledge, this will be the last time.

Frank Bana

The Cup Of Mercy

The cup of Mercy is so small
Its drops are few
Too greedily
We thirst to drink them all

Mercy holds the well of life
As songs and fables claim
So humbly from this cup
We seek the source of nourishment

And we become the same
In Mercy lifted up
Our kindest acts of Love performed
Above this almost-empty cup.

Frank Bana

The Damage Of Abuse

I wish I could expose and shame
All those who abused you when you were a girl
Growing up in a torrent of hail and pain
As they stripped the remains of your childhood away

The foster-mother who neglected you
The foster-father who molested you
The welfare worker who imprisoned you
The state psychiatrist who violated you
The extended family that turned their eyes blind
The review board members who enabled it all

I wish I could avenge the damage
That impels your daily struggle for peace
Your search for perfection and release
And your courageous strength of will
Reaching for what is normal and whole

Show me who to shame and kill
To avenge the damages done to you
And the hurts to those who love you now
Inflicted in collateral

I know there is no revenge to be had
Your abusers are escaped or dead
But they live on among us, untouchable
In all the damage they do and did.

Frank Bana

The Desert Wells (Kalahari Cattle Posts)

It was springtime in the Highveld, I was only twenty-two
He took me to the open plains where desert flowers grew
Where weavers built their summer homes, hyenas roamed and plundered
He drove through mists of dancing heat, the storms of evening thundered

They drilled so deep and desperate for the siren scent of water
Young men with crude divining rods, the cattle bred for slaughter
We asked for buckets from the wells, San people living there
Refilled our metal jerrycans, swaying on sorghum beer

We flattened trails in new-born bush, gathering information
On age and health and livelihood, the last nomadic nation
I studied all his methods as he raged on Nixon's crimes
His stubborn mid-west bravery, attentive at all times

And time confirmed all that I learned, and suffered for it after
The memories of morning breeze, the moonlight's silent laughter
My spirit knows her origin, the wells I did not reach yet
He teaches now in Michigan, the desert guards her secret

I taste the wind from Africa, fine particles of sand
The devil's claw scoring my skin, red flowers in my hand
The pricking of the cactus, the green acacia's tear
The scars upon my heart, your healing fingers in my hair.

With thoughts of Bob Hitchcock

Frank Bana

The Doctors

They told me I was dying
But I was only sick
I started to panic
Made all kinds of mistakes
I returned to poetry
Got myself married
But now I'm in recovery
And I tell you straight:
It's a long, austere process

Don't listen to the doctors
They understand sickness
They know nothing about death.

Frank Bana

The Fear

And now my love the terror
Is surrounding everything
Even the red wheelbarrow
The trembling of the sky
In the rising heat of fire
Fear of the recession
Sleep-walking off the cliff
Fear of a new rainbow
With nothing at the end of it
Fear of blackened rivers
Return of the sickness
Fear of everyone else's fear
As they patrol the stage
Bars raised on the cage
By their fear of change

Fear of the Israelis
And the brown girl on the train
Fear of Ms America
And what she's doing to her face
Self - immolation
Self - mutilation
Bearing arms and burning hearts
Terror of intelligence
Allergic to complexion
Fear indeed of anyone
Living without fear
Fear as fever, fear as balm
His excuse to minimise
The meaning of ideas
Fear to stand stock still
And run from every fear

Fear is here but I
Myself am different now
I have changed my shape
From the inside to the out
A shell that hides on shore
As camouflage, I dive

Under the surface of seabed
When the tide pulls back
At the command of fear
He no longer sees me here
Through prison walls I slide
I am man no more
I am liquid in my shell
Viscous, moist and free to run
And fear cannot find his mark
To enter anywhere.

Frank Bana

The Gardens

Here the gardens fenced and walled
Hold no fauna for my poetry
But the Goddess has been good to me
She gives me work to nourish me
In the pain of living wild, remaining sane

After rain and climate change
Walking to the morning train
Leaves are fallen golden brown
Crushed to slickness underfoot
Reaching through the concrete
To seize life at the root

The birds seem to be thinning out
The times they neither clothe nor suit
Caught by the fences, in the netting
Unremarked and left unheard
They pile up in the chambers of forgetting

While to my ears come other songs
The fall of the beat, the note of defeat
No way to evade this atmosphere
The leaves dissolve like snowflakes on air

None of the gardens fenced and walled
Hold a motif for my poetry here
I have seen it all, good fella
The grand yachts in Marbella
Sade singing, love is king!
I am not yet in that pit
I remember how to sing
I have not reached the very bottom yet

Broken here, irrevocably
I cannot love as I must love
Earth, She, and the stars above
Until hope is lost to me
And the gardens fenced and barred
Hold no sentries to safeguard my poetry.

Frank Bana

The Grace Of God

If, as some suggest
We should thank God and His Grace
For not sharing the fate of those
Entombed in the ruins of Port-au-Prince

What should we tell to Him
And His agency of Grace
On behalf of all of them
Whose voices have forever
Been stolen away?

Frank Bana

The Heart Of Things

There must be a man somewhere
Who sees into the heart of things.

Ventricles clogged by secret lust
For violence, bitter juice, revenge
Lost hope in passage, aspiration,
Breath, the dreams of dull routines

Drops of cherry-coloured tears
In channels run, immortal fears
That rear unbidden, clog and check
And strangle life remaining

Elevated, rising steam
From burning embers of the fight
Bright visions of eternity
In yearning for immunity

The heart lies void, resentful in the night
Its longing an imperative
To know the pleasure of the dawn
Pulsating in its seizure.

I know there is a man somewhere
Who sees into the heart of things

Sighing, he spreads out his wings
And cries.

Frank Bana

The Horses

The horses on a hillside
Grazing in the sun
Creatures never ridden
No pulley for a cart
Dark and sleek and careless
Heavy in their English field
Muscled in the heart
Descendants of the Pegasus
Strong and stubborn born
To carry an unbroken line
Out running our human time

Run for water, run from fear
For food, run from a man
For a filly, to a child
Eating from an infant hand
A stallion running over here
Approaching my despair
Bearing me no harm, I see
Sunlit creature from a field
Caught in the need for nurture
And the longing to be wild

Teach me to be careless too
Show me how to follow
Tracks cut through the meadows deep
In the land of Blake and Keats
Cutting through their tragedies
Into the dens of night
Tracks to guide the horses home
Trails to bring them safely in
Where they spread their ancient wings
And escape in flight.

Frank Bana

The House Of Cards

Wrecked cars on a concrete roof
Men sing of death and dying
Women dream of coloured hair
While foreign faces claw the glass
Preparing to break in at last
Determined to demand a share

Debt and lenders run the prison
Shamelessly buy politicians
Trading and negotiating
Everything they get their hands on
All accounts belong to them
As the storm rips through the dawn
As the train comes rolling in

Old folks know the words you need
Christmas, Eid and New Year's Eve
They know too well the flood that's coming
Firstborn killings, days of judging
Hear the priceless words they speak
Sit and listen at their feet

All the visions double back
Dreams defenceless from attack
Abandoned on the open plain
Not a tree in sight to climb
Immobilized by all the weight
Of present day and ancient crime

As it turns out, it's now too late
The house of cards comes crashing down
Its credit out of time and date
The self-appointed priests of hate
Are left to tend the fires at night
To keep the packs and prides at bay
For all the so-called good and great
Hanging from the hands of fate.

The Jail Of Pinochet

Streets resound to Pinochet's demise
The murderous Dictator lies
Interred with all the multitudes
Of innocent young lives in bloom

The stories of Allende rise
To dance beside his muddy grave
The spirits of Neruda, Jara
Raise their voice in song again

He might have been a kindly father
And kept his torture memoranda
Hidden from his children's eyes
Behind his mask, his deadly shroud

I wonder who those children are.
Five hearts and all the shadowed souls
A ghost cries for exoneration
The morning sun guarding his jail.

Frank Bana

The Letter, 1974

A certain man was left alone
Creating work for his hands to own
Left alone by his woman lover
Abandoned by a man, his brother

Humbled he lay reading poems
Relearning faith from modern bibles
Reading in poems of a fool Isaiah
Instructed in his own desire

A dreaming man once found a letter
Beloved hands, but not for him
A letter returned to the stars
To free him from his burning heart.

Frank Bana

The Little Prince

The Little Prince has come
The dreams of Saint-Exupery
A boy refused to die
And it is winter now
It too has come so late
Now that the world is warming

The snow is building in the sky
All the schools are closing
Commuter lines are dressed in white
Perhaps I will stay home and read
Sharing Saint-Exupery's dreams
My little girl and I.

Frank Bana

The Lost Sun (African Song)

Police herd the helpless through Landrover doors.
Soldiers mount women like dogs on all fours.
Children bear parents, shot down in the road.
How can the Sun be so terribly cold?

Maize fields abandoned, eaten by flames.
Mud walls destroyed, villages without names.
Livestock run free, the kraal gates cannot hold.
Who left the shivering Sun to the cold?

Breakfast plates empty, stores with no supplies.
Noon, vacant desks, hunger in pupils' eyes.
This was the New Dawn, for breaking the mould.
How rose the Sun so unbearably cold?

Grass was preserved by communal rotation
Wildlife conserved by decrees of the nation.
Watered, watched over by Sun-Gods of old.
Now who saves the African Sun from the cold?

Frank Bana

The Nature Of Miracles

If I brought myself
To write of
Me touching you touching me
I would have to think
More than it is politic
About your skin
And the nature of miracles.

Frank Bana

The Quiet One (For Beatle George)

They met him on the local bus, just
Local boys not knowing they were bound
For glory, greatness, and here was

The one to always ask for less
The quiet one, who worked hard on his lines
Holding his own above the fuss

For years they kept him to the wings
Without stage mark or microphone
Rising to harmonize but not to sing

Saturn's dark sun, its self-effacing child
Of Krishna, kept strong by belief
Sharing his heart, looking for inner light

It was more difficult to hold
To keep that faith when all around
Of his small frame it rained, the arrogance

Intrusion, all the slights and checks
Of his kind and careless friends
Advice on what and where and how to play

And when the dam burst and the songs poured down
The rivers he had stored, the chants suppressed
In deference rang quiet and strong, the hum

Of new contentment in his mind, the sign
To cultivate his garden and his son
Discovered footsteps in that quiet time

When cancer is held back, in check
And has not come again, not yet
To take the life on which it once laid claim

He thought back to those years, he said
They gave their screams, the Beatles gained insight
And gave their nervous systems in exchange.

Frank Bana

The Rhinos

They are more important: understand
They watch over the plains from which we sprang
The plains we glimpse in monochrome at dawn
Not realizing what our eyes feast on
Protected by a camera or a glove
From that which we have learned to fear or love

They are more important: understand
They occupy edenic promised land
No title and no good deed left undone
It is their own, their holy site and stake
Where they are pacified and burned
By subterfuge and cruel recoil
Of tranquiliser dart and gun

Now in this casual struggle to the last
Who will outlive the other, who can tell
The pachyderm, the homo sapiens
Distilling shame from all magnificence
The quicksands of commercial commonsense:
The plains are emptier than when we came
They who are more important, almost tamed.

Frank Bana

The Shadows Of Stephen

You can run alongside but he's out of your hands
He stumbles in the sad and stony road
He has the bible but they have the land
You can touch his side as the slickness of sky
Sends its twisted messages among you

And can you hear your windy cry, that plea
For release against the soldiers of the creed
Of the still-born revolution, hateful energy
On which your authorities feed?

Pray as you may, on your Sabbath of decay
That he will live among the poorly-fed
To be rumoured and remembered
In the dark and centurion years ahead
Write poems for the beauty of his skin
Washed in the blood of your love for him
For which you will be exiles, and pray
He will not drive in limousines
His words will be obscenity
If men are still obscene

They mock his blackness harder than his dreams

Hear his song conciliation, see his eyes
They bind him with passivity, they ride
Beside him through the throng
His hands are open now in theirs'.
Soon they will be shattering his palms.

In the shadows of Stephen
Men will take to arms.

For Stephen Biko
December 1977

Frank Bana

The Space For Dreaming....

A space for writing, with a solid desk and chair
Circled, cornered by the ever-winking lights
Literary progress drifts and fades on air
The music of the spheres is drowned by TV fights

The grunts of boxers, punditry, united lovers
And static that the commerce of the age defines
A refuge on the eastern plains where poets, once as brothers
Hitched, hand-holding, inward to the mountain spines

And cast their visions out to where the oceans end
Engulfed by gadgetry, in solitude and screaming
While keeping hope, weighed down by what we spend
We cling to bright materials saved up for dreaming.

Frank Bana

The Suffering We Are...

I'm only looking to post this mail
I don't know if it will get through
To the hostel where you daily seek a kind of health

And stumbling to my hill
I can't ensure a forward path
To hospitals where they will seek to call you ill

It isn't clear
That you aren't horizontal, flat or broke –
Or lucky with the government, provision for the unemployed

There's not been a cough or word
Since we cooked and laughed in Coventry
And you told me how your mother said that you should marry me

I only have discovered
In this brief and frothing brew of my affection
A little aphoristic pill that puts us sane above the rest:

It would be cynical to cure
All the suffering we are, to contain
The pain we see, with art, of any quality.

Frank Bana

The Temple Doors

I'm waiting for the Temple doors to open up again
The day we hold each other's hands and may enter where
I was in spirit raised, behind the gates of stone
Marked with the necessary stain of learning histories
Of sufferings and art, my tribe's philosophies

But Temple doors are closed and not by our enemies
But by a pestilence that, for once, is not laid upon us
Nor can be laid at any door, for in this our distress
The new Angel of Death carries no tattoo mark or race -

She breathes and we are mortal, for she is oblivious
To how we worship, and with whom we chose to love or hate
And gives no prophesy of when she passes over us

We are not summoned up now to read the scrolls of G-d
We are not asked to worship, nor to praise the Name
Our call is to be human, practicing the ways
Of daily placing hands on hearts, to know it deep and full
That we, the chosen genus, must come to peace and dwell
At temples of the inner word, and understand it well.

Pillars of our History, white pillars of the wise
They do not stand a hundred years, but easily they yield
Not to the massacres of men, the ravage of disease
But to forgotten memory, at the repentance gates
That men are now too sunk in pride to enter on their knees

By each third generation, we must be taught the pain
Of some disaster that our covenant is destined to reclaim
To stand and join our hearts, connect our hands and pray
To the One who may not be, and to One who may
And when the prayer we speak is Love, it has become the same
For on that day the Temple doors will open wide again.

Frank Bana

The Thorny Crown

Now the moment of truth, some of us can see

It must be worth the pain to know what we can be

Time for contemplation on the things we've done wrong

For reflecting, composing, working on a new song

Resurrecting Humanity

I'm rising up early with little to do

The trees rising high, taunting me, haunting you

Sunlight toys with my mood and refreshes my dreams

Bees tend to the flowers, birds play on the beams

Tempting my Humanity

We are heroes and villains, saints on every block

Red crosses, white paint and e-files to unlock

The chorus of courage and desperate pleas

For are we the cure, are we the disease

That interrogates Humanity

The last words of prophets, first thoughts of the fools

Each crying a warning in a world without rules

The child and the pensioner make common cause
When science and freedom are crushed by the laws
Of a ruthless Humanity

Blame for the Chinese, the cold corporations
Refugees and high-flyers, rootless of the nations
Go ahead with deflection, it will take you nowhere
For your clothes are unwashed and your bodies are bare
Naked in Humanity

The skyways are clear and the runways deserted
While life is on trial in warehouses converted
Into hospital ships where we sail our last hopes
Fever dreams redefined and love on the ropes
Binding Humanity

So slow down for a while, grow your own food
It might hurt you a lot but it's for your own good
You wounded the planet, it's all for the best
I'm placing the human race on house arrest
To contemplate Humanity

Now together we watch this crucifixion unfold

Crushing dreams of the young and lungs of the old

Missing times long ago when the mountains shone bright

Do we still have the sight to put everything right

And become a Humanity?

Frank Bana

The Truth (For Leonard)

she is almost naked
she removes her garter

now do you believe me?
she says

Frank Bana

The Weight You Carried From The Start, My Friend...

At Genesis we sang, learned to hold hands
And then abandoned one, the other too
Disappearing through the world, men strange and new

Unable to express the loss, to sing or cough
Or even to admit the weight
We carried down the road, inside a common soul

That space, that place of emptiness
To which some part within us fell, since we let go
The grip we held when juvenile and brave

We would not give it voice, to comfort
And assist, that it was both of us who bore
The weight and felt the loss the same

We could not ask, what kind of love, my friend,
Among loves manifold, are we?
What love is worthy of our name, what place

In you is that cold corner where I lay?
Will you once lift a hand to find
And touch the place in me?

When we were teens, I kissed your future wife
And now thirty years on, it's late, as you
Might say, to make a fuss of life

And I've been scared, I've never dared
To push on your home gate
To ask if you remember where

We put these heavy things, and if
They can be disinterred
To celebrate our love again.

To England I returned, and watched the birds
Above you, as you hauled the weight of all
The expectation and uniqueness of your soul

Your back and talents hurt like hell.
My weight is less, don't be afraid, I'll bring
My new creations lightly to your side.

(For D.P.)

Frank Bana

The Wounded Self

If I could be my ego death
The pain of love could be outrun
I could forget
The distance of your womanhood
To peace succumb

Dissolute and self-effaced
No mirrored shadow of desire
I could achieve
Sunder of hard material
Breakdown of inner pride

The wounded self seeks healing
To wholly disappear
But necessary still to rise
To bear the weight you find to be
Too heavy to ignore

Buried by a hail of tears
Offshore. And I meanwhile
Devout and strong
Bowed to my need, approach
The self-abandonment where I belong.

Frank Bana

These Hands (201?)

I looked down at these hands
No longer those
Of some younger man

They made some big mistakes
On looking back
Painting bright hopes upon a man
To make a better world
Because he started out as black

I dared believe in love
But in my foolish bravery
I learned to want it too
To hold it in my palms
As fresh
As waters of my happiness

Innocent of rituals
Strangers to distress
These hands have seen some action nonetheless

They would write in long lines
For the daily bread of typists
Botswana is a semi-arid country
Just the size
Of France or of Texas...
I began to visualize
They could do more than this

Their fingers, they would play
Sevillian arpeggios and trace
The passion place whereof I sang
Until every song had passed crescendo
Was done in kisses
diminuendo

These soft middle-aged hands
Held my new-born one
A daughter, I gave thanks -

(Never wishing for a son)
These hands do not aspire
To mould someone

Yet still not at peace
Itching to contend and fight
Burning, rash and desperate
To seize a shred of poetry
Grasp a shard of light

These hands, whose thumbs
Still tap out poems of love (for you)
Although no longer young

Stretched out long and wide,
Cannot divert or stem
The terrible slow tide.

Frank Bana

These Words

You've stumbled on my legacy
You've found my gift to you
Words are my precious currency
Flawed, they will have to do
My lift-me-ups
My hand-me-downs
A belated resume
I'll run into the virus soon
Or if not soon, one day

You'll find me in this hidden cave
My songs brought by the wind
You know I loved insanely
And loved just as I sinned
These are my thoughts
This is my heart
Her joys and suffering
You were my birth
Now in my death
The seed of all new things

I know I was a golden boy
I scratched the dirt of life
Perhaps I fell, or never failed
To outrun the sharpest knife
I do not claim hereafter
There's no pain I must endure
So call me in this moment
Hold to these words a second
Now I'm free forevermore.

Frank Bana

This Is Your World (An American Dream)

Don't curse the absence of snow on the slopes
This is the world that grew as you wanted
Nor pine for the sons and daughters you've lost
Your's is the army for which they enlisted

Yes, this is the world you voted for
The future to which you relinquished control

Don't cry for the youth, their innocence lost
This is corruption your cable bill cost
Don't wail for the absence of blue-collar work
Destroyed by the goods you bought home from Wal-Mart

Yes, this is the world you sat back to see
Unfold on your shiny new flat-screen TV

The world that you saw mutate every day
Drifting out of your reach, as you left for work
Blowing clean out of your way
The dry leaves onto the street.

Frank Bana

Tiger Stalks In Red

Since this decade of zeroes began
There has been something special to watch
In the warm heart of Sunday afternoons
When the game and the season are on

Checking to see if a young man in red
Wearing reserve as his elegance
Is striding ahead on the multiple shades
Of closely-mown green grass again

The ballet formed of angles and planes
The rhythm he makes of steel and wood
In a moment's blur, the elements cohere
Like a wicked cool Miles Davis groove

With stride and glare, self-conscious looks
Of appraisal, he adjusts his glove
One man calls attention in the crush
Compels with mathematical moves

It would be just a game and not mean a thing
Except that his smile and aura can seem
As broad as the wheatfields of Van Gogh
And bright as the tigers of Rousseau.

Frank Bana

Time To Hear (Birdsong)

The bird calls to protect the earth
She sings under the kitchen roof
In a magical, hypnotic trill
In quiet crystal notes of truth

Even if we cannot name the bird
We can set our day's concerns aside
None of us are innocent now
Of making it harder for wings to fly

Are we to say which of the species
Among us are worth less or more
A birdsong calls to protect the earth
It is in our power, to act for her

It's time to care while hope is there
It's time to hear before hope is lost
Birdsong calls to heal the earth
To repair what damage can be reversed.

A blue note sounds and we give pause
A new note skims across the earth
The bird calls us to tend her roof
While our neglect can be reversed.

[with thanks and acknowledgment to letter-writers in the New York Times: Jeff Fischer, Matthew Schenker and Paul Smaldino]

Frank Bana

To Begin Again (Shalom Aleynu)

I told you back in 74
You had better get out of your neighbour's yard
And in the course of 35 more years
Of beatings and squatting
Blocked tunnels and talks
You have poisoned his wells
Uprooted his olive trees
And he still lives next door
Steeped in hostility

You say you had no choice
Either his neck or your's
There's no way out
But your boot on his throat
Pressed there for so long
That you froze in the pose
No new ideas? In so many years?
A shame for one as smart as you
So let me offer one or two

Learn his language, he sure knows your's
Study his story. Everyone knows your's
Repay your debts across the fence
With technology and respect
Pray hard for his pardon, and now don't forget
You must give up quite a lot, if this you hope to get.

Long after our children had lived and died
Peace came to Israel, to Palestine
Peace ran through the hearts of men
Sprang from women, jumped over the hedges
That grew where walls and fences stood.
Don't ask me who or how or when.
There is only one fact known:
We all resolved to begin again.

Frank Bana

To Hold You

Fall back, human race, time to let the birds free
Sleep and be woken on carpets of green
I used to fly hemispheres, I lost my wings
Yet life burns so sweetly whenever it sings

Rising up, empty view, if my body feels good
In the arms of the dawn, embraced by the shade
Wrapped in cotton cloth, a hand full of seeds
Stepping out to sow butterflies among the weeds

No Mount Fuji water, no Jamaican rum
The terminals closing, the skyways are clear
We're begging and sharing our local supplies
There's no importation, the customs are bare

I play kitchen radio, political talk
I shave and shower daily, permitted to walk
The rhymes fill my footsteps, words dance and say
If it were not for you I'd live always this way

I wait for the doctor, wait for Jesus to call
Expecting the best of news, lifting the veil
I'm a patient old man and a restless small boy
I broke up my train set, the trains run no more

Jesus rose, leaving his friend vilified
So we wrestle today with our enemy blind
How shall we reckon these deaths with the Lord
The last-day creation of an unyielding god

How do you stay strong, dear, night after night
And yet you stay strong, I ask how do I
Perfect and perform all it takes and requires
To sanctify love and to keep us alive

I wash my hands, heart, like a padre these days
Sunlight will distil water pure from the haze
I call the stars, beg the moon, with all my guile
To deliver this song to hold you for a while.

Frank Bana

To Jesu

Oh Jesu
They made a beautiful
Story for you
A bright garland of dreams
To wear around your raven hair

Did you find the love you need
In man or womankind
Among the lilies of the fields
Where the young goats browse
As bluebirds fly in Galilee

Oh Jesu
How was it to be god for you
To be our servant too
When so many take your name
Who would think to betray you

You deserved more of us, Jesu
And I for one won't turn away
From the stories you had told
When you were happy yesterday
Today in greater sorrow

Knowing you tried to be true
To all they held you up to be

And I will ask you, man to man
Did you receive the love you need
And will you lead
That kind of love to me

Jesu, don't be lonely
For we are here in memory
Of Ginegar and Beit Tzeilim
The scaffolds of Jerusalem

Oh you, sweet Jesu
Mighty in your tenderness

Have you read French poetry
Can you converse in German too
For men to know and understand
The love we urged on them
Through you

Can you speak more clear to them
For the children, and women
Open up these shuttered hearts
With the word of your vision

Until we give in finally
To all gentleness within
The path that leads to home, where we
Will keep the children warm, again.

Frank Bana

To My Wife's Step-Father

All because of you
I cannot wear white T-shirts
Or play Hey Jude
And other songs of '68
Around a busy house

In part for what you did
I cannot make love
To my wife, can't break through
The wall of anti-depressants
She has raised up to protect
Against your memory's assault

Thanks to your abuse
There are shadows hidden
In every moment of light
And unexploded ordnance, seeded in the soil
That should be the bed of love

You were God-fearing
You made her fear you like a god
Hiding in the congregation
Where you are buried now, I'm sure
It's you who are afraid

All we really need
Is for Time to back right up
To return to a beginning
Where you never adopted her
Nor could pose as any father
To agents of child welfare

Time for a brand new start
Where those long years of abuse
Have been strangled, all along with you
At the moment of birth

But for now it's clear
There'll be no reconciling

While this river runs its polluted course
Until another generation
Has reached another shore.

Frank Bana

To Thank You, Lord

I thank You My Lord for this happy moment
Crossing my face with a half-moon smile
For the song in my soul and the tears of salt
This sacred melody draws from my eyes

Thank You Adonai for the sudden feeling
By which I stand inescapably moved
The sun on the Alps, the covering of snow
That rests only overshadowed by You

Praises on my tongue, Majestic of Ages
For each precious phrase locked within the Shema
Causing me to be born in Jewry
Commanded to write on the page of my heart

May they each arrive, to the ears of Almighty
These halting words of a man occupied
In collecting the tiny fragments of shells
That He by His Wisdom left buried to find

I will never be claiming to seeing you, Lord
Or think to your presence that I can come near
I must yet be a stranger, but I write to thank
The One known as You for the beauty in here.

Frank Bana

To Womankind

Womankind, please make up your mind!
You want a man true sensitive
A vulnerable romantic type
Open to his inner self and willing there to live

And yet - is it contrarily? - you need a man protective
To keep you safe, your children well secure
To chase away the other wolves
And memories from the door

I'm just one person - not quite two - enough perhaps
For what you want... but not for all your needs
So now what happens to the rest of me,
Inadequate, the wounded part that bleeds?

Frank Bana

Towards A Pain-Free World

Tylenol claim to be offering
A convenient tablet for headaches, to chew
When you're on the road or the run. It's called
'One small step towards a pain-free world'.

For this, I'll give them thanks and feedback
For J&J and their corporate friends
On how to get stepping to a pain-free world
One big stone at a time. I'll say:

You could heighten your fight on malaria
Raise your donations for mothers with AIDS
Work with allies against poor sanitation
That torments kids with deadly disease

Another big step: a campaign to respect
International laws against military games
That lead to the kind of headaches that leave
Children orphaned and maimed - in lifelong pain

I'll propose further paths to that painless world:
The foreswearing of torture in every jail
Abjuring of mines, cluster bombs, use of lies
As tools of terror and social control.

Yes, there's much that we and the Johnsons could do
Even if our strides are timid at first
I'll carry their tablets, next time I'm let out -
Now let's start treating the pain in our hearts.

Frank Bana

Train Of Dreams

In the village called Mochudi, on the Kalahari fringe
Two sisters, Education Child and Miracle, carry their loads
Of elementary books beside the line of rail, climbing in neat grey uniforms
The hill to school. The single track
Awaits the daily train that hauls the sheep and goats
And owners to the north colonial lands
While in the dry warm hovering air
Infused by levitating specks of sand
Freedom is a perceptible dance

In the Pyrenees, carriages hug the snowy morning hills
Exhausted by the nightlong dash through redolent French fields
Now voices raise a chant in every silenced church
Invading like the lethal sunlight of a summer dawn.
The train descends for the embrace of Spanish plains,
The olive groves of Portugal, carnations from its windows strewn
And gathered by the thirsting wraiths

As the skirts of old Philadelphia unfold
The red-lined slums and drug-imprisoned zones
Snarl below the elevated track,
This line that finds its station
In a history of forgotten slaves, by the cracked bell of Liberty
Where Washington himself owned souls, where the Slave Trade Act
Of 1794 was passed in Congress, where African children
Apprehended from ships were indentured to education
And grew only to glimpse their freedom, to receive two suits of clothes,
One new, one old.

This train conveying dreams on every rack,
In every trunk, conceived by many minds,
Comes to halt in Pennsylvania, but remains primed,
While we its crew
In hope and servitude
Lay sleepers towards new frontiers and stoke
The engines of our dreams.

Frank Bana

Two Jewish Boys

We may have lost the Torah, but we had The Favourite Game
My voice and your guitar on the Charing Cross Road
Simple chords in Hampstead at Cyranos, sweetcorn-drenched burgers
Up at Maxwell's, playing ping pong till you won
Playing golf till you won, playing girls just the same
You married one of them
Your captive bride
I guess you won again

However long it took, you aimed to be a writer
You wanted to save Israel
From your command post on a hill
I wanted to save the poor
We both still do

Neither you nor I succeeded (yet)
You published your first book at 58
And threatened the world
With 30 more, your basement literature
Which I have no time or will to read
For I have some recruiter to impress
Lest my latest trip to Africa
(Sweet-scented beauty that she is)
Turn out to be my last

No-one now needs skills like these
The calls are silent for my pieties
How goes it with your histories?
I have to ask you for
We don't call each other anymore.
I got my pension, you your Website and manuscripts
Now digitized, we both wear glasses to disguise our eyes
In case they might reveal the naked souls
Of two little Jewish boys

John and George, Gunner and Spur
Bob and Lenny, Jonathan and David
The Psalm king and the singing follower

Naughty boys the ghetto never whipped
Saved from oblivion by real estate
And by the schmatter trade, lost boys
Whose fathers died in the same small frame
That separates us at our birth, our mothers live alone
And we over the ocean, why, why, why
Do the women that we thought to love
Sheba's girls with hidden knives
Hate us like the poison and detest
The you in me, I can tell you now

No matter the stern distance, the unmentionable pain
I feel your breath, your arms, our single kiss
Two artists in one mirror, refugees from history, free
To drive the sodium-bright evening streets
In the wrong direction once again

And though I hate the thing you are
And some memories have a reflex gag
I'm glad for what I've heard, about you doing well
With your calculations, books and friends
Somewhere in the not-so-distant world.

Frank Bana

Two State Solution

To celebrate, I'm drinking lemonade
The two-state solution now is dead
With Egged we can all go home and watch
The video embed. Wailing and grinding
As we watch the great wall fall
Rubble engulfing the hungry pure
Just as it was foretold
Skull caps askew, the women take their place
Their beads and dresses sway, in ecstasy
Tearing their bonds and visas, chanting
Don't talk of two when only one will do
There's honey here for everyone. The bees
Have flown, the worker drones take charge
Of fighting for the comb. Old men
Hairlines, prayer-bumps receding
Bleeding, swarming in
Searching for the locks that fit
The keys their fathers hung around their necks
And ordered how they must never forget
Until the dawn, the day that surely breaks
When fear awakes and lords of iron
Will slumber still. A day of rest, undreamed and unexpected
When they went to bed. They now arise, and realize
Their maps are obsolete and wrecked.

The markets emptied of unleavened bread.
Dates and olives, orange juice, to celebrate instead
I'm drinking bitter lemonade, one with the people
Of the book, today it's heard and said
The old two-state solution now is dead.
We ticket back to Kiev, Budapest
They're called for us, rolling out the welcome mats
The party has begun, homecoming will be "live"
The cameras roll, the drunken lefties, writing blogs
Dancing close and dirty with the right wing ideologues
The first jet lands, the last jet leaves
The land of sacred true belief
To the waiting ones. Cast your rosaries
And worry beads aside. The children

And the righteous shall arise
From the smoke of ruined cars and burning skies
Inheriting this tortured compromise.

Frank Bana

Vers Le Poeme (Petit Bonbon)/In English-Don'T Be Scared..!

The poem brings you verses
Elements, sun and rain
The rain, 'par averses'
Paints grass verdant green

The poem is subversive
Turns the world onto its side
Until you feel vertiginous
And give up the ride

So when you get sick of it
Just avert your eyes
And demand the writer
Some better advice

On how to stay vertical
And not fall in the tank

It may shine just like Versailles -

But the poem is blank.

Frank Bana

Village Marriage Day

With a long fine cloud
She wandered slowly away
Across the yellow mouth of morning
Through another gate-head
Where the withered maize-stems made
Leaves for folded dolls.

The backyard
Should be smeared this year.

She approaches her father
His hands bloodstained
The goat's head laid back
On its tenuous link to the body.

She looks at the goat
Turns over the night of love
Her sleek tilted head remembers
The other art of marriage
For which he said she must prepare.

Frank Bana

Visitor

I stood high on the railway bridge
Waiting for the train to come
Steel rails in the dawn shining
Caresses of the morning sun
Stretching all the way to London.
But the train it did not come

I sat down by the bus shelter
Waiting on the Green Line to come
The timetable was posted clear
I was full of expectation
To talk to a fellow passenger.
But the bus it did not come

I watched the daily press event
Waiting for the truth to come
The deadly numbers played on air
Fact and blame and counter-claim
As the men spoke to the nation.
But the truth it did not come

I was taken down to hospital
Calling for the nurse to come
Among my hosts and new-made friends
Talking through our many tongues
Prone and racked in suffering.
But the nurse s/he could not come

Frank Bana

Visits In Beijing

The buildings are stacked for miles in rows along the wide main street
All new, erected in the last five or ten years. It must have been a frenzy
Under grey skies heavy with pollution or mist or fog we pass Tiananmen Square
And reach a cultural centre carpeted in red with dragon clocks and chandeliers

I acquire the gift of a rolled silk tapestry, a huge name tag in English and
Mandarin, and then a guide and an interpreter to direct me to my place, to where

at every moment

The plan calls for me to be. I sit, my capped bone china cup of tea is filled
And as I sip, topped up again. My turn comes in the playlist, my microphone
switched on for me

I deliver speech, then off we go for group photo, every seat pre-prepared with a
name tag attached

Over coffee and sweet bean cakes I engage the student girls who guide and
interpret, their real concern

Is for my viewing of historical sites, for advance of cooperation and the march of
social harmony.

Apartment blocks emerging from the heavy haze

Ever more Ring Roads as migrants swell the city

Cars replace bicycles over the years

On the way to visit the Great Wall

At Bada Ling, snowfall around the feet.

I am freezing up high in the early morning!

We were the first, before the daily groups of students came.

Climbed down gingerly, got inside. Ordered cabbage, beancurd and noodle soup.

Five women gathered round to watch me eat. My local guide

Waited... until we found a KFC.

Frank Bana

Waiting For Lindsey

A crib, a growing plant, a madonna's rocking chair,
Moving images of shooting stars and moons:
What must be prepared for her arrival?
What should properly adorn the world she finds?

While she's kicking in her evolution
In training to abandon the lake-like womb -
Summoned to be the embodiment of dreams -
The demand persists: how must we prepare?

Nothing of her future can be previsited,
Nor her choices, nor her freedoms of choice:
The numbers swell in lines that bind the continents -
Some insisting on justice, some applying for bread.

A brightly multi-coloured mobile
A trunk of infant clothes, gifted and store-found
Await as first inheritance, closeted
In a slightly sunlit, meditative room.

Families of ducks gather outside the window.
So large our hopes of her, and
She so young and small -
Our questions burn the tongues of a hundred million more.

Frank Bana

We Celebrate Silence

I write to you only
In poetry now
Letters are useless
Our poems contain
All the silence between us
Wherein we remain

Poems are the songs
Of church morning bells
Lyrics are scriptures
Of soft evening rain
The choruses ring
On the craters and hills
In echo, again and again

We make love and listen
We laugh when it's funny
No judgments to sweeten in
Vaseline and honey
We never use words
Language is absurd
For transactions of touch
Where blood rises unheard

Now we celebrate silence
It causes no fuss
Love and only Love
We will let speak for us
And with all time erased
Your hands recall my face
And kisses speak to you
In every quiet place.

Frank Bana

Weightless Boughs

Lost among the tallest trees
Men drowning of the green
Bury me under weightless boughs
Where I may not be seen

So I will come to visit you
In your nights of peace
Talk with me to comfort me
Still youthful in your sleep

Out there on the motorway
The gridlock of the dawn
Here beside a cherry tree
A hoof of newborn fawn

Ducks beneath the willow tree
My widow weeping silently
You let me down so tenderly
Leaving me rest eternal.

Frank Bana

Who Can Be Redeemed?

Who can be saved?

So many can be saved -
A rich man and his family,
They can be saved.

But who can be redeemed?

Only souls enslaved.
Only those sold
Can be bought back again.

Those who purchase minds and souls
By sermon, fear or flattery
May not petition for redemption
Or ask how it will set them free.

Those who traded on South Africa
While Mandela worked in jail
Those who issued bonds of war
While Iraq's children died in flames

You who claim to be redeemers
While disowning fields you've sown -
The lands you've stolen, slaves you've owned -
Will pay in different currency
Than any you have yet controlled.

Until you've lived in servitude
To justice and its wondrous law
Until you are the slaves to truth
Redemption is not yours' to know.

Frank Bana

Who Takes Care Of Him?

He is so often there
Corner of 44th and Lexington
At the breakfast hour
Tall and thin, matted hair
Roughly shaven
With his jeans and cane
Talking to the buildings and the air

Who dresses him, prepares him
For the day
Hands him the cane and combs his hair
To set him on his way
To pace the waking hours
Between 44 and 43
With words that issue endlessly?

And who looks out for him
His health care and income
Ensures the police will leave
His corner well alone
So he can swear, disclaim and eat
Not waste away entirely
Before he goes to sleep?

On mornings when he is not there
I think about him even more.

Frank Bana

Who Was William Shakespeare?

Surely G-D herself
On a short Sabbatical

Taking a break from
Divine forms of Inscription

(Makes one wonder, though
Who on earth was Verlaine?
Who in G-d's name was Rimbaud?)

Frank Bana

Wintermusic

I got to know you well today
Whether you shined
Whether it rained

Your words are wintermusic
That I hummed today

You gave me poems on paper
They fell, they made a terrible sound
I found them in my homework
And nothing gets done

Give me nothing to keep
Except this music to believe.

(1973)

Frank Bana

Wish I Was A Vegetarian!

I wish I were a vegetarian
I'd sleep a little easier
Without dead sheep to count
Brushing my teeth, not watching out
For stray pieces of meat

I'm searching for the discipline
Excuse or motivating force
To bolster my resolve to eat
And be as I should long have been
Of flesh and guilt, absolved and free

I've visited the slaughter-house
Where brains are stunned, carcasses hung
And bled and quartered into steak
The regiments of hens, all caged, debeaked
The pigs castrated, eunuchs waiting for the end to come.

I don't care how the surplus beasts would do -
We're overpopulated here ourselves!
Just let them all run free, I guess
In case they could feel happiness
They wouldn't be deprived of it by me

It's not about them, in the end
It's all familiarity
And if grandchildren ever crowd my knee
They won't recoil and faint beside my feet:
Oh man, what were you thinking, way back then -
Killing poor creatures for their meat?

Frank Bana

With My Beloved

I pray with my beloved
She is the moon in whom I disappear
Men of evil may kill her
And the beauty of her children
And gun down the mourners at her funeral
And the taut spirit in me –
So I love her in this moment
Against the murders of that day
When the centuries' chain of anguish
Will be dragged across the backs
Of the suffering, toiling prisoners here.

If I wake tomorrow and find her taken
If I wake to receive the news of her murder
I will confront her assassins
I will haunt their souls
With the intensity of all they are obsessed to destroy
I will use the weapon
Of the faith that she planted in me.

My thoughts become hers'
In this hour of the serious part of night
And I visit the place
Where strength and survival are renewed
And technology is democratized
And the fruits of nature are harvested
For our delight
For our tenderness
For our fertility
For our freedom, brief, from fear.

To all the men
Who murdered us one in three:
I see you now
Bringing slaughter upon the homes of my beloved.
You see what you do.
I wrestle with my hatred.
You are nothing to forgive.

("It is an easy thing to rejoice in the tents of prosperity;
Thus could I sing and thus rejoice; but it is not so with me"
William Blake)

Frank Bana

Witness To A Song

As Bob is witness to his songs performed
By Dylan, I am witness to this little song
Busy being born and read.
I am not lost, nor dying more than anyone
Is dying. I can testify for those alive
Despite my crime, if it should come
To taking of the stand. I am the evidence.
I do not need to speak to be condemned
By songs for you I've sung, by poems
I was compelled to write 'neath life's duress:
They suffice to assure my fate, without defence.

Ten miles out of La Guardia, recalled
From high mid-air, and hustled off the plane.
Handcuffed to a metal chair, taken down in chains
To Rikers Island, facing water, the UN.
Brought to my accusers, long in waiting lain,
On charge of being a witness, silent,
Absent while the post-war crimes prevailed.
And now I face the music that I wrote
The words I could have chanted fearless
From the rooftop gardens
Through high office windows, but
Attesting to my little song, I failed.

Frank Bana

Year's End, International Avenue

It's both cool and warm, at the corridor's end
Windows spanning one-eighty degrees
Views of brick walls and a small city square
Dedicated to children's defence
Now I sense coffee brewing down the hall
From the depths of my sanctuary, buried here
In self-accumulating paper trails.

Cool, the face of the industry of aid
The winter hustle of briefcase bearers
Cheap watch sellers by the bagel stands.
Warm, the office where my young poems tread
On cat's paws around the baby photos
The little stress balls and desktop toys.
Here I learned, in the quiet early hours
How to find out where happiness glows.

A Kenyan, Ghanaian, African-American,
An Indian, colleagues from the Caribbean
Form up the team with confidence!
I am certain of them. To us, from here,
With the flags of all nations almost in view,
The world seems large in its fragile glory
Red-faced with hope, chilled by despair
Still nursing ideas on how it might come through.

Frank Bana

Yet Another Neglected Masterpiece (53rd Birthday)

I released a masterpiece
When none of you were listening
The sounds of silence were deafening
You must have been out for the summer
Watching the Olympics or Obama
Praying for the fate of civilization
While I was slaving in the kitchen
(While she was sleeping in the bedroom)
To serve you with my inspiration
Poetic new cuisine
Basted for decades, a recipe
Not tasted since Verlaine

And now my mess of words, my dish
Cool and putrid, languishes
In the wastebins of rejection
On the dumps of your distraction
Condemned to death by unconcern
The amusements you call progress
I call poet injustice.

But still I do not take offence
And now you have another chance
For this is the remake, re-release
The warmed-over, hopped-up, reheat
The Bargain Bin Reissue
The final call
The dying fall...
My new Soup Can Picasso.

Enjoy it while you may
There are bills to pay and did I mention
It will be auctioned off, real soon...
Unless you pay attention.

Frank Bana

You And The Jew

Listen as the snow falls
To the song the Jew composes
He who looks to the hills
Tends the fields and the young lambs
And suffers out of turn to be suffering

See how the Jew
Who knew nothing of the art of the sea
Yet lays no hand of claim upon the land
Walks distant among the hills and stony paths
That lead him on to a barren tree

You must burn if you seek him now
Under high suns which crack the skin
Until you find his small barren tree
His eyes failing as the fine print dances
Like fireflies in the light of evening

You may finally locate his name
In computer files of grubby visa sections
Accented by tongues that never come to rest
In conference rooms and airline terminals
In trains that run on single tracks

But if you find him, don't expect
To live with more than light on the horizon
For the hands that long to overturn the candle
And their mouths that hunger to swallow the flame
Will occupy your trails ever again.

Frank Bana

You Find Yourself Loved...

You find yourself loved
As seen by other eyes
It may be an acceptable surprise
A discovery of life

To be admired, an object of longing
Can be very tiresome
A criminal act, or worse –
Who needs to be loved that way
If that's all there is?

And to be "appreciated"
As in the frame of some painting
With your soul in some gallery
With admission far from free

Is not to be respected
In what is worthy of respect
In what you consider vital
For the reasons you choose

May you find your self loving
In a flow unavoids
Lift the dam on a spirit
That is generous below

And by this, to discover
What is worth your acceptance
Surprised in the knowing
Growing precious and defined.

Frank Bana

You Knew

You inspired Woody Allen. He hungered to cast you.
Joe Strummer snuck you into a belated protest song.
You knew everything of everyone. And you agreed
With me entirely, about the endless Greek tragedy
That the Beach Boys had become – Brian's madness
Dennis drowning, Carl's cancer, Mike's takeover.
You knew the tender details
Of England's lost heroes of song -
Sandy, Marc and Nick and co -
As perfectly as anyone. While in infinite debates
Of the merits of Dylan, Cohen, the qualities and portents
Of the Fab Three and their drummer, the most essential verses
Of the Hallelujah, you held all my attention
Without a bead of sweat. In sex you never turned
Away my offerings, nor cast disparagement upon
My need for mystic song. And thus I swore
And promised to the gods, such as they were
To you or to myself, I am not sure

To write your praises here –
From the beginning, this time forth
And forever more.

Frank Bana

Young Men In Maun

The house, on which the moonlight fell
Leaving a ghostly shadow mark
Had a porch, a low white wall
On which my Norwegian friend
Perched with the trophies of his hunt

He worked in the village hospital
A laboratory technician, he knew
Exactly who had tested and for what
But it was not so bad, those were
The years before the HIV

Once a month, just after pay day
When the moon was full over the plains
We'd open the door
Loudly unleash
My late 70s dance mix tapes

And invite the council workers in,
The nurses and the Danish volunteers
He bought the beer, I bought the bream
From the fisheries depot, cooked it up
With lemon juice in thick wide pans.

Six days a week John drove to work
Never bringing his lab tests home
Preparing for his doctor's life
He stocked the fridge with kudu meat
I cooked quietly, not touching his peace

Far from perfect, but beautiful
Ruled by the codes and by the moon
Like the lovers of our nights, with whom
We visited the riverside
Drank beer and coke and watched for birds

And that house - still standing, probably
These twenty-five years on
Protected district property

Its small garden of moon
Drunk dry by brazen sun.

Frank Bana

Your I-Phone

I'm so sorry

The next time you look at your I-phone
Or tablet or screen
Ancient poetry will be all you see

Philosophy
And finest art
Will also be on the menu

Enjoy your reading
Watch out for where you're heading
With your body and your soul
In the bedroom and the street

And if you pay your best attention
And work out your true direction

Your options may be restored

Frank Bana

Your Mercy

I saw myself lonely, abandoned, forsaken
My scars ripped wide open, my self-belief shaken
I asked for a dollar, they gave me a token
I called for my justice, the scales were all broken

The winter is coming, the dreams near to dying
That I've tried to protect without weapons or lying
I banked on exception but I was not chosen
My rivers of longing were too fast or frozen

And now I meet creatures whose clothes have been taken
Their dignity stolen, their neighbours betrayed them
I must lay down with them, although they will curse me
For only with them may I beg for your mercy.

Frank Bana