

# FOR THE INQUIRY

poetry of the dirty war

**Nigel Mellor**



## FOR THE INQUIRY

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Limited edition 1989

### *British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Mellor, Nigel 1946 –  
For the Inquiry.

1. Title

821'.914

ISBN: 978-0-9513862-2-4

e-book edition for sound files and text available at [www.nmellor.com](http://www.nmellor.com)

Design by Adny for Dab Hand Press  
Dab Hand Press, Newcastle upon Tyne  
Visit <http://sites.google.com/site/dabhandpress/>

Environmentally conscious book production from  
[www.printondemand-worldwide.com](http://www.printondemand-worldwide.com)

*For Mary*

## **Acknowledgements**

‘The man who knew the make’: *New Poetry 1, The Arts Council.*

‘Official secrets’: *Time Out*

‘Afterwards’, ‘The clouds’, ‘Chernobyl’, ‘At times like Spain’, ‘Preparations’, ‘Opposition’ and ‘Interrogation’: *Tribune.*

‘Detention’, ‘Doing accounts’, ‘War crimes’ and ‘Might’: *7 Days.*

‘Voices from a bike’: *The Third Half.* ‘Kevin Finney’ and ‘Two foot of 3 by 2 pitch-pine’: *Nutshell.* ‘Lingering’ and ‘Premonitions of memories in old age’: *Writing.* ‘Vigil at Lavoite sur Loire’: *Weyfarers.* ‘On Souter Fell’: *Ostinato.* ‘Feeling used’ and ‘Following an unusual conjunction of the moon and the sun and certain planets’: *Jonathon.* ‘Party’: *Torchlight.*

‘Annie at Medlam’: *Newcastle Evening Chronicle poetry competition, prize winning entry.*

‘Corruption’: *Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers ‘Post-a-Poem’ competition, prize winning entry.*

‘Kevin Finney’ and ‘On Souter Fell’: *set to music by Rick Potter for a performance at Newcastle Playhouse, Mar 7 1989.*

## **Reprints**

‘Preparations’: M.Mellor “Breaking the Boundaries” (Virago)

‘Might’: J.Tierney “Criminology” (Prentice Hall)

## **Notes for the current edition**

I have re-titled the poem on page 35 to avoid giving offence to a community. In Kevin Finney, ‘hinny’ is a local term of endearment; ‘Cherry’ refers to Cherry Blossom, a shoe polish.

## **PREFACE**

At some point, there will be a reckoning. Those who were responsible will be held to account. This is my evidence **FOR THE INQUIRY**.



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## **UNEASE**

At first, there was nothing you could put your finger on; but as we carried on in the same old ways, we looked back to an age which, in reality, had all but gone. Flowing through it all was a sense of unease. Something had to change – unfortunately, we were not ready.



## **The man who knew the make**

*I*

*Cannot see*

*I do not*

*Understand*

*Why*

*This body no longer lives.*

*I cannot remember.*

*Yes*

*Clearer now*

*I do remember.*

I remember the day the mill broke down.

I remember the feel of the air

The very colour of the light

That day the engine died.

Ever with us in our workplace

Made the ground beneath us thrill

No matter where or what the season,

That engine bound us to its will.

But then, that day, at first a falter

Then a most peculiar cry

The engine shifted in its halter

The engine slowed, began to die.

A vital vein in vital clockwork

Pulsed an oily, wasteful stream

A gear seized and pistons welded

Crying out with vented steam.

The wheel lurched once, spun, jammed then settled

While boilers cooled and metal ticked.

But then they called up first the foreman,  
Then the man who knew the make.  
Then the craftsmen, then the guildsmen  
Then the room grew thick with skill.  
Soon that wheezing, dying engine  
Lived and turned and shook at will.

Now, show me please, oh please I beg you  
Show me how and where to mend  
Fix this corpse, this solid waxwork  
Restore to life my loving friend.

Bring me up no mumbling doctor  
With Yes and No and Just Perhaps  
Send away that bloody surgeon  
With cut and probe and gouge and hack.

I want right fast that engineering  
Oily-handed Lord of Life  
That overalled, certificated  
Metalmaster, Lord of Life.

Drag him from his dusty cavern  
Dredge him from that coaly slake  
Find him, pay him, sign and bind him,  
Find the man who knows the make.

## **Lingering**

I know you *are* there  
When I come in  
Voices suddenly fade  
The air is not quite still

It's silly  
I can't tell anyone  
They'd think I was mad  
But you are there  
Don't play games  
Show me  
Just a little more.

## **On Souter Fell**

Latch's rasp on rough plank door  
Opening  
To the sad half light  
Of Souter Fell

Through draughty kitchen  
To sodden heath  
Past rusting spares of farm machines  
He trudged unmarked  
Returned ungreeted  
With logs to burn  
With thoughts to speak

This bloody fell  
This mean poor pasture  
Unfit for men  
Not fit for beasts  
Stones it grows  
They spring up daily  
Grass it yields –  
A miser's treats

He drove his thoughts like simple creatures  
And turned them to a well trod path.  
Perhaps a woman, warm and tender  
With odd off days and secret ways  
With things to dust and rinds to render  
But not some farmer's coarse-grained maid

A voice to still the killing silence  
Perhaps another tale to tell  
In place of days all worn out hopeless  
Soaked up there on Souter Fell.

## **Feeling used**

If you only knew  
The power of your face  
You would simply smile  
When you visit  
And share a bottle  
And ask no more of me.

## **Vigil at Lavoite sur Loire**

I waited for you that night  
You and Jean Luis  
Breathing in the darkness  
On the corner near the chateau  
No one came.

Brave at first  
Beside the railway line  
Rehearsing all our moves  
I almost stayed the time

But I remember running  
Then, back along the hill  
I saw the sentry halt you both  
Saw him shoot to kill

I said that we were young  
Whenever people asked.  
I said we had agreed  
To try another day.

And now for thirty years and more  
I've owned the house which hid that night  
And stood each day to watch the road  
And waited by your grave.

ICI SONT MORT  
POUR LA LIBERATION DE LA FRANCE  
HILAIRE AUBENAS  
J. LUIS RAYMOND  
2 AOUT 1944

## **Kevin Finney**

Little Kevin Finney  
Was pale weak and skinny  
Little skinny Finney  
As the kids called him

Running Kevin Finney  
Glasses held on grimly  
Panicky and screamy  
As the kids chased him

Crying Kevin Finney  
Sobbed on his mother's pinny  
You've got to tell me mammy  
Why the kids hate me

Listen Kevin hinny  
Don't be such a whingey  
Frightened little baby  
As his dad told him

Trying Kevin Finney  
Was beaten in the spinney  
Crouching in the alley  
As the kids left him

Growing Kevin Finney  
Left his school so quickly  
Never been so happy  
When the kids lost him

Apprentice Kevin Finney  
They blacked his balls with Cherry  
Shoved him down the lavvy  
On his first day in

Working Kevin Finney  
Made a job so tinny  
Thicky Tinny Finney  
As his mates called him

Called up Kevin Finney  
Put him in the army  
Put him in the barracks  
With soldiers baiting him

They tormented Kevin Finney  
For months and showed no pity  
You'll have to learn to take it  
As they all told him

Hanging Kevin Finney  
Took his life on Sunday  
Left no note to ask them  
Why they hated him

Buried Kevin Finney  
Forgot him very quickly  
Brought it all upon himself  
They all said of him.

## **The craft of the poet**

The craft of the poet  
Is not to set jewels  
Into the walls of a hut  
But to take old stone  
And build a cathedral.

## Party

No one  
Ever knew  
What went on at  
Their parties.

No one ever said  
Or hinted  
Or by any sign  
Gave any indication whatsoever  
About what went on at  
Their parties.

They sat waiting  
For their latest guest  
Who, with sweet enchantment  
Would accept that invitation

Everyone  
Must know  
What goes on at  
Their parties.

Later  
Much later  
In the house outside town  
Near woods  
Near rings  
Near all manner of unusual things  
The party  
Begins.

Lock that door  
Says man to wife  
Wear your cross  
Say your prayers

Stay in  
Tonight.

She's left here now  
The latest one  
They never stay  
And tell.

And no one  
Ever knew  
What went on at  
Their parties.

## **Premonitions of memories in old age**

In the kitchen, family calm  
August storm and tempers done  
Clothes hung damp upon the line  
To hear a tape of birthday gone

Recorded voices somehow made  
The present telescope and fade  
So that the rows and spiteful ways  
Of that quite ordinary Summer's day  
Seemed like a once remembered play  
Recalled in distant future time  
But dimly, from an *old* man's mind.

## Spider

*The male St. Andrew's Cross spider attracts his much larger mate by tickling her feet. Unfortunately he ends up being eaten.  
The female St. Andrew's Cross spider traps moths by emitting a scent that mimics the female moth. Unfortunately, a species of predatory wasp lays her eggs in the belly of the female St. Andrew's Cross spider.*

Smooth smooth silky smooth  
Spin and spin and spin  
First the long long leaps  
Watch, my sisters  
Branch to branch and branch again  
Smooth so smooth so silky smooth  
And now the dance  
Crossing crossing criss and cross  
Make my web  
And spin and spin  
Mmmmm spin and spin

I see you sister  
Hiding in the bark  
Mossy coloured  
Still  
Watch! The bird! Watch!  
Still and still and still  
Mmmmm  
Feel my web  
Singing twanging  
Waiting

Sister in your hole  
Jump. Grab. Pull. Bite bite bite  
That's it  
Now drag that ant

That juicy eaty squashy  
Anty anty anty ant  
Mmmmm  
Watch me sisters  
In my web  
Still and still and still  
Mmmmm

What's that?  
Web bouncing  
Thread pinging  
Where?  
Other side  
Feet. My foot.  
Third one back  
Second left  
Ohhhh  
Over there  
On his thread  
Feel it. Oh feel it sisters  
Oh feel it. Feel him play it  
I must go  
Must go to him  
Must go along his silk  
Come to me lover. Come on. Come on.  
Feel your palps.  
Oh I feel your palps.  
Quickly. Come on lover. Find me. Come on. Find me.  
Let me squeeze you  
No. Don't go. Not now. Come back.  
Come back. Come back.  
I have your arm  
I want you all  
Now. Come on. Now.  
Promise I won't eat.  
Promise.

Watch me sisters  
Eat this weakling.  
Hah.  
Three legs. Half dead.  
All gone.  
Mmmmm  
Spin. Spin. Spin.

Quiet. Quiet.  
Watch your sister.  
Who do we want?  
Want that moth  
That tasty moth  
That tasty lasty mothy moth  
Use the web  
That sticky web.  
Like my smell, lover boy?  
It's me, yes me. All you ever dreamed of.  
Not your dowdy little wife  
That boring little frump  
It's me. It's me.  
All you ever wanted.  
I'm ready.  
To hold you. To fold you. To love you.

To eat you.  
Sucker.

Still. Still. Still and still.  
Watch me sisters.  
Feel my babies  
Feel my spiderlings  
Spin. Spin.  
Broad and flat. Great swathes.  
Beds for my babies  
Beds so smooth and soft and warm.  
Watch me sisters

Spin and spin.

Now my babies. Now.  
Ohhhhhhh. My babies.

More  
Must spin  
Spin some more  
Cover my babies  
Spin. Spin.  
Tired! Must stop.  
No!  
Spin. Spin.  
My babies  
Wrapped in silk  
Dappled brown  
Birds won't find you  
Warm and safe  
My spiderlings  
Spin. Spin.  
I'm tired. So tired.  
Sisters. Can't you help me?  
Spin. Spin. Spin. Spin.

Still.  
Must eat  
Soon.

Wasp!  
Wasp!  
Too weak  
Can't move.  
Not there wasp  
Not me. Not me.  
Not your eggs in me. Not me.

Weak. I'm so weak.  
Can't move.  
Not your eggs in my belly, Wasp.  
Please. Not me.

Still. Still.  
Must eat.

My babies?  
Safe  
Good  
Rest  
Must eat.

Something growing  
Twitching  
In me  
Inside  
Eating  
Eating me. Me!  
The wasp  
Its babies. In me.

Too weak.  
Too weak.  
Too weak.

My babies,  
My spiderlings  
The wasp  
Beware the wasp.

## **Annie at Medlam**

Father drank  
And when he left  
Mother couldn't cope  
With awkward Anne

Took her off to Medlam  
Saved her from her mum  
Locked her up in Medlam  
Mother couldn't come

But Medlam helps girls like Annie  
Leaves them calm  
Leaves them  
Walking up and down  
Leaves them  
Quite forgotten  
Leaves them  
The way mothers never could

And who'd believe  
After sixty years  
When Ancient Annie passed away  
Just in case of any hint  
Of favour in the home  
No flowers would be allowed from life-long friends  
And to mark her place  
Just a number on a stone.

## Voices from a bike

I feel sorry for the Chemist on the corner  
Although I usually can't stand small businessmen

I rarely see anyone in his shop.  
The Chinese does a steady trade  
Even the butcher's has a queue  
But while trying not to stare past his display  
I can see him standing, looking.

I would go in  
But who needs shampoo every day  
And who can pay their prices for developing and printing?  
I checked, then sent mine off to Boots  
I felt richer  
But can't go in today.

I don't like her - the woman he employs  
I know she feels the same  
Yet she still resents the times I don't come in.

He comes from behind somewhere  
And stands and smiles  
And nods  
Not in agreement, but because he cannot stop.  
She glares and wants you out  
And him as well.

Cycling past on Monday  
Up the lane to miss the cars  
I passed him walking  
Turned to smile and shout hello  
He glanced, but that was all.

Years of not knowing are not cancelled  
By voices from a bike.

## **Following an unusual conjunction of the moon and the sun and certain planets**

There were exceptionally high tides that year  
And in one of the few places still accessible  
Where the Harbour and General Works Department  
Had recently laid piles and infill  
To strengthen the quayside against the event  
The river swelled up to be touched

That flood  
Dragged upstream by the moon six hours before  
Against its natural order  
Surged back  
At such a speed that even the best swimmer  
Would not make the bank  
But face down and lifeless  
Wash out  
And under the Northern sea

At low tide  
Mudflats were exposed which  
Until that day had never dried  
And beyond the breakwater  
Weed choked pools of unsure depth

We hesitated too long in that opening  
Then the planets moved  
And the waves returned.

## **SIGNS**

Their first actions cut deeply. We tried to escape the consequences, to deal with it alone. We could not see the pattern. That came much later.



## **The clouds\***

You laughed  
When I said that the verb  
To own  
Did not describe a natural state

You smiled at my poor attempt to reason that  
Even though this ownership  
Was never questioned  
I could prove it wrong

You listened, painfully,  
While I described  
The possibility that someone  
Would build a meter large enough to hold the air  
And send me bills  
For rent and standing charge  
And so much fuel adjusted cost  
Per breath  
And that armies would defend  
This meter  
And this man  
And you their right  
To deny me air.

As I say, you listened, painfully.  
Since that time I've heard complaints  
That someone tried to steal the rain  
From Denver, Colorado  
The problem there it seems  
Is that no one knows who owns the clouds.

*\* For the 50th anniversary of the death of Robert Tressell, author of 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists'*

## **Two foot of 3 by 2 pitch-pine**

Two foot of 3 by 2 pitch-pine  
To mend the door where the burglars had been  
But it'll be hard to get  
Warned the joiner

And it was  
Nobody keeps it these days  
Except Southernns at Jarrow  
And I didn't think they'd bother  
For such a small order  
But, despite hard times, they wrote  
To say the job was ready

Bit of an unusual request  
I suppose it caught his interest  
A hard softwood, high resin content  
Withstands the rot  
Used for building piers  
And sometimes for boats  
Never heard of it in a door

Couldn't find it in the machine shop  
Where the hell!  
Chocking up another stack of wood.  
But there it was  
Heavy, smooth, warm  
From the Caribbean  
Must have been planted before the Russian revolution  
And been growing through the Depression  
And two world wars  
Then felled and somehow brought to Jarrow  
In decline

Two foot of 3 by 2 pitch-pine  
To mend a door  
Broken open.

## Speelam on a Sunday

Speelam Harbour sits in pools of engine oil  
Not leaking, thick from a tanker  
But thin and wasted  
Furtively disposed

A beach of stones  
And half-bricks  
Round, but not quite smooth enough  
To hide the brickwork's stamp

Leading to this sorry tip  
Were many paths  
But mining falls  
And erosion by the weather  
And neglect  
Had cut them jagged.

"Harbour" to unwary folk  
Is promise of a welcome scene  
But in Speelam's worked out maze  
Of walls within walls  
The coal stained sea  
Sucks up beaches oblong, flat  
And squirts through concrete cracks

Further down  
An abandoned mineral line  
And staring out  
Someone remembered Speelam  
Full of men.

## Corruption

One hundred feet  
Below the canopy of the equatorial rain forest  
Known as the Kaross  
Amongst the hectic but delicately balanced activity  
Of little known life forms  
The stink ant goes about its business  
Until  
It inhales the spores of a harmless looking fungus  
Which drift about the forest floor  
Then, for the first time in its life  
The ant begins to climb

On reaching the top of the plant  
The ant sinks its jaws into the stem  
And grips  
Until it dies

The fungus however  
Continues to grow inside  
And in time  
Thrusts its way out of the brain  
To fruit  
And cast new spores

There are always ants, below  
To complete the cycle.

## **The re-burial of Lord Haw Haw**

Hanged at Wandsworth  
Thirty years this month  
His body placed in sacking  
In an unmarked grave  
Soaked with quicklime within the prison walls.

I had thought that justice  
Had progressed.  
Surely death was quite enough  
For traitor and betrayed.

## **The Bronze Age horn**

No one could blow one single note  
On the Bronze Age horn  
From the Irish bog  
Except the captain of the military band

Deep in the mud  
Old swords and axes  
Sucked and pulled  
Waiting for the hand.

## Preparations

What the hell  
Is a well?  
I mean, do you just dig a hole  
And up it comes  
Ready to drink?  
And wheat.  
I've squashed bits of what I thought was wheat  
But nothing came out  
Looking at all like flour.  
Sheep make wool  
We all know that  
And potatoes grow in the ground  
But how do you stick woolly hairs together  
And where do the seeds come from  
Which make the potatoes grow?  
You see  
What I'm worried about  
Alongside all those others  
Returning to nature without knowing why  
Is how to survive.

## **Doing accounts**

For chipboard, catfood and two cents off the burger

There goes the butterfly, Giant Blue

There goes the whale

There go the Indians of Brazil

There go the trees

One day it's going to be you

Brother,

One day it's going to be you.

## **Chernobyl**

We lay in the dark, scared  
Alone, because in the end  
We are alone  
In the rain.



## **CRISIS**

We wanted to fight back but there was nothing to fight back with. The rot was too far gone, they had laid their groundwork well. Even so, their success turned sour and the dirty war began.



## **At times like Spain\***

O.K.  
So Alec often gets it  
Wrong  
And he's workerist  
And just a bit of a sexist  
But he kicks arse  
(When camera men from the Front  
want photos for Bulldog)  
And that's not nice  
But at times like Spain  
Looking back  
Words were not enough.

*\* For the 50th anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War*

## **Might**

They are tough now  
And so sure of themselves  
That we even begin to accept it  
Because they don't try to hide  
And they don't care who sees.  
They are so confident  
And that's what makes us weak  
But when the change comes  
(and it will)  
The truth will shift  
Because they are wrong  
It just happens that  
For a time  
They have the power.

## **Official secrets**

We are in greatest danger  
From the freedoms we have

They do not become a part of life  
But a way of forgetting  
The struggle which gave them life

When we no longer have to fight  
We forget why and how to fight

To be free is not enough.

## Opposition

We talk  
At times  
As if they came with hammers  
And iron bars  
To kick and splinter  
An oak door.  
It wasn't like that at all  
The door was hollow  
Rotted through  
They hardly needed to push  
And we did  
Nothing  
To hold it.

## **Detention**

If you come for me  
Then you're lost  
Not now  
No, I accept that.  
For the time the movement's finished  
And so am I  
We were both weak in any case  
But that's the point  
If you have to come for me  
And I'm no threat  
Then you don't know where to stop  
And because you can't stop  
(since to do so would mean denying  
all you have ever believed in)  
You must carry on  
And destroy me and others like me.

But they have family and friends  
And their friends  
Have family and friends  
And soon, within the terror you create  
Some will feel  
There is little left to lose  
And the nightmare  
Which you have spent your life opposing  
Will finally arrive  
And consume you all.

You see  
That's why I can smile  
In the little time I have left  
Because if you come for me now  
Then you're lost.

## **Interrogation\***

I won't hold out for long  
Soon you'll get the lot  
The names  
And more besides  
I will crawl at your feet  
I know that  
But in the long dark night of your soul  
You must finally face what has been done to you  
That you can do this to me.

*\* For the fortieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights*

## **War crimes**

Now listen to me  
You have one job  
And one job alone  
Do not resist  
You have no power to stop the screams  
They would kill you anyway  
Do only this  
Remember  
Remember the names  
Remember the faces  
It may be a lifetime  
Before you can stand there  
And accuse  
So do your job well  
Just survive  
And remember.



## **COLLAPSE**

This was their only way out.



## Afterwards

It would have been about three in the afternoon  
If there had remained  
Some trace of reason in the world

The man continued to cradle the child  
From time to time  
She appeared to sleep

They faced ruined walls  
But made no attempt to turn  
Or seek shelter  
As the walls were everywhere

It did not comfort the child  
But when awake  
The man spoke of times past  
Until her sickness returned

For a long while  
He had held a housebrick  
But could not use it

It would have been about three in the afternoon  
When the child began  
A cry that would not stop.