

Occasional Turbulence

Poems by Pete Shanks

Santa Cruz, CA, 1997



Airport City

Airport City is a long white line
It freezes the nose and it numbs the mind
It has nothing to say but it says it all the time

Airport City is hyperspace
With nothing but links in its interface
For it has no time and it has no sense of place

Airport City is a mutant mould
Infecting the planet and out of control
And it grows itself forever so it never grows old

Airport City's a consumer hell
Where nothing is allowed that it cannot sell
And even the workers aren't people but personnel

Airport City is a classic con
A vision of plastic where no one belongs
It can promise you the moon 'cause tomorrow you're gone

Airport City will lose your soul
But deliver your body to the baggage hall
And throw you in a car like a zombie on parole

Airport City is the world ahead
Where nothing important is ever said
And everything that makes us human is already safely dead



For Bert Le Noury, 1912–1996

1

The ocean was clean, and full of fish
The sailors built their boats
And learned to dance with the waves

The bats would swoop around at night
And never lose their way
Like the mariner who needed no chart

The sea would sound its own alarm
For the fisherman to hear
As he gentled home in the curling fog

Ten thousand years of history
Are strangled in the nets
Of the floating long-haul factories

As another man, another kind of man,
Slips solemnly away
To find again a peace we all have lost



2

A cantankerous old fossil called Bert
Had a molar that started to hurt
 But the dentist, he found,
 Wanted twenty-five pound
And the pliers were free, said old Bert



Café Royale, Friday Night

Waiting
not smoking
missing you

One dollar rent
and nothing to read
missing you

'This table not to be used for studying'
Across the room, a quiet youth
flouting the sign

Waiting
not thinking
missing you

A pair of women honestly gray
leaning over empty cups
laughing low

Waiting
not drinking
missing you



Faces on the walls in black and white
Two girls brush past my chair
looking up

Waiting
invisible
missing you

Whispers that blend to silence
with the white noise puff of espresso
smoothing the air

Peter appears
questioning
so you're here



Om Mane Padme Hum

When Hillary came down from Everest, he shouted to his mate: “Well, we knocked the bastard off.”

When Armstrong set his foot upon the Moon, he paused a moment for the camera and softly spoke into the microphone of his space suit, to Mission Control in Houston, to the waiting media vultures, to the hydra-headed monster behind them, to Congress and Russia and history and slowly, slowly at the speed of light to Alpha Centauri and beyond, his well-rehearsed spontaneous announcement: “That’s one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Poor Neil tried — he really did — and what he said was true in its way ... and yet that casual ‘we’ of Hillary’s (unreported for many years) included: his partner Tenzing, yes, and Evans and Bourdillon, and Hunt and Lowe, yes, and all the rest of the ‘53 expedition, and Mallory and Irvine, yes, and Shipton and Tilman, yes, and Herzog and Lachenal, yes, and Messner and Habeler then in school, yes, and three billion more, yes, and their parents, yes, and their children, yes, and their parents’ parents, yes, and their children’s children ...



while that 'mankind' was just enough to leave Buzz Aldrin shattered, cut out, alone, failed, drunk.

What is the opposite of loneliness? The feeling is connected, connected with community.

Brian would not let the train carry its cargo of death — no! — he made it run over his legs. Helen would not take parole from a system she would not accept — no! — she chose to be jailed instead. Peter prevented a satellite's launch by chopping it up with an ax — no! — he paid with two years of his time. Kim could not stand that the homeless were starving — no! — but giving them food got her busted. Jon decided on his own he would not let the Pintail dock — no! — and he risked both his boat and his life. Katje left cookies and flowers to show she would not hurt a person — no! — but she smashed the computer controlling the bombs.

No one asked them, no one forced them, no one told them what to do.

Are they heroes?



We live in circles, many circles, many different sizes — we live in a universe, a world, a continent, a society, a group, a family, a head — we breathe in our circles, and we give life to them, as they give life to us, even as we try to act on our own.

Other friends — yes, I'm in here — have picked up praise for what they do, have won applause and cups and silver plates, certificates and generous fingers pointed. Does that make them ... winners?

Accomplishment is everywhere, and with it the taint of success.

When Hillary came down to radio range, he learned that he'd been knighted by the Queen and someone else had accepted on his behalf; he couldn't turn it down without a bigger fuss than the one he wanted to avoid. Sir Ed. Oh well.

There is no action without consequence, and no inaction either; what we don't do ripples as far as what we do.



Hillary kept bees at home; Hillary drove across Antarctica; Hillary boated up the Ganges; Hillary worked for Sears in product endorsement; and hit them up to pay for a clinic in Khumjung; Hillary built schools in Solu and Khumbu; Hillary helped to rebuild Thyangboche when the electrical wiring caught fire.

But to the press, and to the world, and to his son, he remained:

The Man Who Conquered Everest.

Poetry is personal and if it's good it tells a truth, one truth, my truth, in beauty. Poetry needs no apology; not even that. Nor does anything else worth doing.

Reinhold Messner soloed Everest and everybody hated him, the egocentric, self-promoting, overpaid, bastard mountaineering genius. He is the greatest climber of his age, with the conquests to prove it. He has a castle in the Alps, and best-selling books, and movies and money and beautiful women for company. Messner picked off every one of the 8000-meter peaks. "By fair means" — no artificial oxygen, no vast arrays of porters, just Alpine-style assaults on the highest places, alone with a camera and a contract.



Messner is a little cracked, but who are we to pull him down? All he does is all he's told by everything this crazy world surrounds us with that drags us down and builds us up and tumbles us around and round until we don't know how to be or who we are or what we do or why.

A poet in community needs to join in ritual, and competition is the way we learn to motivate ourselves, to measure up and be assessed, to find out just how far we came.

Although we know that nothing's best and nothing's worst and every verse is different and every thought is possible, and so it makes no sense to say that this one wins and that one loses, or even that this one is good and this one — well, what do you say? — still somehow corruption holds us in its ugly fist and what we do for no one else receives some kind of validation from a judge who gives a Yes.

If applause is ever the point, it is never deserved.

In '53, the expedition had to walk for weeks before they even saw the mountain, and everything was carried in by hired men and women. If you came from Kathmandu, you climbed the mountain, up and down, before you



even reached its base. Endless rhododendron forests, interspersed with distant views of the awesome Himalaya, jagged mountains, cold and new, from which icy rivers rushed, which you crossed on little bridges made of rope, balancing your twenty kilos — up to fifty for the porters — tying prayer flags in the middle to protect you from the fall.

Now the tourists fly to Lukla, saving so much time that in a month they see it all — well, not the top — and fly back to their work at home.

Now the forest is in danger, now the trash is piling up, now the electric plant is working now the western pop is heard, now the Sherpas are wearing jeans, now everyone has foreign sneakers, now your Coke is just a dollar even at 15,000 feet, now the inns have private rooms, now the fields are neglected when the trekking season comes, now the world has come to Namche and Namche starts to disappear.

For this they need the airport. And Hillary built it.



Aldrin saw the earth from the moon. He went as a pilot and a scientist and a man who wanted to be first. He got aced out of the history books, and he came back a mystic who could not bear the news he brought, and drank for years, and screwed around (both senses) and finally awoke and understood something he has tried for years to express and maybe somewhere he knows a peace.

Buzz needed the naked power to comprehend the ineffable, to see the sun and live.

Poetry.

Everywhere we go, everything we do, every time we speak, every chance we take, every choice we choose, every game we lose or think we win, every day and god knows every night, something happens we cannot expect, something comes to us whether we want it or no, something is and something will be.

We cannot choose what happens to us, but we can choose the way we try to choose.

It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it.



Hillary asked what they wanted in Khumbu, and they wanted a school, so he made one. That's why he built the airstrip, yaks and people dragging tree trunks to smooth the mountainside, to bring in materials and with them the catalyst that cured what was by killing it and made what is by accident.

He sped the process up a little, that's all.

Legless Brian has a voice. Of course it makes no sense. Look at the geek, he lost his legs, he really means it, man. But how does it feel to the freak with a message, what is it like inside? If he exploits celebrity to bring his world some sense, does that justify his pain? Has he paid so much he must be right or his life's destroyed in vain? If he went to a cave in the mountain, would that mean that he'd done his bit and it wasn't ever enough? If he did it for himself, is he now an ego star? If he did it for the world, isn't that an ego trip? Is it worse to want to look good to the world or to yourself? Is it ego not to want your ego to get stroked?

Brian walks on metal legs but he walks with his eyes open.



When I do well, I know; but I am weak, I doubt. In the prison of my head, no one tells me, 'This is good' except myself and everyone I've ever known thinks they're crap, sometimes.

Hillary says he's mediocre and easily bored.

The universe is awful when you think and frightening when you don't, and whether or not you let it stop you's all that's up to you.

All the people in this poem are imaginary. Hillary and Armstrong, and Aldrin and Messner, and Brian and Kim and all the rest, and you and me, and all of us. It's not the press that made us up, it's not TV, it's not the neighbors down the street, it's not the father in his grave, it's not the singer on the airwaves, not the pundit in his books, not the mother living on in the rosebed in the garden that's been sold, not the kids who never came, not the friend who knows her name, not the water bearer up above, not the Gaia I don't love who doesn't love me or herself, not the DNA inside me, not the worms I will become, not the future, not the present, not the past in



all its shame, not the moment in its glory, not the heaven
I don't know, not the hell I love to hate, not the daisy or
the kitten, not the Clio in the driveway, not the money in
the bank, not the holiday in Florence, not the 49ers
triumph, not the pleasures of the senses, not the logic of
the mind, all of this and none of this and all of them and
none of them are true.

But sometimes when the rhythm's right, or when the sex is
really special, or when the words fall into place, or when
you see, or when you act, or when you think and don't
know why, or when you smile or even cry, or when you
pray at Swayambhu, or when you paint the garden wall,
or when you know, yes, when you know,
Sometimes you are.

And when you climb your Everest,
REJOICE!



Jet Lag

The seat's not uncomfortable, exactly
The food's not bad and there's plenty of drink
There's a film I missed in the theatre
Or today's *Sunday Times*
Or a good book or a bad book or even a good bad
book
There's a video interview, there's a choice sitcom
There are six different channels of audio
And if all else fails I could talk with the guy next door

But I'm locked in a metal tube six miles up
Going bananas

Till I get home
Where the sofa's pretty comfortable, really
The food's OK and there's plenty to drink ...



Aftermath

she kissed me
we had fun
i fell in love

later on
my heart broke
on her stone face

she could not
even say
she would not talk

friendship lost
blown apart
left unresolved

must this sore
always keep
on festering?

only while
i still ask
why it does



Building a Nest

I live in the air
in a white room with a blue-gray rug
staring at a blue-gray screen
and conjuring words I don't understand

I live in the air
and look out to the sea
and on to the blur of Monterey fog
that smudges the edge of my imagination

I live in the air
and remember my longing
to touch the ground below
the place I was promised was there

I live in the air
and like it
as a badger likes his set
for the eagle too is part of the earth



Welcome to the World, Kiddo

No one knows why
some babies cry
and others just gurgle and grimace and grin
It's been a mystery
all through our history
(except for the ones medicated with gin)

For mother and father
would really much rather
be able to sleep undisturbed through the night
But natural selection
just has no effect on
the reactions they have when you turn out the light

You would have thought
kids had to be taught
how to be happy or solemn or weird
Yet in reality
their personalities
seem to be fated before they appear



Some of the boys
are terribly noisy
and some people say that it must be genetic
But others of them
are born gentlemen
and plenty of girls are too energetic

So if you've caught 'im
trying to be naughty
you might as well say he just is what he seems
But when he's nice
take my advice
and give all of the credit to his excellent genes



Perhaps He Can't Help It

Why should people still be Smiths
When metalwork's a dying art?
Why not pick a name that fits,
The way that Ringo is a Starr?

So, Shanks the runner, Jones the junkie,
Green the environmentalist,
Wright the author, Toad the flunky;
Thatcher's one that won't be missed.

But some old names still work just fine,
Like Robin-son from Robin-dad :
On Monday mornings, five past nine,
Start the Week with Melvyn Bragg.

Vote Aristocrat

(And Get What You Deserve)

The Secretary of Education
Volunteered to be Drug Czar;
Since he hoped to lead the nation
First he'd lead the peace-time war.

When someone pointed out he smoked
Two packs of cigarettes a day,
He had to stop : It's not like coke,
But think of what the press might say.

Of course, he still enjoyed a drink,
(And nicotine, in chewing gum)
It's not the problem you might think —
It's legal, so no harm is done.

How could anybody quarrel
With his stern philosophy?
Marijuana is immoral
Since it is a felony.



And why is it a felony?
It's a sin — by definition,
A crime's a sin. Epiphany!
Ending sin became his mission.

The perfect circularity
Of his logic is amazing;
Did it provoke hilarity?
Instead, the press began to praise him.

Revelling in new-found fame,
He started widening his scope;
Responsibility's the name
Of what they need to get off dope.

Character's what really counts,
Family values have been lost;
Read the Sermon on the Mount
And do what's right at any cost.



Well, almost any — he quit his job
In two years, pleading poverty
And then, at several grand a pop,
He preached his own morality.

He flogged his solemn Book of Virtue,
Trying out for President
With the slogan, I won't hurt you
If you're good; if not, repent.

In the world he advocates,
Such a Lord would rule the earth;
Alas, in our degenerate days,
We leave decisions to the serfs.

And no one wanted him as King;
They'd rather vote for legal drugs.
Humiliating? Not for him,
William Bennett's much too smug.



Fame With Frontiers

Having, as I do, one foot on each side of the Atlantic (and very uncomfortable it is too, at times), I cannot help but notice how much the US and the UK have in common. In each, for example, you are considered a little strange if you are not familiar with:

men who used to hit balls with wooden sticks

The Splendid Ted Williams! The Great Len Hutton!

old men who burble about men and their balls

Hiss David Coleman! Boo Brent Musberger!

men who giggle and gabble and want you to goggle

It's David Letterman! Here's Chris Evans!

men who smile as they tell you they tell you the news

Laud Trevor MacDonald! Glory Dan Rather!

know-all do-nothings with questions to answer

Toast Ted Koppel! Praise Jeremy Paxman!

writers of fiction who read like dictators

Skim Jeffrey Archer! Skip Tom Clancy!

and, of course, the great leader whose principle is politics

Hail Bill Clinton! Salute Tony Blair!



Oh, I could go on. I started by putting together a list, to show how interchangeable most of the celebrities that visit our TVs are, and the pairs of names just flowed, till I began to examine the list, as you do, for balance, and I noticed there was only one person of color (Trevor MacDonald); and no one poor; and no women at all ...

ah, cultural diversity — ain't it wonderful?



Credits

Most of these poems were written in the last year, some indeed in the last week, and have not been published before. *Om Mane Padme Hum* was written in March 1995 and published in *Envoi* in Summer 1996. The eulogy *For Bert Le Noury* was published in *GAP* (the Guernsey Attic Press) in 1996.

The body type is 12/16 Stone Sans, with the heads in Avant Garde Bold, a couple of Minion Ornaments and arrows from Mathematical Pi #6.

This electronic chapbook was put together with all the usual tools, notably Microsoft Word, QuarkXPress and Adobe Acrobat 3.0; I'd also like to put in a plug for the American Heritage Dictionary (Deluxe Edition) from Houghton Mifflin by way of WordStar International, just because I think it is a great piece of software and I use it all the time.

Pete Shanks
20 April 1997

