

# *I Sing the Sonnet*



Duncan Gillies MacLaurin



A Snakeskin e-chapbook, 2017

*in loving memory of my best teacher,  
my father, Eric Duncan MacLaurin  
(7<sup>th</sup> June 1923 - 24<sup>th</sup> November 2013)*

# Dedication

## The Kind Old Moon

The man who sticks to his plan will become  
what he used to want to be.

– James Richardson

*Vectors: Aphorisms and Ten Second Essays*

The man I thought I ought to ape,  
who led me to this bedsit land,  
sticks close to *me* now, cap in hand,  
to claim his tithe. I must escape  
his tired and ugly, gloomy face.

Plan B. Seems like the kind old moon  
will help me out. His quarters soon  
become my temporary base.

“What talents do you have to show?”  
he asks. I tell him: “Not a penny.  
Used to be someone. Years ago.”

To which he says: “You’ve got what many  
want. You’ll settle down and grow  
to be as big a shot as any.”

# Contents

page

<b>Dedication:</b> The Kind Old Moon .....	3
<b>Domestic</b> .....	<b>6</b>
However Far Away .....	7
I Busker / II Vagabond /7	
III Lunatic / IV Poet /8	
Shelter .....	9
I Revelation / II Desire /9	
III On Esperance Bay / IV On Our Silver Anniversary /10	
Drama .....	11
I The MUV Affair / II Just Rain /11	
III Remorse / IV Regret /12	
Trauma .....	13
I The End / II Shades of Venice /13	
III Dunderhead / IV Misfit /14	
<b>Ecphrastic</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<i>L'Homme Révolté</i> .....	16
I Child / II Teenager /16	
III Teacher / IV Torch-bearer /17	
Self-portraits .....	18
I Mama's Little Boy / II The Magic Garden /18	
III I Sing the Sonnet / IV On Papsie's 89 <sup>th</sup> Birthday /19	
Group Self-portraits .....	20
I Mum's the Word / II Chess with Monsieur Joffroy /20	
III The Big Smoke / IV Look! We Have Landed! /21	
Defiance .....	22
I No Bloody Way! / II Lisa Leaving /22	
III Cripple / IV Still Life /23	

<b>Acrostic</b> .....	<b>24</b>
The Four Motives .....	25
I Sheer Egoism / II Aesthetic Enthusiasm /25	
III Historical Impulse / IV Political Purpose /26	
The Four Tempers .....	27
I Melancholic / II Phlegmatic /27	
III Sanguine / IV Choleric /28	
The Four Oracles .....	29
I Will / II Heart /29	
III Mind / IV Soul /30	
The Four Virtues .....	31
I Hope / II Love /31	
III Peace / IV Faith /32	
<b>Meditation: Pusher of Dreams</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<i>Notes</i> .....	34
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	36
<i>About the Author</i> .....	37

# Domestic

## However Far Away

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

– Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

### i) *Busker*

I'm working at a gentle pace,  
a rhythm of my own;  
it isn't hard to find a place  
where I can play trombone.  
I stand alone and improvise  
to music in my ears,  
a line of work that might surprise  
Pete Needham at Careers.

And when I stop, say half past five,  
I'm not exactly sad;  
acknowledging I'm still alive  
and kicking makes me glad.  
The pay's not great, but I survive.  
Poor Papsie thinks I'm mad.

### ii) *Vagabond*

I'm living like a vagabond.  
Why 'settle' for the best?  
I sidestepped uni for a blonde.  
That's how to 'pass' a test!  
I act according to the Tao,  
"a real nowhere man".  
I celebrate the here and now  
and seldom have a plan.

So when I'm heckled on the road  
by people asking why  
I choose to have my fixed abode  
beneath the open sky,  
I treat them to my latest ode  
before they walk on by.

iii) *Lunatic*

I always knew I wasn't scared  
of people acting God,  
but never thought that I'd have dared  
to turn on PC Plod.  
He shrank away, quite terrified.  
I walked on down the hill.  
Malign intent can be denied,  
I think. But not the thrill.

I hung a left, and soon I'd found  
a disused railway line  
with peace and quiet all around.  
It wasn't by design,  
but nonetheless I'd gone to ground.  
The sun began to shine.

iv) *Poet*

Home is where the heart is light;  
home is where I'm me;  
home is where I'm out of sight,  
autonomous and free.  
I'll sing my sonnets on the street  
until the day I die,  
and even then, perhaps, my feet  
will tap for passers-by.

This alias, a subway star,  
is close to my ideal;  
I'm learning how to play guitar  
and finding out what's real.  
It doesn't matter who you are:  
just trust the way you feel.



## Shelter

### *i) Revelation*

The sun had been surrounded by a gang of clouds out west;  
I felt serene and thought about how I myself would rest.  
The moon appeared, invigorated by a day in bed;  
I sensed *I'd* better find a place to lay *my* weary head.

The silence of the countryside was music to my ear;  
I listened, briefly, to a blackbird singing loud and clear.  
The roaring of a car nearby turned out to be a brook;  
I noted I was thirsty and resolved to take a look.

The water was delicious, and the air was sweet and good;  
I walked upstream and came upon the shelter of a wood.  
The ground was buried under leaves, a million lucky charms;  
I tumbled down and pulled them to me with my legs and arms.

The stars conspired to close my eyes, and there, beside a log,  
I found a revelation in the calling of a dog.

### *ii) Desire*

At last the day is dead and gone,  
its greedy star a passing flame:  
but our desire will stay the same;  
in darkest night it still shines on.  
Despite the squalor on the street,  
despite the tatters of our dream,  
despite a swiftly flowing stream  
of deadlines we may never meet,  
that wild old whisper still wakes spring,  
still ushers rivers into flood,  
and we still feel the rush of blood  
each time we hear the blackbird sing.  
You walk beside me in a blend  
of lover, partner, muse and friend.

iii) *On Esperance Bay*

So pebble-rich a beach will never miss  
a mere fourteen shaped oval, heart and pear.  
Here, a reddish, orange-brown one. There,  
a semi-oval, semi-kite. Then this:  
a yin-yang dancing on a heart of gold.  
But now it's gloaming time; it's hard to see  
their glamour anymore. And only three  
of these fourteen will have their fortunes told.  
I somehow doubt these sleeping beauties mind.  
What's it to them this Scottish sonneteer's  
account's soon twenty-two in terms of years  
spent sheltered on this shore? They're deaf and blind  
to rise and rush and fall, to this kiss blown  
across the sea, to now being left alone.

iv) *On Our Silver Anniversary*

You walked across that street in summertime,  
the sunlight glinting on your golden hair.  
I almost slipped, the shift in paradigm  
a sucker punch. Then, trying not to stare  
– my thoughts, all scattered, falling into place –  
I watched you walk across that sunlit street  
and almost didn't want to see your face.  
I knew it would be strong; I knew it would be sweet.  
And then you turned and flashed a cheerful smile  
as if I'd made an innocent request.  
I took my chance, and we chatted for a while,  
until you had to go. I never guessed  
we'd meet again before the week had gone,  
still be together twenty-five years on.

## Drama

### i) *The MUV Affair*

*Probitas laudatur et alget.*

Honesty is praised, the poor shivering wreck.  
– Juvenal, *Satires*

With Esbjerg/Fanö reeling in defeat,  
you zoomed right in. They said: “This case is closed.”  
You prised it open, carefully exposed  
the vice-PM’s corruption and deceit.  
But, white with rage, the vice-PM denied  
the evidence, demanded you be sacked.  
Both Press and Parliament refused to act.  
At Question Time the PM simply lied.  
There’s something rotten somewhere. Justice sleeps  
in poverty. Yet she survives. They bring  
her to her knees; she does the only thing  
she can: she hopes against all hope and keeps  
the negatives that beg to be displayed  
on every inch of every street arcade.

### ii) *Just Rain*

*for Maz*

You died two months ago, a coastal-town  
recluse. This bloody rain’s now making sense.  
For you were married to the present tense  
and what it brought. In daily life you’d frown  
on wilful arrogance. You put it down  
to carelessness – a cardinal offence,  
you thought – and so you started to dispense  
poetic justice. Margaret, here’s your crown.

You celebrated *life*, ignored taboo,  
implored the world at large to do so too,  
adored wild animals, abhorred the zoo,  
championed natural habitats for all,  
and didn’t give a toss the cuckoo’s call  
contained no message.

So, let the rain fall.

iii) *Remorse*

You advertised the flutes of birds  
at dusk, their latest domicile  
the forks of lightning in your smile,  
the cracks of thunder in your words.  
The notes they sang were sweet and clear,  
each one a joyful piece of news.  
“At last,” I thought, “the playful muse  
my cheerful soul has longed to hear!”

What tiger was in me that roared?  
That stormed across your unmade bed?  
That picked your pocket, swiftly read  
the piece of verse your heart had poured?  
No later action could redress  
that stripping of your nakedness.

iv) *Regret*

*Inopem me copia fecit.*

Wealth has left me empty-handed.  
– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

In retrospect, I never thought I'd get  
to wrap my hand around your naked breast  
until your boyfriend's timely absence blessed  
our secret love. You begged me not to fret,  
insisted that your boyfriend was no threat,  
till I believed your leaving him was best  
for everyone. And neither of us guessed  
we'd each in turn be ravaged by regret.  
A heavy price for such a petty theft.  
Admittedly, we could have been more deft.  
I waited seven weeks for you to call.  
Your valentine arrived too late; I'd left  
for Italy. Quite innocent, I'd fall  
for someone else. I meant no harm at all.

## Trauma

### *i) The End*

They thought they'd save themselves some grief by not  
advising us of what they had to do.  
Our mother picked us up from school, her cue  
to tell us our young Labrador, who'd got  
a taste for blood, it seemed, had just been shot.  
And when I saw that everything was true,  
I felt I'd been betrayed. My parents knew  
that Gail was going to die and hatched a plot  
that left us out. I'm sitting in that car  
in Bridge of Weir. I'm six. No sparkling wine,  
no girl, no miracle, no lucky star  
will ever mitigate or redefine  
that bitter blow, or extirpate the scar:  
Friday, 13<sup>th</sup> of June, 1969.

### *ii) Shades of Venice*

For all its beauty, Venice has been cursed.  
The shades of Shylock and von Aschenbach  
lurk behind closed doors. Soon after dark  
Sebastian Flyte inspires a giant thirst  
on balconies above the Grand Canal,  
where discontented sons of millionaires  
console each other, high on Baudelaire's  
philosophy of life, *Les Fleurs du mal*.  
Come Carnival they'll all be sporting masks,  
assuming alter egos by the score.  
They'll satisfy themselves just as before  
but now agree to flaunt their pocket flasks.  
A lethal dose elicits no surprise.  
Each gondolier is Charon in disguise.

iii) *Dunderhead*

You have no earthly means of challenging  
oblivion. Its menace snags your fears;  
its malice smothers love; its madness sneers  
at composition. Every note you sing  
might just as well, well, never have been sung.  
You think by fastening your windows tight  
you'll cheat that hound from hell? Hell, every night  
it stands outside and drools with triple tongue!  
So much for noble dreams. So much for rules.  
So much for truth and beauty. In the end  
you'll go out howling. How can you pretend  
compliance is a safety net for fools,  
yet practise it yourself? You dunderhead!  
What good is recognition once you're dead?

iv) *Misfit*

"I've never had success with misters.  
I might as well become a nun.  
I'd rather hug a horde of sisters  
than any bloke and see our son  
turn out to be his spitting image,  
first barking mad, then bottled up,  
his only joy another scrimmage,  
his mind set on the Eff-Ay Cup."

That's Wendy Cope. But look, here's me!  
Please take your biro, if you will,  
apart. That's it. Remove the spring  
and stretch it out of shape. You see?  
They twisted me like that until  
I wasn't good for anything.

# **Ecphrastic**

## *L'Homme Révolté*

*in loving memory of my uncle, David A. Liddell (1945-2003),  
who read Classics at Oxford and taught at the University of Toulouse*

Youth is a blunder; Manhood a struggle; Old Age a regret.  
– Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby*

### *i) Child*

*My father has this box of matches he won't let me hold.  
He says: "They're very dangerous. It's like they have the sun  
concealed beneath their hats. They're not designed for childish fun."  
I shouted back: "I'm not a child! I'll soon be six years old!"  
But he just smiled and laughed at me in front of everyone.  
Though normally I try to do the stupid things I'm told,  
it's different now. I'll show them how. I'm very big and bold.*

So Pháëthon, his mind made up, sees Helios go out.  
He finds the box of matches, and he soon gets one alight,  
but when it burns his fingers he releases it in fright.  
He's petrified by what he's done. Can no one hear him shout  
in horror as the carpet, drapes and furniture ignite?  
They'll call it misadventure, but, quite honestly, I doubt  
he would have gone ahead if there'd been anyone about.

### *ii) Teenager*

Don't interrupt Narcissus in the middle of his dance.  
For once the one he loves loves him. For once it's not the case  
that Echo comes to comfort him. No longer does his face  
communicate catastrophe. For once, he took a chance  
and fell into the water at the local steeplechase.  
He knew his mirror image wasn't worth a second glance,  
but this was second-hand, and he was thrown into a trance.

He stared in blank amazement. There was nothing to commend  
those muddy eyes, that greasy hair, that corrugated chin,  
those twisted lips, those crooked teeth, that acne-riddled skin,  
yet, cured of his conformity, he longed to comprehend  
the existential crisis crying out from deep within.  
And when he saw it was himself, he couldn't help but bend  
to kiss his spitting image. Now his image is his friend.



*iii) Teacher*

Odysseus is knitting – woollen socks for Penny’s dad.  
She disappeared ten years ago, and since then he’s preferred  
to live alone, quite adamant she’s given him her word  
she’ll find her way back home to him. We told him he was mad  
and begged him to forget her, until finally we heard  
him promising to activate a marriage bureau ad  
as soon as he’s done knitting these two socks. But we’ve been had.

It’s been three years, and still no sign of any fiancée.  
Perhaps he’s sensed defeat, a little rattled that his age  
will figure on the Internet, afraid that once his cage  
is showcased on the World Wide Web his wounded pride won’t pay  
for licensing his ego to go waltzing centre-stage.  
Or else the Fates that smile on him conduct his hands as they  
unravel all the stitches at the end of every day.

*iv) Torch-bearer*

Prometheus is drinking hard – neat vodka all day long.  
He used to be devoted to the service of mankind,  
but, now he’s in his cups, it’s like there’s nothing on his mind  
except the next delivery of vodka. And this song:  
“Why was he born so beautiful?” Come morning and you’ll find  
him sprawling in the same old place. But wait, there’s something wrong.  
He’s not the wreck you might expect. He’s fighting fit and strong.

And then, cold sober, he complains: “It’s all the fault of Zeus,  
who’s punished me for harnessing a natural supply  
of raging fire.” He shrugs his shoulders, gestures at the sky,  
and points a finger at the sun. It isn’t any use  
appealing to his common sense. He thinks the reason why  
he’s drinking is his lighter works. An item he’ll produce  
in evidence. Try telling him his argument’s too loose.

## Self-portraits

### *i) Mama's Little Boy*

A tearaway with golden curls,  
I'll always be your darling boy,  
your little pet, your pride and joy,  
the odd one out among the girls.

You worshipped that precocious child  
who trusted you and shied from crowds,  
the silver lining in the clouds,  
a highland burn, remote and wild.

You'd cut me out to be a star,  
a maestro on the violin,  
a new Yehudi Menuhin.  
You never dreamed I'd play guitar;

and now see nothing to commend  
this bully charging round the bend.

### *ii) The Magic Garden*

Perhaps I'm still in love with her,  
a dilettante, an amateur:  
I hesitate to shred the things  
I wrote before I spread my wings.

It's not as if my bookshelf groans  
because of them; the five trombones  
I never play are surely more  
indicative of needless store.

I keep the poems of my youth  
as evidence – and here's the truth –  
of how I saw myself through eyes  
that understood no compromise,

no consequence, no checks or chains.  
And here, at least, that world remains.

iii) *I Sing the Sonnet*

that comes unbidden, out of nowhere, flies  
upstream, and finds you dangling both your feet  
over the edge of Kenmore Bridge to greet  
a perfect dawn. You're startled by loud cries  
you can't decipher. Afterwards you knew  
you'd heard the oystercatchers long before  
you saw them round the river's corridor  
at lightning speed, their destination you –  
the listener to whom this is addressed,  
my silent partner whose assent has willed  
this elevated song, who's just been thrilled  
by *carpe diem* at its all-time best.  
Just goes to show how much I grieve for you,  
my twenty-year-old self.

And how time flew.

iv) *On Papsie's 89<sup>th</sup> Birthday*

Then he moved into the corner,  
face down like the Jack of Hearts.  
– Bob Dylan, "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts"

I'm sitting in the Shamrock Inn  
in Copenhagen, where there's time  
and space enough for me to rhyme.  
Why do I do it? Not to win  
applause, or please my kith and kin,  
but rather so my soul can climb  
up to the stars, to some sublime  
reunion with its long-lost twin.

The two kids kissing to this track  
(Mumford and Sons, "After the Storm")  
remind me of the face-down jack  
of hearts downstairs. I put him back,  
face down once more, to keep him warm.  
A simple duty to perform.

## Group Self-portraits

### *i) Mum's the Word*

Mum told us if we saw a wasp to stay  
quite still. So when one chose to be my guest  
and crawl around my face, I did my best,  
lips closed. My sisters thrilled at my display  
of courage. Once the wasp had flown away,  
Mum oohed and ahed; she too had been impressed.  
The message was: do nothing, come what may!  
The incident was quickly laid to rest.

Later, Manda would upset a nest  
of wasps, and Barbie, eager to obey,  
stood quite still. She didn't dare protest  
at being stung. Would she be here today  
had Mum not come at Manda's shrill request?  
Kids often do exactly what you say.

### *ii) Chess with Monsieur Joffroy*

*in memory of Frédérique Joffroy (1962-1980)*

Losing to me wasn't the badge of shame  
your father thought; he couldn't hope to stop  
the stronger player coming out on top.  
It stung me royally to hear him claim  
my proletarian tactics were to blame.  
It's standard stuff to snatch a pawn, then swap  
off everything; slow suicide to drop  
the basic principle behind the game.  
To think that he was meant to be the host!  
We were thirteen, your father forty-four.  
Five years later I was told, by post,  
that you, my friend, had hanged yourself. Your ghost  
jolted my memory. Outplayed once more,  
your father kicked the table to the floor.

iii) *The Big Smoke*

*for Will*

We took a flat in central Hammersmith –  
students both, but working several nights  
at some hotel – bamboozled by the myth  
of being where it's at. We scorned the sights  
we never saw. The day you said you'd scored,  
I thought you meant a girl, not Mary Jane,  
yet I too fell under her spell. We bored  
of books and in our loneliness and pain  
mistook the kindness of a nurse that smiled  
for promises of love, too blind to see  
our heroine was nothing but a child  
that stroked the ego till it proved to be  
collapsible – a folding carry-cot  
she jubilantly folded, then forgot.

iv) *Look! We Have Landed!*

My wife does stretches in her sleep.  
For me such chores deserve neglect.  
She's very tidy. I elect  
to scatter stuff or make a heap.  
She ditches things I'd rather keep.  
My instinct says: *Preserve! Collect!*  
She hates the music I select.

What madness made us take that leap?  
What kamikaze bug possessed  
us both? We swore on oath to love  
just us (*To hell with all the rest!*)  
and never guessed we'd pussyfoot,  
solicit doubt, bail out above  
our target, land by parachute.

## Defiance

### *i) No Bloody Way!*

*for Mark and Mike, whose room it was*

A crowd of students sitting round a room  
one summer night in 1983.  
They sit quite still, make little sound, assume  
they've every right to simply wait and see.  
Until the college porter comes along  
to tell them that they're threatening the peace.  
It's obvious he's got his sums all wrong.  
And what's he going to do? Ring the police?

This memory will always ebb and flow;  
a part of me has never come of age.  
So when, today, I find a treble "No!"  
means rattling the same old bloody cage,  
I'm back in Oxford sounding out success,  
the silent choir inside me shouting "Yes!"

### *ii) Lisa Leaving*

*for Lisa Lind Dunbar*

For me at least, you'll always be the child  
who hated school; now never to return.  
No longer need you struggle in your seat;  
you're free to go; you'll soon be running wild,  
down to the sea, the sand beneath your feet,  
no morons shouting: "Won't you ever learn?"

I'll miss your Scottish accent, miss your face,  
miss your easy wit and plucky grace.  
I yell: "Hey, Lisa! Leaving us for good?  
You made it through! I always knew you would!  
*God tur!* Have fun! Take care!" Defying care,  
you climb King Christian's horse on Esbjerg Square,  
broad-grin at all the others fading fast,  
then ride like hell into the distant past.

iii) *Cripple*

The doctor's diagnosis struck me dumb.  
I felt stripped naked, exiled, useless, numb.  
He said I'd never walk again. I cried.  
Yet, even then, a warm voice stirred inside  
my skull and whispered: "You shall overcome  
by following one simple rule of thumb,  
which is to bear your fate with grace and pride.  
Now spurn the legs on which you once relied."

I watched my world first shrink and then expand.  
Both feet have re-emerged in my left hand.  
I've gained this extra finger in my mind,  
whose tip I give to help all humankind.  
It's ten years on. The crying stopped last spring.  
And, looking back, I wouldn't change a thing.

iv) *Still Life*

*for Richard Wilbur, still writing poems at 88*

That roller blader might be past it –  
I'd put his age at sixty-five –  
and yet he scudded past so fast it  
made me glad to be alive.

His hair was surf. His cheeks were leather.  
A happy smile still creased his lip.  
Enjoying almost perfect weather –  
one hand resting on his hip –

he took the time to look around him,  
yet gave no sign of slowing down  
for anyone. I'm glad I found him  
visiting this part of town.

Such sheer delight! Such sure control!  
Bless his spirit! Bless his soul!

# Acrostic



## The Four Motives

### i) *Sheer Egoism*

Looking, just looking, is all we have to do to see  
the essential truth.

– Roger Deakin, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*

Looking at you again, afresh,  
just after making love – like Mars  
looking at Venus in the flesh –  
is purest joy. Do lucky stars  
all gaze at this sweet prize I've won?  
We ask if world enough and time  
have brought us here. What's done is done.  
To love each other was no crime.  
Do dusty scales not license snakes  
to shun dull ruts and daily grooves,  
see in the tracks of their mistakes  
the evidence that this earth moves?  
Essential beauty is divine;  
truth is, I'm yours, and you are mine.

### ii) *Aesthetic Enthusiasm*

We should do our utmost to encourage the Beautiful,  
for the Useful encourages itself.

– Goethe, as quoted by James Anthony Froude at the  
outset of his essay, "The Philosophy of Christianity"

We never saw the crisis coming. Why  
should we have? Saying it was otherwise,  
do you suppose your hindsight will disguise  
our failure? No! I won't be doing my  
utmost to hide the truth! Why should I try  
to change the facts? Why should a pack of lies  
encourage me to edit and revise  
the story of our love and say goodbye?  
Beautiful as they are, these hearts that kiss  
for ever, let them be the cards we pick  
the next time we go chasing married bliss.  
Useful concerns are what a lunatic  
encourages; let blind vindictiveness  
itself be proud to never miss a trick.

iii) *Historical Impulse*

Writing is something I know little about,  
less at some times than at others.

– W.S. Merwin, *The Paris Review*

Writing verse as often as I can  
is not as simple as it sounds. To write  
something worthwhile I stay up half the night.  
I fumble fearlessly, without a plan,  
know only this: it must both rhyme and scan.  
Little else. Who gives a bleeding shite  
about its weight? What's wrong with being light?  
Less is more. Why tyrannise a man  
at work? Just let me do what I do best!  
Some pieces are a wrench, yet still good fun;  
times of woe are better met in jest  
than rancour. I, at least, prefer to run  
at them straight on, then turn as they protest.  
Others are a doddle.

Like this one.

iv) *Political Purpose*

All that is gold does not glitter;  
not all those who wander are lost.

– J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

All this and more, yes, everything  
that should enrich both you and me  
is a waste of time. Why give you three  
gold bracelets? Why this diamond ring?  
Does it convey I hope to sing,  
not bind you? When we watch the sea  
glitter with gems, we yearn to *be*,  
not *have*: *he* does not strive to bring  
all creatures great and small to heel.  
Those jewels have not been made for slaves  
who soon will die; the ocean's waves  
wander forever. When our graves  
are plundered, let it be to steal  
lost memories. These are more real.

## The Four Tempers

### i) *Melancholic*

First of all nothing will happen  
and a little later  
nothing will happen again  
– Leonard Cohen, *Book of Longing*

First you're told sweet nothings. What you know  
of life is what you've gathered on your own;  
all the evidence would seem to show  
nothing will change, the carnival you've known  
will last forever, what has happened must  
happen again. Here's your plastic cup  
and wooden spoon. Perhaps you'll grumble, just  
a bit, before you lap their contents up:  
little do you guess! When you discover,  
later on, the carnival is over,  
nothing will be the same. Losing your lover  
will make you wonder: Did your days in clover  
happen? You'll bear a cross, tick off each box  
again, put on a mask. The paradox.

### ii) *Phlegmatic*

*for a teacher candidate, Sabrina Buch Hansen*

Always that work is more pleasant to the imagination  
which is not now required.  
– Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Society and Solitude*

Always be on time, but if you're not  
that well-prepared, it doesn't really matter.  
Work on your technique. A bit of patter  
is nice. Fine-tune your wit, and try to spot  
more ways of making character and plot  
pleasant. Transport yourself from mad as a hatter  
to patient as a toad. Contrive to flatter  
the less astute. Don't bully them. They've got  
imagination, some creative spark,  
which, independent, dancing in the dark,  
is aching to escape. Try not to scold,  
not even with a humorous remark.  
Now go and do the things that are, I'm told,  
required of you. And may you find much gold.

### iii) *Sanguine*

The singer, under all circumstances, must be more interesting than the songs he sings.

– David Craig, *On Singing, On Stage*

The sweet sang-froid of Jutland suits this foreign singer. “Despite the fact I’m not unbending under pressure, somehow I’m transcending all the hype,” says Duncan G. MacLaurin. “Circumstances may dictate, but poets must expose the lie that man’s required to be a slave to man. What I’ve aspired to more than anything is memoir. So it’s interesting to bring in others, rather than just quote myself. I know the brutes, the big boys, think one poem’s worth a thousand songs, but I don’t think so. Blame my father!” He puts his pen and pipe down, rises, bows and sings: “The sweet sang-froid of Jutland suits...”

### iv) *Choleric*

Poets need to say what you, Joe Bloggs, must keep unsaid. Your mottoes are: “Do not expose to sunlight. Cross the ‘t’s and dot the ‘i’s. Mustn’t complain. Let sleeping dogs lie.” You survive to fight another day that never comes; you’ll never fight your one-man’s war: you’re programmed just to run, run, run; required by law to run, run, run away. To where though, Joe? There’s nowhere you can hide. Be sure your dreams will find you in the dark. A poet may at times be but a fuming slave to spleen, but there’s another side to him. He’s over there, that unassuming man just sitting smoking in the park.

## The Four Oracles

*Dejo a los varios porvenires (no a todos)  
mi jardín de senderos que se bifurcan.*

I leave to the various futures (not to all)  
my garden of forking paths.

– Jorge Luis Borges,  
“*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*”

### i) Will

I shouldn't doubt my feet know best.  
“Leave it to us to find the way  
to where you want to go,” they say.  
The arguments begin. I test  
various intimations lest  
futures rest on yesterday.  
“Not now,” they say. “It doesn't pay  
to think as much as you suggest.”  
All I can do is rage and shout.  
My feet insist: “No transcendental  
garden ever prospered out  
of fear. Where you see two judgmental,  
forking roads, we see three gentle  
paths that form a roundabout.”

### ii) Heart

“Leave that cocky-bastard piss outside!  
It isn't wanted here! It isn't cool  
to come on strong to strangers! You don't fool  
us in the slightest.” Christ! I'd only tried  
to tap my feet! My buddy, not sure I'd  
find a response, resolved to overrule  
the guy: “A shame they threw you out of school.”  
Way too slow to see these words applied  
to me, the guy looked round and saw the cheer  
where none had been. And when he'd understood,  
you laughed out loud. And when he'd left, who could  
want a more lively display? It was clear  
to everyone, impromptu dancing should  
go hand in hand with knocking back the beer.

iii) *Mind*

Not many poets stand the test of years.  
Now that's a fact. I have but one lament:  
they often face the charge, "a life misspent".  
Say you're a poet. Soon you'll learn the tears  
it costs to advertise your hopes and fears  
doesn't affect your powers to invent.  
Pay no mind to idle talk. Consent  
to be the laughing stock of all your peers.  
Think of the sacred flame you keep alive.  
As darkness falls, it struggles to survive.  
Much pain and passion is required. Then, just  
as Dawn makes ready to indulge her lust,  
you find your feet, in fourteen lines of five,  
suggest they're lighter than their weight in dust.

iv) *Soul*

When I was a lad, I lived for sport.  
I felt my natural habitat  
was sky. But Mother gave the cat  
nine lives, not me. I later thought  
I'd like to be an astronaut,  
no strings attached, and, after that  
idea died, an acrobat.  
This came to naught. The bug I caught  
was one I picked up once I'd grown.  
What if, instead, at a tender age,  
I'd seen that feet, stuck on the page,  
want but to fly? That I'd be prone  
to help them, in my role backstage,  
do as they wish? Who would have known!

## The Four Virtues

### i) Hope

Unless you are a genius, it is best  
to aim at being intelligible.

– Anthony Hope, *The Dolly Dialogues*

Unless I'm very much mistaken,  
you tend to quit whenever things  
are getting tough. But chaos brings  
a chance for every god-forsaken  
genius to find a killer move;  
it offers space to rescue what  
is most divine, to see what's not  
best suited for the present groove,  
to sidestep all the dross. This time  
aim high! Don't worry if you fail  
at first. Continue. Simply through  
being aware, you'll make your tale  
intelligible. Here's to you.  
And to new Hope that lives in rhyme.

### ii) Love

He gave so many people who felt "other"  
to the establishment permission to speak.

– Suzanne Moore on Stuart Hall,  
*The Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014

He saw past today. All his hopes for tomorrow  
gave him the view that he wasn't alone,  
so, now to engrave his achievement in stone.  
Many are those who just sit on their sorrow;  
people are scared to stand up and be counted –  
who needs all that hassle? But this man of peace  
felt the need to conduct a campaign to release  
other poor souls from the myth they amounted  
to little. Exposing through erudite text  
the power of white propaganda, he shattered  
establishment apathy. Nobody needed  
permission to climb on his wagon: what mattered  
to Stuart was listening to those who succeeded  
speak about what they would like to do next.

iii) *Peace*

The growth of wisdom may be gauged exactly  
by the diminution of ill temper.

– Friedrich Nietzsche,  
*Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*

The secret to peace is a lack of intent.  
Growth tends to happen without too much warning.  
Of course, I'm still armchair-cocooned in the morning;  
wisdom comes easy. A later event  
may spark disillusionment. Like getting fired.  
Be ready for anything. What have we guessed,  
gauged, or imagined, that, put to the test,  
exactly matched up with the way things transpired?  
By my calculations the exits I took,  
the flights I've attempted, have all led to this  
diminution. Since I turned my back on the flower  
of Scotland for want of a song and a kiss,  
ill winds have contrived to dismantle my power,  
temper my glory, and bring me to book.

iv) *Faith*

They say it is not who you are that makes the world respect you,  
but what power it is that stands behind you.

– Ben Okri, reading the beginning of *Starbook*

They teach you *class*, then dumb things down;  
say education matters, *but*  
it doesn't mean you'll make the cut.  
Is our day's yardstick mere renown,  
not enterprise and leadership?  
Who needs cheap fame? If no one knows  
you, that's a blessing. TV shows  
are adverts for an ego-trip,  
that with its smug, facetious grin  
makes fools of those who'd rather find  
the muse. Why woo a beauty-blind  
world that's slow to let you win  
respect? Better to bear in mind  
you value something genuine.



# Meditation

## Pusher of Dreams

In all matters of love I had never amounted  
to more than a pusher.

– Don Paterson, *The Book of Shadows*

In splash and splurge I've quenched my thirst,  
all worries ditched, the shades of other  
matters banished by each burst  
of energy. No need for mother  
love that always fears the worst.

I didn't care whose fingertip  
had set me off or what went first,  
never in doubt that too much grip  
amounted to too much control.

To my complete surprise I'd find  
more purpose in my heart and soul  
than ever in my will and mind.

A muse came tapping at my door.  
Pusher of dreams, I rushed to score.

# Notes

## p.3, “The Kind Old Moon”

In French and Anglo-Norman, and all the neo-Latin tongues, the custom of the Latin and Greek languages has been retained, so that the moon is feminine, and the sun masculine. As people began to take their notions of grammar from the Latin language, English writers adopted the same genders for the names of the two luminaries as in Latin and Anglo-Norman. DGM has reverted to the custom of the Teutonic languages, where the moon is masculine and the sun feminine.

## p.7, “Busker”

Peter Needham was a family friend who gave DGM a list of possible career choices in 1984. “Papsie” is what two of DGM’s nephews later called their grandfather, i.e. DGM’s father.

## p.9, “Desire”

The first and third quatrains are rewrites of the first and third quatrains of two separate sonnets, “Dust of Stars” and “Under A Tree”, published in DGM’s first collection, *Red Moon*. They were the first two pieces written in collaboration with his future wife, Ann Bilde, shortly after they met. The capital ‘A’ in “Under A Tree” is not a mistake, but a circled ‘A’ might have been a better choice. The working title was “Under the Anarchist Tree”.

## p.10, “On Esperance Bay”

Esperance Bay is a small stretch of water that extends from the north side of Skallingen peninsula, which marks the northernmost point of the Wadden Sea, up to the lighthouse at Blaavandshuk (Blue Water Point), the westernmost point of Denmark. The bay takes its name from a brig that was registered in Copenhagen. Hit by a violent storm just out of Hamburg en route to Rio de Janeiro in the autumn of 1874, Esperance was driven off course and foundered on the sand of Horns Reef (also known as Devil’s Horn), ten miles west of Blaavandshuk. It was one of nine ships to run aground there in that storm. Her crew of nine perished.

## p.11, “The MUV Affair”

While still a policeman in Odense, Bendt Bendtsen turned to politics. He was elected to Parliament in 1994 for the Conservative Party. In 1999 Bendtsen assumed the leadership after an extended period of tumult in the party. In 2000 he was instrumental in saving Marstal Navigation School, which was in his constituency. Situated on the fairly remote island of Aerö, the school had long been having difficulty attracting students. No one in the maritime industry was interested in saving the school, but the argument was that it was the life-nerve of the island. Bendtsen became Minister of Trade and Commerce in 2001, as well as Vice-PM alongside PM, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Blinkered by his own interests, he plotted the downfall of another maritime education centre, MUV in Esbjerg and on the island of Fanö, in conjunction with an expansion of Marstal. Using the lessons he had learned from how Marstal Navigation School was saved, he acted in secret with a couple of others. Ignoring the fact that Fanö was also an island with maritime education as its life-nerve, Bendtsen closed down MUV on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2004, the last day of Parliament before the long summer break. He then turned off his mobile phone.

The official reason for the closure was to save 5-6 million kroner of the state’s annual budget. Peanuts when one considers that Denmark’s maritime industry earned 160,000 million kroner in 2006 and 200,000 million kroner in 2007. It would also cost 100 million kroner to close the schools and expand Marstal. In fact, MUV was not only the second-largest maritime institution in the country, but it was also by far the best. Furthermore, it was the institution that best lived up to the industry’s future needs, not least because it was part of a thriving centre of industry and research. Denmark’s maritime industry urgently needed navigators, skippers, marine engineers, etc., and Esbjerg/Fanö had the culture, tradition and expertise that could provide them.

The publication of *MUV-affæren*, an exposé by DGM’s wife, Ann Bilde, in January 2006 prompted Social Democrat MP Kim Mortensen to confront Bendt Bendtsen, and later PM Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Parliament. Both lied in claiming that closing the schools was part of the original overall strategy proposed by the Maritime Authority.

Despite all the evidence Bendtsen wasn't brought to account. Instead it was a case of shooting the messenger. Ann Bilde wasn't popular with the powers-that-were. The vice-director of the United Shipping Companies, the very organisation that lacked Danish mariners, complained that the campaign to reopen MUV was harmful for recruitment. A vice-director of the Maritime Authority told Ann Bilde's biggest customer, the director of a fishing organization, to sack her. When he refused he was threatened with the suspension of the 1½ million kroner PR allowance, so he was forced to comply. On Fanö the campaign met huge resistance from the Conservative Mayor, and others, who saw it as an indictment of their own failure to react at the time.

### **p.13, "Shades of Venice"**

Von Aschenbach is the narrator in *Death in Venice* (1912), a novella by Thomas Mann. He is so obsessed with a beautiful young man that he ignores warnings about a cholera epidemic and dies from it.

Sebastian Flyte is a central figure in the novel, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), by Evelyn Waugh. Sebastian is a rich drunkard whose father lives in Venice.

### **p.16, "L'Homme Révolté"**

The title refers to Albert Camus' work of the same name, from 1951. To translate it as *The Rebel* disregards the fact that "révolté" means not only "in revolt" but also "revolted", i.e. "appalled".

The first of these sonnets that DGM wrote was "Teacher". It was inspired by the cover photo/painting/self-portrait by Teun Hocks (Untitled, 1995, Torch Gallery, Amsterdam), which he saw two days before his uncle's death. Poetry Scotland had posted it online as the subject of an ephrastic poetry competition.

### **p.19, "I Sing the Sonnet"**

Kenmore is situated in Perthshire in the heart of Scotland.

### **p.22, "No Bloody Way!"**

The posh students were at a May Ball that night.

### **p.22, "Lisa Leaving"**

It was a photograph in a local newspaper of Lisa atop the statue on Esbjerg Square (Christian IX on horseback) that inspired this piece. Scaling the statue is a traditional escapade for students graduating from *gymnasiet*.

"*God tur!*" is Danish. It means "Have a nice trip!" and is pronounced "go tour".

### **p.23, "Cripple"**

This was inspired by "Mind and Motivation" (2005), digital art by David Ho.

### **p.25, "The Four Motives"**

George Orwell outlined these motives for writing, in the same order as they appear here, in his essay, "Why I Write" (1946).

### **p.26, "Political Purpose"**

Taking the moon as being masculine, DGM takes water and the sea as being masculine (cf. the note for p.5).

# Acknowledgements

are due to the editors of the following magazines/e-zines/homepages in which these sonnets first appeared:

- "Regret" in *14 by 14*
- "The End" in *Angle*
- "Just Rain" in *The Barefoot Muse*
- "Remorse" in *Bringing Sonnets Back*
- "Desire" & "Revelation" in *Candelabrum*
- "Chess with Monsieur Joffroy" in *Chess Magazine*
- "Dunderhead" in *The Chimaera*
- "Lisa Leaving" on Esbjerg Gymnasium's website
- "No Bloody Way!" in *The Flea*
- "I Sing the Sonnet" & "On Esperance Bay" in *Lucid Rhythms*
- "Shades of Venice" in *The Shit Creek Review*
- "Bio", "*L'Homme Révolté*", "Look! We Have Landed!", "Melancholic", "On Papsie's 89<sup>th</sup> Birthday", "Pusher of Dreams", "Still Life", "The Four Motives", "The Four Oracles", "The Four Virtues" & "The Kind Old Moon" in *Snakeskin*

Fourteen sonnets were first published in the first edition of *I Sing the Sonnet* (Snakeskin, 2011): the four pieces in "However Far Away", "Mama's Little Boy", "Misfit", "Mum's the Word", "On Our Silver Anniversary", "The Big Smoke", the last three pieces in "The Four Tempers", "The Magic Garden" & "The MUV Affair". Seventeen sonnets have been added since the first edition: "The Kind Old Moon", "The End", "Chess with Monsieur Joffroy", "On Papsie's 89<sup>th</sup> Birthday", "Look! We Have Landed!", "Cripple", "Melancholic", the four pieces in "The Four Oracles", the four pieces in "The Four Virtues", "Pusher of Dreams" and "Bio".

"Cripple" was first published in DGM's e-book, *From Moonrise till Dawn: A Cycle of Poetry and Songs* (NordOsten Books, 2013).

"Revelation" is a revision of a sonnet in DGM's first poetry collection, *Red Moon* (Merlin Books, 1987), published under the *nom de guerre*, Gillies Crisp. Four other sonnets – "Desire", and Parts I, III & IV of "However Far Away" – are rewrites of sonnets in *Red Moon*.

Cover photo/painting/self-portrait by Teun Hocks (Untitled, 1995, Torch Gallery, Amsterdam)

Various recordings of the sonnets can be found on DGM's blog at <https://gists.wordpress.com/i-sing-the-sonnet/>

# About the Author

## Bio

When he was 23, his father failed to bribe him not to play trombone before the rugby. At full time the English trailed 6-33, an all-time record score. His contribution mustn't be forgotten. He's since taught English as a foreign language, written some verse – not all of which is rotten – and sung it too. Some said he was one sandwich short of a picnic. Pushing 55, he's lost for words more often than he'd like, but very happy that he's still alive and still can walk and run and ride a bike. He's confident that, given time, he may attain a state of permanent decay.

Duncan Gillies MacLaurin was born in Glasgow on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1962. His father taught him chess and bridge when he was very young, and he was a keen chess player in his youth. He attended boarding schools in Perthshire from the ages of 8 to 18. On the beach of a Greek island one night, in 1981, he was enchanted by a version of “Suzanne” on guitar. He started reading Classics at Oxford University later that year, but left without a degree, disappointed with Classical Philosophy's dictum, “Poetry does not exist”. In 1984, he signed up for reading French, Anthropology and Psychology at London University, but took to playing trombone on the street instead. In 1985, he busked in Gibraltar for three months. Back in London, his home patch was the subway (AE: underpass) beside the Hammersmith Odeon. He began to write poetry. In 1986, he went busking in Italy for two months. On his last day in Assisi before heading off to Rome, he met the Danish writer, Ann Bilde. They have been a couple ever since. He purchased a guitar in Belgrade and began to turn his poetry into song. Settling in Denmark, he took degrees in English and Latin at Aarhus University. He has taught these subjects at *gymnasiet* (sixth-form-college/high-school level) since 1995. He now performs “Suzanne” himself. Since writing “Chess with Monsieur Joffroy” in 2013, he has again become a keen chess player. In 2017 he will be adding Classical Studies to the subjects he teaches.



Snakeskin poetry webzine can be found at <http://www.snakeskin.org.uk>