

Jennifer Maiden:
Excerpts from Selected Poems, 1967-2018

**12 from the 16 poems of
Keeping the Lid On:
A Gulf War Retrospective**

*(written in 1991, first published in Southerly and later in
Maiden's Acoustic Shadow collection, Penguin, 1993.
Broadcast on ABC radio twice, the second time on the Eve of
Bush Junior's 2003 war on Iraq)*

1. 'A Big Idea'

- President Bush on his New Order

The big sand is the place
for the big idea, and
for war's moonface. The sand
has a cinematic purity,
pocked
like a close-up of Richard Burton's face.
We can watch sand relaxedly
and simply, in victory, in
big raid-on-moonlight movies
for relief before we sleep.
And in this *fin de siecle*,
when death has to earn its keep
and we choose an active Hamlet,
the small sand is what we meet.



2. ‘We Are Not That Cheap’

(-King Hussein, after President Bush threatened to stop Foreign Aid to Jordan, for criticising the U.S. in the Gulf War, 11/2/91.)

Like most of us, I fear my price is low:
that when they hoist pay packets on the pole
to flutter in a good march militaire,
I will just shrug and watch the Romans go -
admit they are accustomed to the role
and, anyway, the other side are there
to welcome them without apparent fear.
Like most of us, I fear honour’s a dream
which rots when it is much in touch with tears
of sentiment, or privacy, or pain.
Still, honour of the intellect can seem
expensive, but less vulnerable to cares
about the aura of one’s luck and name.
Like most of us, I understand both men
and understanding is the nerve which stirs
perhaps to rise responsible and blame
that secrecy we must quite welcome when
it saves us from a witness’s grey shame,
and obscures any reason, should we try.
Like most of us, I fear my price is high.

3. Keeping the Lid On

It’s important not to write or speak in rage
which will truss up the apter words
and the syntax which sharpens the skin.
But it’s not a chess-like coolness which
we require, so much as the white-
jowled pit-eyed weariness once
of McCarthy in Chicago or, now, Arnett
in Baghdad. Having seen we must speak
but slowly and with an insensate hand
brushing our lips at times, and all
our reflexes slow with some



clear confirmation of futility: then
we still do what we can: one word
and then one more, forever framed
in a context which ignores, denies
our witness: this will work
if we not unclench one finger or expect
the power to be given us again.

5. Rations

Simone Weil made the point that men
and women would queue for hours for an egg
but not to save a life. What TV wrung
me most - apart from the Gulf War -
lately was the ancient, trembling face
of a Moscow woman whose fiercely saved
higher currency notes had just been
outlawed to serve some higher cause.

I thought:
sanctions always do work,because
eggs give us purpose, reassuring
us that our mother is still here,
at the day's end, and sane beyond meaning

6. The Journalist

27/2/ 91

Sometimes, she wonders if the job
in PR would have been better, but
they don't give a by-line to cadets.
At the cafe, she still sits
apart from older journalists,
who drink - while she drinks
coffee, lots and lots
of clarifying caffeine, but



she makes sure that she does take decaf, if not often.
She sips the afternoon, watching CNN on the wall. She likes the drumroll, at the ads.
It gives her energy, and makes her feel part of something happening, just like when they let her do little things on disposable nappies, or smokes.
She doesn't smoke, unlike the older journos, who leave their tables smelling acrid.
Mainly, they're men who did not write exposures of Vietnam, Pol Pot, and so react with irony and heat if she shows even minimal distaste for this war. So she does not.
The coffee remembers how she read Camus for her B.A.: something like: 'It will always be too late, thank God.' She stirs herself and the coffee, thinks perhaps the PR job might not have meant this much passive smoking.

7. Miniatures

It is interesting to see in the Art Gallery, how much Monet's seas are like his waterlilies: the same sumptuous, pastel ruffles, which still seem soft but cause fingertips to dream of fish scales, or the bearded feel from snow.
It is true that in war



we want the miniature focus,
a camera small enough
not to show a mad wind blow,
but reveal the serene molecule -
its tiny crimps and pleats -
calm as a helix, floating through
our heart's brittle holes, when each
sea seems a waterlily, each
lily a sea of peace.

8. The Road

(compared by one U.S. military spokesman to
'the Pentagon car park at going-home time')

It has a name - already infamous -
in Arabic, which I don't want to know,
although in coming months no doubt I will.
I've dreaded writing about it, but
I knew that it would press
like a boil of pus until the words
came out. I will retreat
into an image which for me
is safe because the animals
in it are still alive: a cage
with a pyramid of terrified
wild kittens which I extricated,
tamed. The old image of pigs
mounting each other at
an abattoir recurs, but that's
too blunted and inadequate to show
170ks of road, bombed days
and days beyond decision to retreat,
stalled cars and wild trucks outstretched
six abreast in the black sand,
between merciless horizons.
In time I hope it will become
a hackneyed phrase, with which we



prevent some lies again.

In the meantime, I have heard
a rumour that we have to leave the city.
I snatch a sequinned dress
for my wife from a shop window.
I think that I remember how
to drive and I have stolen
some Prince's confiscated Ford, because
my feet can't cross to home
in time... they say that time
is running out for us. Ahead,
There is nothing but metal and blood.
Some are burnt up, some are intact
enough for me to recognise their wounds.

And there are planes
in squadrons coming at me from
both sides of the road - there seems
no difference here between the land and sky.

My car
is off the road and screams and I still try
to overtake the convoys of the dead.

11. White Flags

The point is sometimes made that the Surrealists
were reacting against World War One, and trying
to create a peaceful perfection
in shape and colour. Perhaps the order
in their geometries is still too
physical to be abstract, but the idea
seems useful, since they are extremely
tidy.

As Ronald Blythe observed, there is
one sort of Socialism which is really
merely an obsession with
tidiness. But bold colours,



which sing across the room
like stars, do compensate for that.
It is the white squares
and rectangles, however,
which stay in the mind much longer
growing stronger than much stronger
to the power of emptiness.

12. Dodge

(‘They were just trying to get the hell out of Dodge’
- US soldier looking at the dead on the Basra Road)

The strongest thing
in this has always been
repatriation, been
the right to go home again,
 beyond
the right to truth or breath.

This
supercedes the image
of a bird in oil
and is not
about guns or gold,
no longer even
about fiery pride,
or long
plotting, long
resentment
bursting out at last in death.

Most of these, out West,
were the crowd at the gunfight
who watched from
the windows, or carried



their rifles barrel-down,
 unless
the deputy was there,
 and then
would echo his distress,
 always
a little unpredictable,
nervous, and a little
unsure about the facts.

It would be wrong,
though, to patronise
what is framed here
and dignified -
a corpse-hand, half-curled, and half
childlike,
 half black, or one
frail stranger sprawled face-down,
 his leg
tucked out for walking back.

13. Measurement

There is not
the kind nod now which ended
many squabbles on the hearth.

The risk
now offered is not measured,
 and perhaps
 there's that
to be said for the decade:
 it offers
true scope for the dissident heart.



15. Grammar

Sibilants curl, succulent
on the sweet part of the tongue.

Even before he
opposed the Gulf War, I could agree
with Chomsky that grammar
was first and physical, as
irreversible
and subtle as a taste-bud, and
as bowel-deep as passion. So
even Chaos flows out in order
we are told:
like buds on a branch,
this way.

The endless pattern guarantees
no apple bloom the same. For a man
with that belief, hope might not be
so dangerous and so false,
so fiery.

The infinitives and conjunctions in
this foreign language stay.

16. Premature Burial

(13/9/91. On the 6-month-delayed news item that the U.S.
buried thousands of Iraqis alive in the sand with tanks at the
start of the Land War)

We've buried the war. It always was
bad taste to mention it, even
when it happened, unless one
made jokes about Saddam or CNN.
We've buried the war. It always was
a matter of a soldier in the sand,
on his belly, not believing where he was
and seeing a tank as big as the U.S.
- whose movies he loves, where his cousin



still lives - arrive on top of him and take
his air, his air, and fill his lungs with earth.
We've buried the war. It always was
a suffocated mouth, a word not said.
Before the Land War, the Republican Guard
in their bunkers choked on sand bombed down
ventilation shafts. The children
Smart-bombed to bones in Baghdad suffered less.
We've buried the war. It always was
something the good journalist expects
who knows his side will win, who does
understand the wisdom in delay, that good
journalist who always felt a bit
cheated that we lost in Vietnam, who has
now found how easy patriotism is
when you bury the war in you, which always was:
how easily that seems to let you breathe.

