

What makes life last

**Some approaches to
the problem ahead**

Mel Witherden

*“There’s a problem ahead. We’ll all soon be dead;
so it won’t matter much whatever we’ve said.”*

What makes life last

*It's death, I railed, that makes life so absurd.
So if you want the truth, urged my partner,
Defy the lie that killed your father.
"Last" was an adjective; make it a verb.*

1. The Google search for everlasting life

"Find out what makes life last" is what I heard
and, bloated with frustration, belched the word:
"Which answer would you like?" my fury rasped.
And while the keyboard kicked out "life" and "last";
the screen swept back two billion thoughts, reckoned
by the net in one eighth of a second.

"Last" [[Search](#)]

What the Blogotropes say

This is life at last:
it lasts a Life
when you live life to the last.
You can have a faster life,
a master life, an afterlife.
Why not make your profits last,
Your losses last
Lost Prophets last.
Learn when to make your ...
How to make your love last,
Your lust last,
You come last.
Make a marriage that will last
Let this marriage be your last:
Another woman saved your life
last night.
We make batteries that last and last;
We make power first and last
We can make your powers last,
flowers last, last hours last ...
When did you last change your life?
Get change from life?
Arrange your life?
Enjoy the good life last?
Draw up a last account?
You must sustain the chain of life
and get yourself an aim in life,
Design for Life.
And still you bear the pain of life
however long it lasts.

You're living with the lasting cost of care
You're in the last year of your life,

You're looking to give meaning
To your life's last days.
The last thing you will think of
is how life's made –
is life everlasting?
is it really life-size?
And the last thing you will think of
is the last man on Mars.

No! not this, no!
Is "now" and "fast"
more true than slow,
more real than past?
I want to know
What makes life last;
But clichés flow
like oil on glass:

<Search>

Treasuring each moment leaves us stronger -
that's how God can make our lives last longer.
... Now you can make lives last with consequence
playing Zombie Apocalypse Defence.
... Please donate freely here to spread the word
of godlessness to the living and interred.

It was so clear only a seer
who'd persevere more than my years
could engineer an answer here.
Could I be the line that veers?
At the bedside at the ebbside
"acceptance" is the golden rule,
the goal which gets us through,
the tool which can outwit the ghoul
that plays us for a grieving fool.
A quality which makes life last could be
anywhere – from sense up to infinity,
from culture, chemistry to my settee
from then to here, as far as we can see.
And how would I know what the search has missed?
if there's no answer? if answers exist?
Yes sure, death itself lends us no way back,
but life's, like white, the other side of black;
so if there are five stages in our grieving
might we stop the search where we could be leaving?
Grief's said to trail five steps behind the hearse
so why not follow grieving in reverse?
reject acceptance and the bargain stage,
then break depression and denial with rage?

The Mourning News – Acceptance

Last words aren't those our dear departed used,
they're not composed and muttered by a muse;
wise up: they're what the vigil-keepers choose.

... We're tuning in to the mourning news:
the razored questions, mouthwash views,
Westminster bruisers who cynically excuse
abuses by our spooks and snoopers,
a journalist who just can't listen
as he's too intent on pissing
off the guests who he's accused,
and a caller who's a bit obtuse.
There's a shot of politics at eight o five,
prompt and daily, tough and live
that ministers dare not refuse;
then the slot where young articulate smart-
arses ridicule the arts,
and a drab parade of boring farts
or someone skilled at baking tarts,
and spots for language to unravel
in outlandish sporting babble
sandwiched by a prayer and weather,
which somehow keep it all together.
This is the page that keeps accounts,
this is the field where the ball is bounced
this stage is where the critic flounced
and is momentarily renounced
because: "... *The death has been announced...*"

And suddenly the medium has pounced.
It happened just a moment ago
but reports will cover everything we know
and it will be as ever blow by blow.
His death will be a shock to those
who loved him and those not quite so close;
the fact that he'll be missed goes
without saying, almost, as the story flows
of a man who claimed the People were his bros.
We hear that he's a "national treasure",
a man of energy and leisure,
urbane and foul-mouthed under pressure,
mysterious and born in Asia,
(though some said Esher, others Cheshire),
arbiter of taste but styleless dresser
most charming when he played aggressor –
just a guy like us or
a saint in contemplation,
modest, shy on all the TV stations.
We bathed in hope and empty pleasure
and gave him ceaseless approbation
sweetened smugly with our indignation
at his apparent abnegation.

Flick

So I opened a door
and I came upon a heron on the lawn ...

Beyond the garden, lost in lanes,
stubble stumps and flails in far farm fields,
as if resisting some coming catastrophe.
Catsear grows dwarfed,
tucked into the grass out of sheepreach.
Yarrow, hawkbit, hemp agrimony,
the hangers on into October
are watching the landslope corrode or
the season flick a switch.
The landscape leans forward
it's all spaced and pinched for winter.
Though warmth and water weaken dying stems
everything now is food and sustenance,
the matter of who's eating whom.
Decay and advantage fall into balance;
mosses supersede the grass;
a new kingdom rules the lions and clowns:
its messages passed underground
on hidden threads that make connections
between acceptance and affection.
You can tell if your head's too close to the ground
when you can see shadows of birds and clouds.

... Yet when I came upon the heron on the lawn
I opened a door.

There's a place across fields heading for town
where dead people decompose underground;
studying the headstones there I found ...

The point

There's a problem ahead. We'll all soon be dead;
so it won't matter much whatever we've said.
And if in the end we're all going to croak
what's got more point: life? death? or a joke?
If we die yet influence the lives of others –
so what, when they too are all doomed snuffers?
Most of our achievements, if we've got them,
charm a generation till forgotten,
and memories of what we've been and done
in time will thin out to names etched in stone;
so who's to know that we had brains or hearts
if we're just dates on documents and charts?
When engraved names too succumb to weather
when we've become someone else's whatever
with our bones returned to the cells of plants
it won't matter then what we had in our pants.
All species fade, and mankind's extinction
could mean that you and I will lose distinction.
Yet might humans, godlike, some day disperse
to populate a neutral universe?
Will we feature then in heroic verses

or follow them on photos in their purses?

It's too late for me now to get into trouble,
so I've been pondering as I do most days
whether I should write the Great English Novel,
and if so what was left for me to say.
Then it occurs to me, as most days when I
ponder, that I too am going to die.
Though I grasp the logic of acceptance,
is there a hint of sadness and reluctance?
my jagged mind cranks down towards the chief
and second stage of self-defeating grief.

The Mourning News – Depression

A pall pulls down on his finale:
it lasts a while, we don't keep tally.
It's not as if we've been that pally,
we didn't know him well, not personally,
though we always thought he'd be our ally
if we'd tried to challenge
funding for the opera or ballet
an airport in the Severn Valley,
that Hailey's Comet's really "Halley's".
But today there'll be no rally:
last posts are drowning out reveille.
The death of someone with his aura
was also sure to draw a plethora
of tinsel tributes and afford a
darker border to his bright aurora;
and so while mourners wait on corners
broadcasters fall about to call a
friend, a fawning old explorer
who deplores the loss of fauna, flora
and a host of other fading causes.

By now the whole world wants to stake a claim
to share the pain and, by association, fame;
just speak his name and get in on the game.
There's no rationing the information.
Voices everywhere are crashing in,
hopeful they'll cash in by splashing
their untimely allegations.
Tweeters clamour to complain:
if they've been listening in the rain,
contentment and containment sound the same –
although Guantanamo's a shame.

Looking for answers, you may find the cost
is recovering ideas you didn't know were lost.
Depression holds you down so you can't get free
then drags your scraps inside the black settee.

Settee

I tend to find things which are difficult
to work out slip down the back of the settee.
You suspect they're there but just can't grab them:
instead there's a handful of grubby coins
whose value you exaggerate at first.
That's not what you hoped – compassion, purpose,
the capacity to communicate
without abstractions. These are out of reach, wedged
between a hidden rational framework
and upholstery's giving intuition.

I still recall three questions my son
has asked me to which there was no answer –
once when he was ten: "why did you leave home?"
why, at twenty-one, I had no words of praise,
then "how do you feel?" when my father died.
I'm sure he wanted more than information,
not this embroidered cushion conversation;
I fumbled and groped for something out of range
but all I offered was some lost loose change.

It's tough that all the stuff you feel down there
is real enough yet not what you suppose.
It may have been some use nine months ago
perhaps it solves a problem late next year.
But don't expect to put an end to doubt
about to what your life and death amount.
It may be wiser to discover nothing
than to find that nothing is worth knowing;
a sofa's disappointment's not a lesson
when it sucks you down in its depression.

2. Ghost stories

*The world is full of wisdom that's received;
can there be one of us who's not deceived?*

What are the stories which seep out of sleep
into half awareness, like TVs blathering
unattended in the abandoned nursing home;
I catch distorted syntax here and there
in vivid nonsequiturs just beyond
logic, aquatic voices in my head
which say I think I'm depressed, and I'm not.

Conversation with your ka

"My best advice is hide from your cars
since we gave them powers to know where we are;
our movements are also known by the stars,

their light is trying to prise us apart,”
says a man in a bar. “My ka is a void.
The universe chose me to be paranoid.

“Have you been in a room with papers blown?
seen too many people you already know?
stayed on till dawn to be the last to go?
put trust in friends? everyone, anyone, none?”
Online he sees his avatar avoid
him too, so maybe they’re both paranoid.

“Why should doors seem to open behind me?
Why do insects, birds and angels have wings?
How could they possibly know they’ll find me
when the phone in the shopping mall rings?”
It’s this kind of crap gets the bar annoyed:
does he want to make everyone paranoid?

“Can they tell for certain that I’m speaking?
and on what, since when, why, where and to whom?
Can I ever trust sunlight that’s sneaking
in crevices at the edge of my room?”
His friends stay indoors wearing polaroids –
and he thinks it’s just him who got paranoid?

“What made the world stay so warm for so long
if the sun’s nine minutes away from our berth,
unless there’s a force that’s equally strong
burning the dark at the core of the Earth?”
It’s physics that first got the stars deployed,
but in minutes he’s made them all paranoid.

“If you spend your life expecting to trace
evidence of who you are, you’ll erase
your footprints, your co-ordinates, your base,
and mirrors will spit back names in your face.”
Were microbes dispatched here by asteroid?
Is that why evolution got paranoid?

What are the stories spun in my mind
while I am sleep-waking into life?
Sure, psychology and neuroscience
might winkle out mechanisms, functions
from a quadrillion possible connections
in each of seven point three billion brains;
but pictures in mine spread like stains.

Mourners

We haven’t seen the sun these last two nights,
the sky’s black sponge has soaked away our lights.
Has our lust and greed blocked its return?
Will we put it right if we watch till dawn?

We haven’t seen the sun these last two days

our highways and distance are closed by haze;
it's the densest fog anyone can recall –
some say it prefigures the Kingdom's fall.

We haven't seen the sun this last two weeks.
There's a forlorn pall of which no one speaks
but sometimes clouds lighten a moment as though
an eye is watching, pressing to see through.

We haven't seen the sun these last two months –
our forecasters will pay for these affronts,
as ministers and speculators strive
for lies to help economies survive.

We haven't seen the sun these last two years;
silence and darkness amplify our fears,
But deep below ground our well-stocked cage
keeps our people safe from the surface rage.

We haven't seen the sun for two decades:
Loss and hope won't hurt when memory fades,
but they say we'll freeze, and we've heard we'll burn
since friends who ventured out did not return.

We've seen no sun these two generations.
and we can't endure on failing rations –
our young men say we should storm the stores,
share out the food, take our future by force.

Our ancestors died while they watched the sun,
and growth is too precious to let time run;
we must mine, and make, and consume to escape;
our greed must be the future of the race.

What are the stories that come when I'm engaged
elsewhere, negotiating with demanding nerves,
mediating for eyes, throat, limbs and organs
prying for insider knowledge, doing
opportunistic deals to buy more time.
The spider slips into the folds of my brain
its bargain is nothing, or fear and pain.

The Mourning News – Bargaining

And all news now becomes obituary.
Normal service has somewhere gone awry;
distain and pain is not how listeners align
since everyone suddenly wants to supply
their ideas of what it must be like to die.

Researchers at an uptight university
report today how differently
we'd live without philosophy;
they speak in deep opacity
as if there were proximity

in being dead and being free.
Someone says when molecules are parted
from the recently departed
they rarely travel far from where they started,
and so, sic transit Gloria,
residents near crematoria
must inhale us in memoria.
Now the Pope and ayatollahs chime,
archbishops, patriarchs and rabbis mime,
address their childlike worlds in rhyme,
ascribe our stint to a tunnel in time.
We're all going down, all on a slide,
despite the warnings in their guides.
Honest doubt is fine or, maybe, a crime,
but most of all don't touch the sides –
the moss may turn your fingers green,
and rub our noses up against the grain.
The price we pay may fall or rise
as we glide away sideways inside.
So let's be sure, His Holiness implores,
before we board that train:
life may be the Grotto Azure,
but it could be a drain.
And by the by, this dead celebrity
would seem to be a real cool guy –
the Vatican's immediately applied
its influence to get him sanctified.
Biography and history are crap
says a man deemed old by virtue of his hat
who never made it as a diplomat.
The past is a parameter, simple as that:
we can go back only just so far
and still accept the thing we are.

Flying kites

We have the power to make you and take you away;
we relish our control, the puppeteer holds sway;
and yet we wonder at your curves and dives
and envy your freedom, your mastery of skies.
We are your playwrights – we feed you lines –
but stage lights and sets are your designs.

The sharp-toothed valley bites the air and sings
as we slice at heaven with whistling strings
and cut the bellies of clouds, spilling rain
like a fall of angels both good and malign.
Though we can't be sure what you are, windspite,
we'll face the demons who dance on our kites.

What are these stories recycled as myths?
these childhood lessons in pride, vengeance, death?
Morality tales, timeless as stones,

relayed forever in our veins and bones.
When history's too early for survivors
it still burns in the hearths of its admirers
as crimes against justice, flawed redemption
and shedding of blood without exemption.
But whose moral code? And whose mindless scores
are used to confuse their purpose and cause?
We know for sure veracity is skewed
when corpses are piled for their point of view.

Dinner with Chris

Cromwell, Churchill, Thatcher claimed the past,
and climbed on wardead for their names to last.

Blasphemer Marlowe who lies for the state,
is plotting at Deptford, drinking with fate.
He's asked: "Will you have to go underground,
to give the Stratford hack your drama crown
while you scribe with his name the next twenty years?"
"I'd rather die than yield fame to Shakespeare,"
he slurs. "Wait. I fear friends here mean me ill.
Please excuse me while I settle the bill."

"Why build a pyramid, o Lord Khufu?"
"There's a journey to make," the grave replies.
"When the last stone's laid it will touch the skies."
But his smile says: "So, you know of me, do you?"

What are these stories parading as dreams?
Are they unconscious reassurance, streams
of underground miscellanies for me
to wash away the pain of memory?
Is the self-awareness which makes us humans
so unbearable that our brains must groom us,
make deals and restorations overnight
till we next face the awful waking light?
How am I so broken? What would be undone
if my mind ever made its secrets known?
I'd give anything not to cross that line:
So I'll live in your fears if you'll sleep with mine.

Pulling our selves together

I passed Bob Dylan coming out of the john
hollow-eyed, love sick, anger almost gone.
I told a friend who claimed he'd almost met him,
and he knew someone else who Bob let in.

We are so free and loose and lost and lone
that only heroes spilt by cars or guns
can make a reeling nation act as one.
We blink, as they did, then another's gone.

Their deaths are strange, but living's stranger.
Not even DNA is what it seems;
though it may survive, there's hidden danger:
we're dead before we find out what it means.

We're trapped in darkness, figments fill our dreams,
commanding and commanded by our genes;
So why's predestination such a crock
if an earthquake stops my watch at twelve o'clock?

Life's a sprawl. It's not a spurt.
You go to school, you stay alert:
you want to win, you learn to flirt;
you play the fool, you lose your shirt.
You try to rise above the dirt.
But no one says old age will hurt.

There's a pulse that waves us onward from our birth,
a ripple of electrons through the earth,
it's pushing everything towards one end,
though not what these synaptic ghosts intend.

Growth forges knowledge; knowing drives decay;
pain sharpens its claws on our nerves each day.
The only hell which might still make sense is
living forever and missing the census.

All over the world people think they've seen
doors slamming shut on Zimmerman's latrine.
But Christ, aren't we all thin women and men
pretending we can tell what's going on?

So if all you live for is to criticise,
show us naked as someone to despise,
tough luck, you'll have to join the fucking queue.
Our pants are down, and we might agree with you.

What are these stories I read if not lies
by people who lead, sell, write or advise?
Aren't they the fictions of those who hold power
applied to mislead, though some lies are purer
than others – dishonesty compromised
by good intent, deception improvised
by figures of trust whose condescension
wins our approval and quells dissent.
They might as well have told me white was black
while whoring wishful thinking out as fact;
and so denying me respect has left
a grievance easily as deep as theft.

The Mourning News – Denial

An entomologist sends his respects,
reflects that a rarer insect yet

was moved when its habitat
came under threat
(common wood ants won't confess
that they've remained emotionless).
Only the queen can reproduce
which clearly can't excuse
a migrant mass of half a million males
who followed on behind and on the loose.
It couldn't happen on a human scale.

The PM, blowing in on a popular gale,
has nailed the skill to aimlessly flail
against some group beyond the pale
and shrill the cherished values they assail,
while wearing chain mail behind a wall,
Today the risk is less that he will fall,
so he joins the caterwaul
and sends condolences to all.
But just in case, he vows that he will drill for shale
or save the whale or never bail
against the migrants, even if our borders fail.
His rival, the mayor's a classical scholar,
a rotter from another Oxford college;
he drops the PM in a spot of bother
with hints that he's a tedious plodder
who understands rather less than nolla
and famously gets hot on the collar
when other fellows can't follow his thread.
He's setting teasers for our leader
to test his neoclassical cred:
Shakespeare's the wallah we're led
to believe went out, got fed, got drunk, got red
got wet, got chilled, got ill, then dead,
and left his wife his second best bed;
Socrates was hemlocked, but could have fled;
Aeschylus was silenced, tortoise on head;
for Shelley and Keats it was loss of breath
while Byron purposefully bled.
So, what tells us more of what's ahead –
the things they said?
or the fatuous way each lost his head?

Superlatives get adjectival,
and the speed at which this death goes viral
is on an endless upward spiral
without a single lifetime rival.
Even those who hadn't known his name insist
his funeral's to be a public fest
The civic grip on this deceased
means his corpse can't be released –
he could have hardly been more pleased
if he hadn't been diseased.
And yet, communities
of scientists are cheesed
on behalf of the bereaved
that the admitted oddities

of their ideas are squeezed
right out of these formalities.
it seems that matter has by stealth,
they say, found a way to be self-
organised, which is good for making life;
meanwhile chaos, entropy and strife
feed off the same equations
which while less satisfactory for health
is helpful for artistic installations.
A stringtheorist too phones in with a sting:
there really are angels that dance and spin
in trillions on the head of a pin –
they've been there since the dawn of time
to argue for intelligent design.
While he thinks that nothing that can be can sin,
we'll have to take it on the chin
that Hell might be activity within Within.

False accounting

A trick cyclist has one wheel.
A psychiatrist can't fix a bicycle.
A tricolour plays in three bands,
on two boundaries across one border.
A lama has four legs, and rear legs.
A starfish has five extensions
and unknown intentions.
Six quid buys you a dying octopus.
The Severn receives income
from tributaries and bores.
The spider had one web and ate husbands.
The politician is a fatcat with nine lies.
about innocence too tense to score.
You need to see elves
in elevens or twelves
to be sure.
Thirteen bankers lent bikes against a wall.
And made much more.

What are these stories we hear in the car,
the scrap of discussion, a snippet of news?
(Tuning in late we're unsure where we are.)
We go to a meeting, we read the reviews.
That night we drink and drown in noise at the bar -
half-heard half-truths, sounds our minds won't lose,
crashed half-facts bedded deeper than scars.
Were they true or false? Our heads have to choose.
Like uncertain diplomats they'll lie all
night; nothing says "true" like a quick denial.
Whatever reason can there be to grieve
when there's nothing left for us to believe?

Making Road Movies

The screenwriter whines:

Today I found myself inside my own
road movie, reflecting everything in sight;
tarmac poured with gleaming grills, car doors
in sprays of morning light. Here there's a smile
that races like a snail across my face;
road noise dies, a CD laser glides,
the place I'm heading lies as far as I can go

A director signs:

Don't question me
if I can see
gravestones on the skyline;
no route between
symbol and scene
blinds you like your eyeline.

The producer opines:

Got yourself a fucking road movie, right?
Can't ever sleep, and you still can't write?
Aren't your aims like motel walls too slight?
Is this the only way you can pass the night?

And so the actor mimes as she declines.

What are these stories conning me as news?
Inference, deception, control, abuse?
And these falsehoods you're telling me now?
You need them anyhow, doubt's not allowed
in this godawful babble that we share
to dull our fury and fill vacant air.
Why? How can this vital force clock off?
memory, reason, purpose, love just stop?
How can everyone known, one by one, pause, pop –
it's a snatched arcade game preset to drop
us to oblivion, break every rule,
and in an instant take back all our jewels.
But I'm damned if I'll buy hope on a metre
while I can still measure the earth in feet,
and while there's love I'll travel to meet her
as far as Mars if that makes us complete.
Your truth is a wish, your trust is imprisoned,
so shut the fuck up, and for once just listen:
Death is a bastard, and life it isn't.

The Mourning News – Anger

Now some clown unleashes fears to hound us:
“We can't allow those work-grab westward-bounders

in here unless, until our health care flounders.
 We need our uppers and our downers."
 This witless politician doesn't get "discussion"
 or why the miseries of dead celebrities
 should get more coverage than his;
 he lands a million listeners with concussion
 confusing self-importance with compassion
 while wearing his rejection like a fashion;
 "Taxation is an evil sent to saint us;
 if you're not with us you're against us,"
 says the Minister for Not The Faintest.
 Statistics fly with witches to confound us
 when a mum in fury counters
 it's the state not her which should astound us.
 She's also on her uppers and her downers
 and feeds her kids on quarter pounders,
 while banking's snakes and ladders played by scroungers.
 She says the numbers are a fiction –
 almost boundless in the countless
 shades of their unsoundness –
 like a spaceship, upsidegroundless.
 It's the facts that makes her madder,
 fire her disaffection
 with government's addiction to distraction.
 The instant audience reaction
 is outrage at her lack of tact and
 disrespectful plea for action
 while a man lies dead in his perfection:
 so they demand her obviously fractious
 children are put in care for her infraction.

Wild last words pour down like water,
 storms of words, words in chorus.
 Words as adjectives and verbs and nouns,
 words insignificant and words renowned,
 new forms of words, unknown, unfound
 and swarms of words that swirl you round,
 dull leaden words, waste coffee grounds
 words with meanings sunk and drowned:
 so many words until the morning's run aground ...

It's already 9am here
 and the news like mist is going off the air.
 Next is a phone-in for people who care
 which one of the Dimblebys will chair;
 there's a helpline for joy, another for prayer,
 and Twitter's the place to go to share
 the emptiness spilling out everywhere.
 Then for those with pain they still can't bear
 there's a brand new channel for rolling despair.
 But tonight there'll be more serious fare -
 an in-depth probe on his life will dare
 to ask *if you die of fame is it fair?*
and was there really anybody there?

I ached and shook a fist at someone else,
then turned and found I was talking to myself.

Passing

I'll never accept this mealy-mouthed fest,
the "passing" of relatives, friends "at rest",
the warm euphemism of remembrance –
in case we betray that priestly licence
to mangle living memory, and maul
our capacity to know them at all.

Just at the point we're clawing for meaning
we're suffocated by the preachers' preening:
vacuity that validates delusion,
curtains closed to simulate conclusion
to the real life rolled silently away.
Someone, please say, who do I have to pay
to bring an end to this vampiracy
that makes believers prey on our dis-ease?

I'm sickened by that bear's bloody bandage,
that slack black armband round our knowledge,
not because we need to revel in death,
not to complain, to confide or confess –
but damn you all, and damn your hellish haste
to eliminate my feelings from this waste.

Weighing souls

It's naïve to believe that our sole loss
of bodyweight is what leaves as shit and piss.
There are bits dropping off us all the time
in front of pitying families, in sight
of embarrassed friends and grossed-out workmates:
the falling hairs from balding pates, the slake
salt solution wiped off our necks as sweat,
the tears and crystals scraped from sleep-caked eyes,
scabs and skin cells, tumbling by millions like
demons into hell, sebaceous oozings
from our slimy flesh beyond our choosing,
earwax in lava flows, dead mites, and semen,
gases and vapour, spittle, mucus, phlegm,
the flush of dead eggs, the lining of wombs,
platelets, and sorry seepages from wounds,
and after-births with life's unique completions.
They're all real and measurable excretions.
Then what of weight loss when life goes down the bowl?
How is it no one ever weighed a soul?

3. A death in the family

You'd better believe it,
Death is always sudden, brutal, violent –
at least that's how the body sees it.
The anatomical change proceeds in silence.
though the last sense is hearing, the family throng
whispering: "He's going now – it won't be long."

A surgeon took the family aside
to say my father had a year to die:
"There's nothing more that doctors can contrive
to keep this mainly healthy man alive."
They sent him home with drugs to make him fat:
his casenote tautology said that was that.

Don't mock the bombers' virgin paradise –
they're *dead*, not disappointed by their vice,
(our angels too are hypothetical –
so which to choose?). And how typical
we believe men who opt to splay their guts
are driven to this madness not by rage but lust.
The problem's not their liquid motivation
but our own crusted dry imagination.

Each day he took his snappy dog
and climbed the windmill hill
contemptuous of rain and fog
and anything that might do him ill.
Did it keep the dog alive?
It did a while.
Did the climbing keep him fit?
Did it shit!
Would he stop what he wanted to do?
Was someone going to tell him no?
No, not even if we'd known.
Was he going to stick to Horlicks?
Was he going to touch his forelocks?
Was he bollocks!
Even if we'd argued and debated
on what gets cells deregulated,
even if we'd pressed and questioned
his guts would still have ganged against him.

I was young driving the interstate
flicking midges and flies with wiper blades,
before I took a turn down lanes where a skunk
misapplied escape with its clichéd stench
of death against my chassis' sudden club.
Once I had a bird on my car's bench seat;
it blew in like a crude innuendo,
flightpaths that met at my open window;
its loss of breath and fluids went unseen.
The future of two small girls I'd known
was jettisoned in one cursed moment

when their dad's car turned a bend on a road
and met a coalman who'd stopped to unload.
A much-beloved dog who died in our arms
learned too late that freedom can do you harm.

Although the pain drove in like splinters
he only once spoke with bitterness
against the great shrivelling disease
that assigned his non-renewable lease,
and laid him imperceptibly,
uncomplainingly low
like a fresh coat of snow on the road.
When we walked, spring plants
surprised the sleeping woods,
summer showed off its goods
and autumn tinted our moods.
When we talked it was of items
we needed carefully defined,
to bypass what we both had in mind
and so we made the conversation rattle
on relatives and war,
tools used by engineers
and naming of wild flowers,
things we cared for, not idle prattle.
His last affecting words were respectful
of the Chancellor of the Exchequer:
it was our deal not to make him reveal
the ache of keeping everything concealed.

Death's a dread and wrecked absurdity
that deals with living things it catches napping
with specialisms in impurities
and disasters which can't wait to happen –
it operates with written policies
to mine for pain and inequality
it largely gets its way with harassment
and by disregarding risk assessment.
It gathers wreckage up like tsunamis
and drowns abstractions and lovers of peace;
so even when there's "good" dumped in the silt
we still feel loss, and guilt in relief of guilt.

Death's a bloody outrage on us all,
shouldn't we resist it like terror and war?
It's not just the gulp of bodies stilled,
but the family which secretly withdraws,
missing the terror that fills your eyes
as they discuss the time of your demise.
Is there any place for truth if you lie
to a man you love when he's about to die?

We waited for "herb wilson"
to break out among hedgerows
so we could laugh about the fiction
of my dad's own common name

for a common enough pink flower,
and a term for something we couldn't say.
Did he have a mate when he was young?
I never asked. A lad called Herbert Wilson?
Was he a guy who didn't make it back
from war or someone who drowned,
plastered, in the pool, in the dock,
in that treacherous brackish marsh?
Was he just an empty desk
in a rowdy village school,
here one day and gone the next,
mangled by memory, regrets
and some other wasting sickness?
Was this a friend everyone loved and missed?
My father found Herb Wilson everywhere
but never told us what he'd lost.

An end, maybe, rewards endurance.
It's sometimes just a disappearance
that takes survivors unawares,
leaves an imprint in the chairs;
we see the shadows in the halls
hear a voice whenever someone calls.
Ends are artless – out of order,
beyond communication or the
reciprocity life infers;
we can't create what just occurs.

He didn't resist or speak of death, and didn't betray life either.
Though he sometimes stood in the way of stupidity and officiousness,
he always knew when to step aside and still refused a little while longer.
When he grew too weak to walk he'd rant at shop assistants or attendants;
he bore their obstructions the way he expected them to suffer his.
But when he'd been eaten away two years or so even he was ready to go.

Down among brickwalled photoshopped bowers
the mourners shuffled off to view dead flowers;
crematorium staff would lay to rest
the mess, while grounds fenced off the wilderness
and priests drew lines they refused to cross,
saying our choice is always god or dross.

He didn't prize pillowed apologies,
featherweight metaphors or pleas.
And the poor bugger's breath had to seize
to get a eulogy at last from me.
It's anger not grief that stanching my cry
the day I watched my father die.

The man who works the shutter sighs
at the photo's perfect boundaries
between the object, its image and sight;
he paints frontiers dividing dark and light
pixels and pixels between one and nil,
between imagination and his will.
There are so many edges that even

endings themselves become inconclusive;
if Hell existed we'd need to know which way
to go and how to separate each shade;
we'd need these photographs so we could see
anything that's left after the memory.

4. The search for life in the universe

*Solutions to what makes life last
lie in the future, not the past.*

Darkness

One day in the slow lens of entropy,
when we come to upend the reason why
believers must save souls and prove myths true,
forgiveness may become our province too.
The powerless may need to trust salvation,
but what redeems the men of education?
– those who impoverish philosophy
with god, emaciate our history,
mistrust ideas like superstitious serfs,
make sex and all they can't control a curse,
and passively at best accommodate
the science and discoveries they hate.
Their sole and limpet talent is to scour
society for influence and power.
We hope – not pray – they'll some day light a spark,
that blasts their mutant magic off the park.

Distractions

Now even still desert stones can be traced
on pixels captured in the dark of space.
Down here rabbits, voles know which way to crash,
bees dance, ravens croak a route to the trash;
we struggle to follow sheep runs on hills,
yet roads would chase us were we slugs and snails
and, next day, at least we'd know where we'd been.
But there's no road map, not even a line
to join up ideas on the so-called net.
The pathways of a species' thoughts are as yet
as shapeless as water running in sand,
as closed as capillaries holding my hand.
Though navigation's what we do with tracks
there's still no link from opinions to facts:
sure, there's always someone to tell us where,
but who rides the hyperlinks? and who cares?

The discovery of life

Earth
is the one place we know of death and birth.
So forget the stories, toss out the maps
of roads in forests, lost paths and broken tracks;

make memories, instead, with trunks and rocks,
find sites that poetry is yet to trap.
Snapped branches flag a new way through the weave:
beneath their cardboard and corroded bark
are a billion mirrors of my cells at work
that replicate themselves from air we breathe.
Swifts and midges skit; stitchworts cloud lanes white,
then heaths drip gold with gorse and broom,
lakes paint themselves with blue-green algae bloom
and every slime-smeared surface comes alight.
Moving closer our glass would discover
all sex is wet and flimsy for the ferns;
air and earth are fungi's main concerns,
all five kingdoms train their fire on others.

Life fills the planet, finds footholds discreet
for each landscape zone and every species,
breeding for brutalities and beauties
with animal experiments and secret
GM trials that sneak in jealousy and lust.
We can't possibly know what happens when
this macrocosm interacts with man
and frightened toxic sprays kill weeds and trust;
we're all too busy felling dying trees
or splashing daffodils down urban roads
to notice wolves that circle in the wood
and doctors losing catch-up with disease.
Maybe we're due for coral and fungi
to evolve powers of independent thought or
for plankton cells to hydrolyse water:
all things alive aspire to reach the sky.

Time shifts and shades the graph that plots the line
that life might take. Its plentiful supply
implies design's not in the speed of light
but in the trails of mist it leaves behind.

Blind speculation

Let's speculate that life's direction, drive,
is to discover life. So were we flung out wide
and distant from home to this blue backwater?
Challenged? or abandoned to self-slaughter?
Is it the mission of our fumbling myths
(McCartney, Moses, and Odysseus)
to help us to wind our way back homeward
to somewhere lost – not an escape but an end?
Was this blind imperative planted, then
crystallised, borne in some comet's icy core,
an accident of art, or angel-wise?
Is this what Oedipus saw, gouging his eyes?
Oh ye gods, could it be we've been here before?

First light

I once thought that we were divining for Truth,

with Shakespeare, Einstein, Mandela, Camus.
But that's not it. We're winnowing for life.
The truth can't save worlds governed by grief,
while God gives instructions to think it right,
or unmask fumbling priests who snuffed the lights,
when loves and longings were all oiled by lies,
and Redemption arrived wielding a scythe.
Even now the shamans smuggle this lonely stub
of space-borne rubble stuck out at the nub-
end of our galaxy – and with it Sin -
to stand it heartless at the heart of things.
So here with Hubble and SETI we're stayed
sweeping exo-worlds for new DNA.

And meanwhile ...

Dawn

Dawn is like being born each day
cries suddenly bursts free
dawn is like your first few steps
above your tiny fenced-in space
you can see trees and clouds and sky
dawn comes in like words and speech
all you see takes adjectives and names
formless chaos comes within reach
dawn is like getting the point of Donne
complexity falls into place
you stand and wonder at the firmament
dawn is like sex
colours flood the monochrome
make the solid ground flex.
But dawn's a lesson for everyone:
the moment it arrives it's gone.

Mars

leaving Earth we feel small now,
brilliant, superior, infinitely curious,
but weak, dependent, divided,
inconsolably solitary.
there's no wonder so many human hopes
are pinned on finding life beyond our home;
it could help make sense of the way we are,
help us to feel
a part of something, and also less apart.
the first step is to take our search to Mars
live in real time with human eyes.
and if, when we get there, what we find –
despite the worm in the meteorite
despite the aquifers and CO2
despite a surface sometimes at twenty degrees –
what we find is nothing,
we will still know this is a slight first step
and we will always be capable of more.

then when we finally establish to our satisfaction
that there never was life (apart from ours)
in this chilling desolate outpost
where the sun is a pale watery disc
half the size we see on Earth,
and that, probably, it never existed
elsewhere in the solar system,
how will we feel?
after the months of travel
with only exercise and sleep to keep us sane
in a life-support capsule with paper-thin walls
padded to catch the radiation
what could we possibly feel?
early travellers are not expected to return;
they will stay to fabricate
airtight caves with artificial twilight,
to grow plants for food and oxygen
and recreate the weather;
they will stay to terraform the land,
making soil and atmosphere from rocks and water;
they will learn what it means to conserve,
that nothing must ever escape or be destroyed.
that's how Earth people will come to stand
in the observatory at the mouth of their cave
or gazing in awe as new world explorers
at the unmeasured edge of Valles Marineris,
contained by dust and that insipid pink sky
but freed by distance and technology to imagine more.
They will be looking out on a vast uninterrupted horizon,
and looking out for life,
powered by knowledge and the understanding
that they are utterly indescribably incalculably alone
and that they must be the next to make life last.

What kind of answer is that? she asked.

"A very carefully considered one," I said, honestly thinking I'd given a tough assignment a fair shot.

"But it doesn't answer the question. It doesn't answer any question." she protested.

WHAT MAKES LIFE LAST is a self-contained section of a longer work in progress, *The Last Orchid*. It has been edited slightly to remove references to this wider context. MW