

skin tight the sidewalk

martin daws

Skin Tight The Sidewalk

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coed y parc 2008

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bridging our divisions with rhythm we pull together

TAX

(a n o l d s k o o l h i p h o p p o e m)

the beat was heavy heavy heavy heavy

heavy with the weight of a bulldozer

hittin' a south bronx tenement (12 years previous)

it was compulsory purchase **heavy**

architect's abstract drawin' board **heavy**

bulldozers rippin' the heart out of the place

layin' a freeway to butterfly over the ghetto

heavy

hittin' the boogie down with a mid-town sky bomb

pressin' upon the planet 'til the people

e x p l o d

and its reverberations

would make the whole world crush

as the first act hits the stage.

step up, step up, step up, ladies and gentlemen,
gather round, gather round, tonight
martin daws proudly presents to you
- the post-colonial identification show;
look on in wonder as the hulking body
posture of his nordic ancestors morphs into
the hip rolling swagger of a street corner
hustler, laugh as his dialect slips from
mother tongue to city slum - **ya get me?** -
be amazed as his invisible white centrality
and unacknowledged non-ethnicity are
kicked to the kerb by a blur of shell-top
up-rock and give thanks as his inherited
assumptions of english cultural dominance
are shredded between two revolving wheels of steel.

smoke **heavy** seventeen
and
music is my **religion**;
a microphone my **chalice**
twin technics my **altar**
a **graffitified** subway
my sunday mornin' **church**
new york is my **jerusalem**
KRS1 my **God**
and **Chuck D**
his prophet of rage

it was search lights and sistas
foghorns and sirens
S1Ws and black hot body heat
it was

'yeah boyee'

and

'brothas and sisters'

rewirin' the system to take
digital bass
and we hard rocked the house
(like you wouldn't believe)

meltin' in the fire
of the dope noise
funk

of it
we made molten
soul

come runnin'
down the
beat

in a **wave** that **reared**
over the odeon stage
catchin' LL Cool J naked,
sweat shined
bare muscled back
shaggin' the sofa
dollar bill indentured
singin' - i need love

and we crashed on jack the rapper
in a storm of holsten pils bottles
that rained out of the ether
on his **soul shocked head**

and the silence that followed
was more profound than the music

yo red

a one poem play

characters:

me: a young soul music lover from surrey.

him: an older street hustler from south chicago.

ancestors:

ext:

the asteroid belt set as a busy south chicago street. people, traffic, conversation, bright coloured clothes in shop windows, the smell of fried food, the sound of a blues band playing outside a record store. him is stage centre watching the street scene from a storefront. me enters stage left with curly red hair, looking most alien to this place.

h: yo red

m: I kept walkin'
fresh face frozen
masque set to cast
quick sideways glances
– and don't look back

h: yo red

m: I kept walkin'
skin tight the sidewalk
whispers linger sinister

h: (Imitating other voices)
wot u doin' down here?
keep walkin' red boy
(sung) "man on the street
gotta make ends meet"

m: gold gilt chains
hot dice games
and knife scars
dirty addict habits
fix yellow dyed slits
on a \$5 redemption,
mine for 10 bucks,
so I can dance drunk
to the hit
from a sucker punch,

and we can smoke crack
out the back
of his gun barrel, sing
“what’s goin’ on” together
and cry at the high notes
the sidewalk washin’
with kerosene dreams
and we’re all
goin’ to get along just fine,
aren’t we?
I mean, I represent – don’t i?

h: (sung) “man on the street
gotta make ends meet,
man on the street
gotta find ways to eat”

m: I’m a barefoot pilgrim
in shell top trainers
a vinyl disciple
on my knees diggin’ deep
through crate racks of flat
black 2nd hand soul plates
I DJ to re-present
to recreate soul feelin’

and when the needle
hits the groove
just for a moment,

I'm saved from myself.
the closed door of identity
dissolves into sounds
flowin' free together
where people all stream
as one and I'm f l y i n ' ,
on wings of wax
too close to the sun

h: yo red

m: I never meant to be anythin'
but funky

h: yo red

m: when the music hits
I feel no pain

h: yo red

m: this aint london
this aint liverpool
this aint cardiff
this is sunday chicago
slow bump up and hustle
I'm swimming'
the southside shallows
way out of my depth,
shark feared, bottomless

with no defence but faith
against up close
ghetto in my face

h: (loud) YO RED

m: what?

h: are you Australian?

m: no mate, I'm from london.
how long have I got
before I get shot?

enter ancestors. time stands still as they circle around
the two men.

h: t-t-t-take it easy red,
you gotsta-sta-sta stop
being so paranoid.
here, you hold the knife.

t h e e n d .

river song

she sings to me,
g e n t l i n g
the slow lap of the years,
moon held in her cup
with sighs of love,

ushered in on breath tides
rippling liquid whispers,
half heard histories
washing

south bank stone

to sand

to sea

to memory

a city.....

the pool lies full
with masts of merchant ships

**and money flows like blood,
is blood,**

but held more dear by many.

a
surfeit
of spires
appease
grandees
pious guilt,
spear prayers
for a christian ship's
safe passage home,

taking

afrikan to field,

taking

cotton to the loom,

taking

linen to the altar,

singing praise be to god.

building docks for the landing,
banks for the blessing, churches for the glory

singing praise be to god.

**gold
gilt
on a cross
wrought
Of
greed
laid
over
fear**

on which we hang the martyred body of our love.

christ's
tears
fall
salt
in mother's milk

washed down
by simple rain
with soho sweat
and fleet ditch scourge
to course her body

and **she** is

life

and **she** is

soul

to this city

and she sings to me
through the shifting tide of restless people
a soft lament for time's sweet passing
in which my place is told

and so she is
as ever she was
gentling the slow lap of the years

view from parc

(for peter prendergast)

life class

look hard
look harder

look into the shadow

look into the scratch

the mark we make in time

look into the bone begetting

press and beat of womb

look into the dark

hidden memory of stone

cut the skin
push your face into the rock

take its form inside you

blood the broken blocks of it
your mother's charms run hard here

no sweet soft haven of flesh
or dimpled arms open

deep into the granite
fear upon your face

crows caw plaintive hunger

for your grave

you crawl under their shadow

there's no escape

from self here

naked in the mountain

feel the weight within your hands

stand and scream in silence

to pull your lines out of the abyss

this is no watercolour
dilettante parlour art show

this is where visions are quarried

from fallen souls
and bodies get broken
for the light to shine
within

oriel mostyn

I came back to town with infinity in my eyes
the buildings on Vaughn St toys from a train set
the cars a little boys push-a-long-push-a-along
the sky fenced in by the gutters and split slates
and the sadness lying on me like a rain

why so sad when I hardly knew him ?
less than an acquaintance / just a name
an artist I modelled for once or twice

in a charity shop I tried on a pair of his trousers
and remembered undressing before his class
it was always cold the students expectant
as we journeyed through privacy to the public eye
the atmosphere sharp with an intimate anonymity

in the mirror the sadness swelled like the sea
and then I knew what I was feeling
it was the mourning of the mountains for his gaze
the sadness of his subjects
now the painter's eye had passed

devil's kitchen

only spirit will speak today
falsehood will break
on these rocks
like thin cotton and lies
spin whistling
lost into the wind

artists will explode here
in a wild way of seeing
while poets stand silent

rain closes
the sky on future
time folds compressed
inside this jagged edge
that breaks horizons
jerks them close

in shards of hard fire frozen
scraping sky with molten memories
and slow held grace

so old so old beyond counting
aching every second still
life unto the mother born
on broken stone and oceans echo
the murmuring shade

sing light sing light

feel this line bow bass beneath our blood

sing light sing light

language naked across the great slabs

sing light sing light

let love release the silent song of free

push on
be true
see close
stay strong

pray
no lies to look
upon the mountains
that you make

the sound of the city hum

switch flickin' cracklin' filament fizzle
multiplied by millions of micro-sonic cell
patterns in electrocute energy backin' audible
sizzle of fridges chill buzz seepin' phonic
pollutant depletin' silence like ozone (breath)
interval quickened accumulated acoustic
audio monotone makin' ambient increment
added to tickin' titened tempo frequency
pickin' time up from natural to rigid
mechanical repetition without flow (breath)
helicopter hammer strokes hittin' decibel
pockets peak parameters punchin'
concussive air into bullets impactin' intimate
signals subtle contaminated subconscious
confusion of patterns type infiltrated by sound
spill (breath) motor engines turnin' cut metal
on wailin' people scrapin' pavement
cacophony pressin' close up overwhelmin'
wave ricochets hit receivers compacted mass
random dissonant density sliced by sirens
pitched to penetrate gun shots sharp crack
(breath) and cut (breath) through flesh

**there is
no silence**

only the
inability to listen

inconceivable city hum
screams submerged in city hum
infiltratin' city hum
senses swamped in city hum
nameless noise of city hum
shuffle crunch of shoe soles hum
pitter patter poly-rhythm
buildin' mass of city hum
hittin' pavement chaos hum
crush collidin' city hum
feet on foot on more steps
numbers pounding

the sound of the city hum

jump

a at that time i lived in a 12th floor ex-smack doss with cheap rent, great views and a bad reputation. the architecture was cold war, and 2 my ex-suburban mind set it was incredibly hip — ghetto without the gun wounds — just the way i liked it. walking in past the seedy security guards on the ground floor and stepping into the disinfected aluminium lift was like a journey to truth 4 me. as we rattled upwards the social masques and ill fitted insecurities of the street would fall away with each floor, and i'd step out onto the rubber non-slip landing of the 12th clean without the nonsense. i mean, there was no one there to nonsense to, except the pigeons, and myself of course.

i loved my balcony, it was the best thing about that flat. the 12 storey drop over the railing was vertigo inducing but you got used to it, and that deep distance sheathed the knife edge of the streets. i'd stand out there watching

the world below like it was reality t.v., the Low Rent High Rise white trash ghetto show that bites like the lice and leaves you itching for the next episode. tension pitched the air like exhaust fumes drifting between the prostitutes and addicts and boarded up buildings. shudders of poverty ran so deep through the place even the children seemed like veterans of a lost civil war, left abandoned to pick through derelict histories in a broken glass playground where boys become soldiers and girls become pregnant. back alleys blazed with kids torching their youth in litter bins and skips, running from the law and the owners of lost cars. pensioners shrank behind their bungalow windows, waiting to die in the shroud of their memories, or else made a proud last stand at their front garden gates watching their blood lines entwine like roots in the earth.

3 minutes later the front door on the flat next to mine slams shut and i hear a women's muffled sobs. i know she's called Naomi because i hear Gary shouting it at her about 5 times a day. i leave her to it and step back out on the balcony.

Gary's keys clink in the lock and the door swings open and slams hard shut, its thud fading into his heavy footsteps shaking the concrete slab beneath us. his voice heaves gale forced lifting magazines, overturning the coffee table, windows blow open curtains waving in distress as Gary's pent up rage licks the ceiling with flame. Naomi backs up against the balcony door as he slaps her hard across the face and her scream knocks a hole in the plasterboard wall between us, but i don't look through the opening. I'm on the balcony, eyes down hearing Gary's heavy breath scratching at the wall and his clenched fist punches Naomi in the gut knocking more holes in it and i look through quick at the scraps of their bodies writhing in conflict. i want to help Naomi, but i'm scared of Gary. Naomi screams again and the windows crack and i know i must do something, but i make a cowards decision; i'll call the security. i run in the flat, get my phone and run back out to the balcony, but the security downstairs don't answer. its just, Naomi and Gary and me and the thin wall breaking and her screams shattering the glass in my windows and their balcony door bursts open next

to me and Naomi flies out followed by Gary. her highlights tangle over her thin young face and she's telling Gary to stop but he's grabbed her and he's pushing her back against the balcony rail his bleeding face twisting and Naomi's fighting to get free of him thrashing her arms and kicking at his legs but she can't break his grip, and he's close up against her with his arms round her waist lifting her up and turning her over to face the drop and i can see her face, her eyes wide with terror and he lifts her higher, almost over the rail and her mouth opens a black hole about to implode sucking me in and i run to her to help her and run to her to save her and I jump from my balcony across the chasm between us and she screams again, but this time in horror, as i grab at the rail of her balcony and miss it, and my stomach feels weightless but really i'm heavy

I'm falling. falling faster through my heart beat, my brain expanding beyond fear into acceptance and i don't realise it but i'm not breathing and i'm not

fighting and i don't care — i'm just falling. falling somewhere between my balcony and theirs; somewhere between the clean white of my living room walls and the bruised yellow blue of theirs; falling from somewhere them into us; falling between what was and what will be; free falling helpless towards the crowd below; the children, the pensioners, the police and the prostitutes, the single parents and nuclear families all come to see me, drawn to the spectacle, the terrible fear of it pulling them in magnetical to the spot where I'm about to hit, and I'm hurtling down towards their faces upturned looking at my body to fall and their hands lift towards me, reaching up into the air as I plunge into their midst and they catch me with the many hands of their community and i'm safe, I'm saved, I'm lifted up on the shoulders of strong women, led back to the flats by a parade of singing men. there's people kissing my hands, and laughing and crying and cheering and taking snapshots with their phones, and I'm alive, although my body still thinks I'm dead.

BLACK JESUS PRAYER

**far horizons
press on eyes
shut tight
in fear of blindness**

**mirror shades block light
our eyes would recognise
as stars unborn**

Black Jesus

**light these shadow
paths of dreamless dark
my people walk in fear
they cannot see themselves**

your genius flows
through these dreams in us
Black Jesus pour your love
in jazz to heal us
flow Black Jesus deep
release our path
to **freedom**

Black Jesus

show me truth
so I can know the taste
of **freedom**

lay my love to heart beat's speech and
grace in flow
with nature's **freedom**

Black Jesus' genius
is limitless as spirit
is infinite as this rhythm
is an orbit turning
timeless **freedom**

Black Jesus
earth my whiteness
break the surface
take me to the core
where you syncopate

e x p a n d i n g

s p a c e

you move

from ear to mind to heart to soul to source from source to soul from soul to heart from heart to mind from mind to mouth from mouth to ear

so we pave our path
for conscious life
to flower rare beauty

Black Jesus

pourin' love in desert rain
upon the sand

Black Jesus
hear our prayer
give thanks

under the slates

we are earth people
long have we hidden
in the rock heavy heart
and harboured our strengths
among the agonies of stone

ours is the granite
wind withered to pinnacles
and the whispered secret
passed behind its scream
and the dark slate blasted
into fragments of its nature
shattered forgotten bodies
patterned random
heaped on houses
dropped on churches silenced hymns
from buried villages lost to light

we mourn our eagles, count our sheep
lay our seed on crusted bed springs
spines shrunk with the gravity
dreams pulled out of star flight -
driven back to earth / to bone
to wakeful vision raw with piling rock
against the sun

we are the subjects of a skyline
held in hard embrace
its dark love a sanctuary
for our healing

boom poetica

this chant was one of my first attempts at lyricism. it came to me as i was walking home from an Apples and Snakes jam in the summer of '95. Roger Robinson had just told me that a poetry crew from NYC called the Boom Poetic were coming to town and i was taken up on a thrill of expectation and next thing i know i'm walking down my street chanting 'boom poetica boom boom poetica'. this was the first of many times that poetry has got me high as a kite and feeling on top of the world.

tax

half history of hip hop and half old school reminiscing, this piece is my testimony to what hip hop was for me back in the eighties; a cultural catalyst that sucked the suburbs out my aura changing the context of my meaning and enabling me to grow. the first verse pays tribute to the origins of hip hop, the second verse parodies my identification with hip hop and the positive transformational effects it had on me, and the last verse recounts first hand the little told story of LL Cool J getting bottled off stage on the opening night of the Def Jam Tour 1987 for doing the infamous 'I Need Love'. to me this was a seminal moment in the history of hip hop. Def Jam were promoting Cool J as a pop star and just for a short while the underground wasn't having it and let the commercialisers know in the most direct of fashions - those were the days. this piece began as a poem about getting mugged at old skool jams and developed into its present form over several drafts. things could be wild back then and i guess even Cool J got 'jacked for some super star ego juice that night. although my pockets got turned out a few times the real stuff i lost was the outdated signifiers of Britishness I'd grown up with - give thanks to those pirates.

yo red

before i got into poetry i was deep into DJing, so much so that my love of black vinyl took me across the Atlantic on record buying missions to Chicago

where i drew close to the source of the funk, soul, jazz and dance music i was in thrall to. i was a long way from home when the 'him' character approached me and became my guide for a few sunny hours on a South Chicago Sunday afternoon. this piece sets up the expectations i held of The Southside with the reality of being there. of the pieces in this set, this is probably my favourite. i like the word plays and close up rhyme and assonance.

river song

i grew up near the Thames, and its power as a thread of living history has touched me since childhood. this piece juxtaposes the feminine nature of the river with the masculine constructs of the city. these two points join in the commercial use of the river as a channel of trade for slave ships. their relationship is explored further through contrasting the river as a symbol of sacred femininity with the patriarchal traditions of Christianity.

view from parc

when i first moved to North Wales i life modelled for art classes and it was through this that i encountered the painter Peter Prendergast. i found him a dour character, tough on the students, pushing them to go deeper in the work. for him the process of drawing and painting was a form of meditation, a practical philosophy that examined life itself through studying its visual forms. i could tell he was serious and i respected that, but i didn't really get him until i saw his work. his focus and determination to get to the core of his subject, to commune with its soul, was unleashed in paintings that captured the majesty and power of the mountains here in Eryri. for much of his life Peter lived and painted in the area where i now live, famously painting the Penryhn Quarry, and in particular his painting 'View From Parc' depicts one of the views i see every day. in this sense, among others, he was my painter. this poem pays tribute to him as a great artist, an influential teacher and a true man of the mountains.

hum

i mailed this piece to Ellen Payne and she said it sounds as if i don't like cities. she said she loves sitting out back of her flat in London and hearing the city breathe out as the night comes in. i'd like to hear her poem on the urban soundscape one day, but until then, this is mine. i feel it captures its subject in an original way, and also, on a fine point of detail, the heavily rhythmic first verse creates a lyrical effect without using rhyme and i really dig that.

jump

back when i lived in a high rise flat i heard the couple next door fighting one night and the woman started screaming and i was too cowardly to go round and try and have a positive influence on the situation. this piece is my attempt to put that sad history right.

Black Jesus prayer

this poem is my thanks giving to the culture of the African Diaspora. the unifying and life affirming qualities of African oral tradition have been a redemptive force in my life, showing me a potential for liberation and truth i would never have conceived of otherwise. in this poem Jesus represents a force for salvation and Black represents African people in Europe, the Americas and the Caribbean. of course within the Jesus story there is great suffering and sacrifice and i feel this reinforces the metaphor of the poem. more than anything, Black music has taught me the power of unity. truly, music is the most potent unifying force at our disposal, it transcends nationality and creed and language and speaks direct to the heart of people everywhere. in my own way, i'm trying to adapt the English language to perform something of the same function and, for me, this whole process has been inspired by Black music and poetry. like the poem says - give thanks.

under the slates

in the 1890s the Penrhyn Slate Quarry ran out of room to dump its waste slate, so they moved the people of St Annes out of their village and dumped the waste on it, burying houses, a church and a lake. i couldn't guess how many millions of tons of slate are piled up there, but they are huge post-industrial monuments that are slowly greening off as nature reclaims her own. i see the spoil tips as a metaphor for our civilisation. this poem explores the history and life of the place, and speaks of how it feels to live here under the slates.

all tracks composed by martin daws
except jump by martin daws, henry horrell and ben tunnicliffe,
and under the slates by martin daws and garry bywater.

personnel

martin daws - poet, kalimba
joy lilly portelli - vocals
henry horrell - keyboards
huw vaughn williams - double bass
rob mackay - flute
ben tunnicliffe - electric bass
ben kirkham - cymbals
garry bywater - tenor saxophone
ed holden - beatbox

produced by martin daws
trks 1,2,5 and 9 recorded at stwudio blaen y cae
by ed holden
trks 3,6 and 8 recorded at stwudio nant y benglog
by jon lawrence
trks 4 and 7 at orange sounds by russ hayes