

# 56

## A LIFE IN PIECES

By Jim Bennett

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a draft of a new book 56 – A life in pieces. It may or may not get published.

There is only one poem per year and although there are perhaps more noteworthy things that could be included, or some years that deserve a number of poems to themselves, my intention here is that these are seen more like a photo album or a scrapbook, with snapshots which are not necessarily to be read as a complete autobiography. For each number I read the corresponding Biblical psalm and in some cases took some direction from that. It might be just a hint or a word or a sense of something.

Thanks for reading. If you have any comments please email [info@poetrykit.org](mailto:info@poetrykit.org)

Jim Bennett

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## **Section 1 - Growing up**

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1

autumn  
arthritic branches  
reach down  
into the river

fish refract  
lying safe in the  
quiet shallows

out in the white water  
is the flotsam  
of Empire

the Union Flag  
driven by the wind  
churns into rags

2

in a gray world  
an abandoned  
broken vase  
is mended

afterwards  
it will not hold water  
but it is kept  
and loved

in this way  
it has a purpose  
and brings colour  
into the world.

the servants  
rose up  
came at night  
took the children  
and sent them  
packed with lies  
to Australia

“Your parents are dead”  
“They don’t want you  
any more”  
“it’s a great life”

the children  
thought it was  
a bus ride away  
a trip on the ferry  
but it wasn’t

pinned with paper labels  
a cardboard  
suitcase  
carried their hopes  
to a continent  
a world away



4

anchored to the table top  
the red metal sheet  
twisted into a cylinder  
held together by nuts  
and bolts

the Mechano skylon  
from a distance  
looked something like  
the real thing

after a while  
it was taken apart  
the bits used  
in other things  
the sheet  
that was bent  
out of shape  
is discarded

the Mechano skylon  
becomes a memory  
just like the real thing

the Mothers Union  
picnics  
and nitpicks  
black hills  
golden fields  
and questions  
“Is he your son?”  
“is this the one you adopted?”  
but she  
clung to her membership  
like a badge  
and often whispered  
“you are so special  
because we picked you.”

so they went  
mother and son on  
sandcastle afternoons  
train trips to New Brighton  
in summers that went  
on and on and on

6

a forgotten aunt  
turned up one day  
pushing a handcart  
with all her possessions

for nights she sat crying  
talking in an adult  
whispered voice  
sleeping in her sisters bed

then she stopped crying  
started laughing  
and smiling  
populating the house  
with holy pictures  
and statues  
of grim faced saints

dark shadows that  
stood guard over her  
at night

after she died they were  
given to a church  
a few days later  
they were seen in a skip  
in the church car park

7

in Chester Zoo  
the lion paces  
round its enclosure  
wearing a path  
through the grass  
close to the fence

its eyes hunt  
across a thousand miles  
its heart races in the chase  
its fur feels the fire  
of the sun  
as its feet wears a path  
through the grass  
as it turns  
round and round  
close to the fence

people watch  
subdued greatness  
captive in a cage  
they walk off  
their feet following  
a path close to  
a fence

8

the curl of cloud  
like wisps of smoke  
from a far off bonfire

secret signs  
around each corner

the world  
that everyone  
seems to understand  
as they talk in code

mysterious  
complex  
terrifying  
it is misunderstood  
when so many  
parts are missing

writing now starts  
to push open a door  
as the words seek to  
make sense of it

9

birds flock  
over the sycamores  
swoop and drill  
through clouds of  
insects

high in the branches  
in a world of  
their own  
other birds nest  
and call

watched by  
a football team reject  
left standing on the  
sideline  
to daydream

in the green vase  
yellow and white  
silk flower heads droop  
cast a shadow  
across the dining table

the dust shows in the light  
obvious when you know  
hanging like forgotten words  
as bright as anger

parachuting onto the  
polished oak  
dulling it coating it  
in dead skin

the undertaker arrives  
shoes polished  
you can see your face  
in the toecap  
handkerchief folded  
into tiny red mountain peaks  
protrudes from his breast pocket  
the long black coat  
sweeps down the hall  
leaving the air behind him  
smelling like  
a flower shop

encircled world  
choked and breathless  
as if the next breath  
or heart beat  
will not come

this is it  
the final act of foolishness  
the warmongers  
knock their arrows into place  
fingers twitching  
eyes locked  
waiting for someone  
to blink

the rest waiting to be  
boiled burned or fried alive  
the best advice  
whitewash the windows  
to reflect the flash  
and sit under a stout table  
to stop being crushed  
when the roof falls in



12

long wings stretch  
grasp the air  
rising

but here  
the slap of tyre on tarmac  
the smell of chips  
shouts and bellows

broken bottles  
wall splattered  
blood and graffiti

children  
play football  
in a crater

around them  
gulls clamour  
looking for the thermal

13

Why not? Why not follow?  
down to the valley  
beside the deep still water

strip swim drinking in the coolness  
the noise of children  
the sounds of splashing water  
why not follow?  
why not?

"It's not for you."  
a voice says  
sit listen gather up  
the sounds  
and later write about  
the furious pleasure  
of youth

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14

in bar on Hope Street  
poets find their voices  
and look for an audience  
that will understand

all day the famous  
sons of the city  
on every radio  
intonate the sound  
of Liverpool

heavy heady days  
watching people grow  
and leave

then the Everyman  
and the new readings  
and here present  
in the company  
of poets  
new words  
new beginnings

the future begins

15

water trickles  
from the spring  
runs down the hillside

taste the cold chill  
the minerals  
and earth

on the hill  
is a song sung by the wind  
words fall  
from the sky  
write poems  
in the swirling dust

it will settle soon  
and after a night here  
a person will be a poet  
or a madman  
or maybe just  
a bit of both

it was just  
another book of poems  
the sort that lie  
unopened in libraries  
that are unbought  
on bookshop shelves  
that are taken  
home from readings  
and left unread

it was another  
book of poems  
but it was a bit different  
this one had a scouse accent  
it moved the  
boundary lines  
opened doors  
that led down  
cellar steps  
to the musty musk smells  
of teenage sex  
and rock and roll

the crushed  
bent broken motorbike  
lies on the roadside  
the rider  
dressed in black leather jacket  
looking like  
The Wild One  
escaped with minor injuries  
was cremated within hours  
had road rash  
broke a vertebrae in his neck  
broke two vertebrae in his neck  
needed to dry out  
hurt his back  
broke his pelvis and died  
needed to go for rehab  
did it as a publicity stunt  
needed a rest  
was tired of getting booed  
didn't go to hospital  
went to hospital  
is in intensive care  
went to a local doctor  
and stayed for a while  
then went off with some friends  
and made music in their  
cellar

the truth was never tested  
and the silent do not lie

18

the planets  
are dust  
that collect  
and reflect the suns light  
like pearls  
strewn on a jewelers  
black velvet cloth

there are no voices here  
no air  
just a rock  
in a gravity well  
anchored to Earth  
and a US flag  
stiffened to fly  
in an imagined wind



19

words formed on paper  
couldn't rest there  
the impulse to read  
them out was too great

and what began  
in Liverpool  
started to spread  
around the country  
and it happening there too

in smoky rooms  
cafes bars and  
living rooms  
in church halls  
old mills and  
school rooms

people met  
gave each other  
permission to be poets  
and that was all it took  
to start a revolution  
and shake the foundations

soon Dockers and  
chipies taxi drivers  
and miners hairdressers  
and artists were being  
poetic  
even school kids  
even the son  
of a dock worker  
said they were a poet

it was like a revolution

20

the day weighs heavy  
words hang  
like a broken clapper

the tense and tension  
playing tricks  
with meaning

what is it?  
what are we to do?  
what? what? what?

a million questions  
on a day of troubles

but it will pass  
it always does  
and somehow  
the fear and worry  
are always wasted

21

like monstrous dreams  
the clouds appear  
darkening the sky

for the first time  
prime time terror  
enters every home

Munich is as close  
as the corner of the room

and the death of Ezra Pound  
goes unnoticed  
lost in the vortex

breath clouds  
hang and drift  
in the frozen air  
leaves crisp  
in imitation death  
the soil fresh dug  
hard as rock

from the smallest place  
a seed opens itself  
pushes up to the light  
and the memory  
of sky  
and whatever warmth  
that holds

at the beginning  
and in the end  
all life is like that

23

the air is still  
the water on the lake  
unmoving  
this is where people  
walk

at night the sky  
is mirrored here  
in the day  
the clouds chase  
across the surface

at the lake edge  
mallards nest  
and countless  
pigeons dive  
for food  
the sound of their screeching  
and the beat of their wings  
is a symphony

24

land turned  
raised above the floods  
in the hills  
high above  
Windermere  
the bones of fish  
lie carved in stone  
the ghosts of seaweed  
echoes life  
in an ocean of rock

the vectors of time  
turn slate slabs  
to snapshots  
of an ancient sea bed

25

along West 23<sup>rd</sup>  
is the Hotel Chelsea  
a place people go  
to talk to ghosts

in the damp walls  
feet and carapace  
scratch  
turn crisp loose wallpaper  
into a sounding board

the sound of beds  
thumping against  
partition walls  
moans and cries  
tears and shouting

time hangs  
in the lamplight  
suspended in dust

at breakfast  
artists writers  
would be artists  
would be writers  
take a communion  
pancake slop syrup  
onto it  
just like Hemmingway

Ok they say  
it's not like it should be  
but it sure is close

the tarmac footpath  
serpentine alongside  
the church wall  
now in summer  
the surface bubbles  
and the edge  
like a mountain range  
full of tiny volcanoes  
of tar waits to erupt

children with magnifying glasses  
focus sun spots  
on ants  
that wither and die  
in flames and smoke  
as the deadly beam  
finds them

around the children  
crowds push close  
watch the tiny pyres  
while they wait  
one last time  
for Elvis



### **Section 3 - The Dripping Years**

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27

he was there one night  
lurking  
waiting to emerge  
when confidence failed

cryptically crude  
the pseudonym fitted  
like a new skin  
to hide in

fired up  
he was a superstar  
burning brightly  
devouring everything  
he touched

from space the desert lands  
are golden  
with skidmarklife  
along the rivers

and the sand  
shifts and churns  
in an hourglass  
the size of the Earth

if you listen  
even if you listen  
hard it is silent

on the night side  
light draws  
an outline of wealth  
and poverty drowns  
in darkness

here and below  
air circulates  
cloudless

as open mouths  
suck life from the wind

somewhere out in the desert  
is a place that goes  
off the edge of the world  
so you are out there  
riding alone on a Harley  
as the last of the day  
slips down the horizon

an electrical storm  
coming in from the East  
silhouettes the mountains  
like ghosts in the silver light

the bike engine sounds like  
the soundtrack  
to Bat out of Hell  
and this is it

this is the moment  
you will always remember

not next week's gigs  
or your time in the spotlight  
or the career and money  
that will come  
because you were there  
when the lightning struck

it's now before all that  
with the wind  
and the roar in your ears  
and the moment that you know  
was perfect  
after it passes

when you lie dying  
this is the moment  
you will think about  
you will never ever be able  
to get back to it  
but it was yours  
and it was perfect  
if only you had known it  
at the time

30

so many went  
down into the pit  
so far they could not  
get out again

“the thing you crave  
will put you in the grave”  
the posters said

and it did  
the booze the pills  
the needles and the  
dope  
they all kill you  
in the end

but you know that  
don't you?

even before you start

31

the fifth floor  
is above the  
street fumes

outside the window  
the fire escape veranda  
like in all the movies  
a place to sit  
and watch  
the never ending  
New York day

drinking wine  
listening to sirens  
arguments  
over loud TVs  
and in another block  
someone playing  
Just like Starting Over  
over and over again

32

the season of death  
is passing  
the drugs  
drying up the blood  
the alcohol drying up  
the drugs  
the medication  
drying up the  
drink

in the end  
life is about  
staying dry  
and living  
is not about  
avoiding death

after years of dying  
twice each day  
you give up hope  
that you ever will  
that it could end  
on a cold slab  
where the blood is quiet  
and the craving gone

either that is where  
you end up  
or you know its time  
to stop

you put the bad stuff  
behind you  
just grab some snow  
or a joint  
now and then  
to get you up  
and play the strings  
and sing new songs  
and maybe you can get  
on with it  
prescriptions  
do less damage  
but it only takes the edge off  
and even after years  
you wake up sweating  
feeling like  
just one more  
just one



34

the poster screams  
“Just say no.”  
and you can say no  
a thousand times  
but you only have to say  
“yes” once

you have strategies now  
but it all comes down to  
saying “no” when it matters  
and that’s when you hope  
you can

like a Pilgrim Father  
going home  
on a cheep flight

the Old World waits

back in Liverpool  
bricks streets potholes  
are the same  
the sounds and smells  
unchanged

faces of strangers  
smile

friends try to trap you  
back into their lives  
swallow you whole  
“it’s like you’ve never been away”  
they say  
but you have  
and at the bottom  
of a suitcase are the photos  
that prove it

36

blood chills  
and settles  
its voice is still

lying in  
a New Brighton dip  
overhead the cumulus  
heads for the hills

the sun sails west  
and the picnic  
is packed away

the light shines  
on the wave tips  
of the Mersey

her eyes shine  
like a million stars

“do you remember  
the future he gave you”  
“no I only remember the past”

and he's gone now  
the burning flame  
of his life  
extinguished  
his plots and anger  
cut down like grass

the energy of his poetry  
dissipated  
lost in the funeral  
of life

he is silent now  
but his words still echo  
sometimes

38

for years the wall  
holds fast  
glued by skin blood  
and bone  
to the city  
it partitions

stinking and corrupt  
the empire  
finally flails  
to dust  
and its wall  
torn down  
bricks shattered  
concrete  
turned into tourist crap

and for just one day  
Berlin  
becomes the world

the poems bundled  
into carrier bags  
he spoke no more  
his coat and T shirts  
packed and sealed

the buzz gone from him  
cassettes given away  
the record wiped

still another year  
of intermittent gigs  
and maybe a few more  
beyond that  
but it was over now

the nightly  
concrete grip of fear  
the terror when  
the words came  
the hand width from failure

now it is time to  
write another history

## **The return of the poet**

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<b>40</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>bulbs</b>
<b>41</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>rust</b>
<b>42</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>folk festival</b>
<b>43</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>summer</b>
<b>44</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>trees</b>
<b>45</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>the Writer</b>
<b>46</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>Allen</b>
<b>47</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>inheritance</b>
<b>48</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>the summit</b>
<b>49</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>80 Generations</b>
<b>50</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>monument</b>
<b>51</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>fluttering</b>
<b>52</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>elastic</b>
<b>53</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>dawn</b>
<b>54</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>flowers</b>
<b>55</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>displaced</b>
<b>56</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>liars voice</b>

**Addendum**   **the circle**

40 bulbs

at one time  
I could calculate  
the weight of history  
put it on a scale  
tease it level  
but now it has  
turned itself  
into the present  
and is far too heavy  
to weigh except  
on my mind  
where rumours  
shape themselves  
into dragons

into this you come  
teasing  
flower in hand  
counting petals  
counting  
counting  
till you get the result  
you want

plant the bulbs  
on three levels  
you say  
tallest deeper  
I listen to your  
explanation  
can hear nothing  
but the sound  
of your breathing  
feel nothing  
but your touch on my arm  
see nothing  
but the world  
through your eyes  
so different to mine



41 rust

on the corner of the document  
there is a metal staple  
over the years  
it has imprinted itself  
two brown lines  
of rust stain  
sit either side of it  
train tracks of rust  
three lines like  
prison bars  
111  
a diagonal page number  
or the room number at  
the Chelsea

the solicitor  
coughs  
tells me to turn the page  
he reads on  
the staple and its stain  
are hidden by the fold  
at least now there  
may be a chance of  
listening  
but in the centre of the page  
there is the  
squashed final  
remains of a small fly  
its wings  
forever spread  
as it tries to fly  
just one last time

42 folk festival

the songs started  
just after the sun set  
the bonfire crackled  
and the sparks  
shot into the sky  
like fireworks

those with guitars  
pick at the tune  
those with mouth organs  
blow a melody  
those without instruments  
clap and sing along

we all knew the words  
and if we didn't  
we pretended that we did

there was no Dylan this year  
and in many respects  
the festival  
would not be the same  
without him

but we had the music  
and the scent filled night

from along the beach  
the sound of ancient  
sea shanties  
and a Neil Young song

43 summer

tumbledown wirewood  
strangling the branches  
here touch a strobing leaf  
green veins pulsate  
with summer

the man said  
my wife's a nympho  
yes I said  
I saw her dancing in the trees

I didn't  
I just said I did  
because I could have  
if she had  
and my harp had the making  
of a song

but here among the  
ticks whistles crunch  
of life and death  
anything is possible

44 trees

after the storm  
had passed  
I wrote a poem  
about trees  
how they were  
left twisted,  
bent, leaning  
with uprooted roots  
pointing to the clouds

it wasn't  
a very good poem  
I decided not to  
try and publish it  
instead I dedicated  
the paper saved  
to preserve the trees

in the end  
I forgot the poem  
and the trees grew back

45 the writer

the writer  
watches  
in the day  
cloudshadows  
make shapes  
that run across the  
mountains  
sprint along  
the foothills  
to hide in caves  
and behind rocks

at night  
dressed in moonlight  
silver clouds  
parade before the stars

and here at a campfire  
she sings  
of all she sees  
her tongue  
a pen  
that records the passing  
of each day

46 Allen

the old guy with  
a beard on TV  
is playing  
Father Death Blues

stressing each word  
he had written  
as he had flown  
home after the death  
of his father

on TV  
it is played  
for him  
by an earlier him

a psalm  
to father death  
a final grasp at  
understanding

47 inheritance

the garden  
churned for planting  
the Mersey shrugging  
its way to the sea  
the sun lights  
the Welsh mountains  
with fire  
and arrays Liverpool  
in golden spires

this is the way  
I remember it  
my father's garden  
the smells of soil  
the flashes of rooftop colour  
and from the houses  
the sounds of  
radios and music

it's easy to belong here  
easy to feel  
a part of history

48 the summit

up where the air thins  
where lungs strain  
and muscles burn and fail  
there is a birdless sky  
and streaks of ice  
fall in gusts  
from ragged ledges

the same east wind  
that broke the ships  
of Tarshish  
cements the rock  
with ancient ice

a mountain is conquered  
with iron and steel  
craft and technology

the tweeds and rope  
give way to  
Gore-Tex and nylon

but you still stand here  
like all of those  
who came before  
and in some special way  
you have made  
the Earth  
a smaller place



49 eighty generations

we celebrate  
the eighty generations  
from Christ till now  
we celebrate  
a number  
meaningless  
to so many people  
we celebrate  
the amnesia of history  
in which so many die  
for forgotten causes

we celebrate  
the new century  
in which all of us  
will die

we celebrate  
the destruction of flesh  
the end of time  
the closing of a book  
the drinking of tea

we celebrate  
a chord plucked  
on a lonely harp

50 monument

I saw a picture  
wreckage of a building fascia  
in a New York street  
spread like angel wings  
a monument  
wrapped in a cloud  
that shrouds the city  
and hides  
a wounded skyline

I hear the rhetoric  
of sympathy and war  
from faces lined with loss  
as dust from New York  
jet streams  
across the world

you will find it everywhere  
eventually  
a dark cloud  
on every horizon

51 fluttering

I saw a wing fluttering  
in the road  
thought I could help  
but it was just a wing  
glued to the ground  
by guts and blood  
feathers  
moving in the breeze

I had to move to the pavement  
as other cars came  
wheels drove over it  
squashed it  
flat to the ground  
but after they had passed  
the wing rose again  
and started fluttering

52 elastic

the elastic  
grows tighter  
stretches  
ready to snap and  
catapult you into  
the life  
you believe is coming

it stretches back  
to the moment you  
were born  
and like your skin  
- following the calendar  
of your bones -  
it can hardly hold you

you lie on the bed  
pinned there by gravity  
as the elastic stretches  
and we wait for it to snap

53 dawn

I don't wake now;  
I lie and listen  
to the silence.

ten years ago  
at dawn  
I would wake  
as birds began  
a hundred songs  
mixed to a choir

and I would lie half wakeful  
for a while  
pick out the individuals  
then doze  
as a sun drenched sky  
stirs up the day sounds  
and mixes them in

now I wake at dawn  
without a sound  
and lie awake  
listening to the silence  
and wonder  
what it means

54 flowers

in the corner of the cubicle  
a red glass vase  
sits on a shelf

today a nurse  
put a bunch of  
of dark deep blood red  
roses in it  
no card she said

and smiled at me  
like we shared a secret

I spent most of the day  
thinking of old friends  
and family wondering  
who had thought of me

at 5 o'clock  
another nurse came in  
took the vase and flowers  
and left with them  
without a word

55 displaced

the plant  
growing  
in the pot  
in the middle  
of the table  
since we moved in  
16 years ago  
is green

early December  
each year  
it flowers

do I leave it  
for the next person  
who will live here?  
do I take it to a new home?  
or buy a new plant?

if I had known  
all the problems it would cause  
I would never have said  
we'd move

56 liar's voice

liar's voice and bush  
burning to ash  
smudged thumbprint  
on the forehead of history

what atonement is possible?  
what?

did you see the news today?  
oh boy  
what! ten thousand holes  
in Baghdad  
enough to fill the  
White house  
now you know  
and one more

body bags and folded flags  
battle banners flying  
foot he soldiers  
tears and dust  
missing body parts  
and wailing  
or tramped in the dust

truth has been masticated  
by men  
every move a battle  
every conversation  
an argument  
whatever is said  
misinterpreted  
whatever is done  
misunderstood



addendum the circle

four thousand years ago  
stones were brought  
formed into a circle  
on the hillside

it meant something  
to the hands that made it

a god praised or feared  
a year of seasons mapped  
a memorial a thanksgiving  
something  
maybe burials  
or sacrifices  
perhaps people screamed  
their last words here  
or took a final look  
towards the river  
or were married  
it must have served a purpose  
had some reason  
for the effort

I touch the stones  
but they have no power  
I think I expected to feel something  
from a circle of stones  
here for all that time  
some energy  
picked up from the wind  
the seasons  
the turning of the earth  
eclipses  
the blood of generations  
something bound to it  
that you could feel  
but there was nothing

then you touched my hand  
said "I'm so cold here"  
and although I didn't  
feel the cold  
I held you close

now we are looking out  
across the River Lune  
from Ruskin's View  
our last look around  
Kirby Lonsdale  
your hand still in mine  
the circle of stones  
on the hillside  
just visible in the fading light

