

urban biology



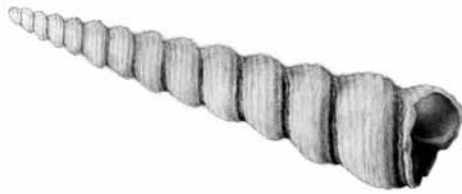
ian gibbins



Friendly Street
SINGLE POETS
SERIES



urban biology



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Friendly Street Poets

Friendly Street Poets Incorporated

PO Box 3697
Norwood
South Australia 5067
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Wakefield Press

1 The Parade West
Kent Town
South Australia 5067
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2012

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Cover and inside artwork copyright © Judy Morris

Cover design by Ian Gibbins

Edited by Thom Sullivan, Friendly Street Poets

Typeset by Clinton Ellicott, Wakefield Press

Printed in Australia by Griffin Digital, Adelaide

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Gibbins, Ian.
Title: Urban biology / Ian Gibbins.
ISBN: 978 1 74305 099 6 (pbk.).
Series: Friendly Street single poets series.
Subjects: Australian poetry – 21st century.
Dewey Number: A821.4



**Government
of South Australia**

Arts SA

Friendly Street Poets Inc. is supported
by the **South Australian Government**
through Arts SA.





Ian Gibbins is a neuroscientist and Professor of Anatomy and Histology at Flinders University, having originally trained in zoology and pharmacology. He is internationally recognised for his research on the microscopic structure and function of the nerves that monitor and control the activity of the internal organs. He teaches a variety of topics and has had significant input into the design and implementation of Flinders' innovative Graduate Entry Medical Program, winning several teaching awards.

In recent years, Ian's poems have appeared in a range of publications, including *Best Australian Poems 2008*, and have been shortlisted in several national poetry competitions. He has contributed text to installations around Adelaide and to Australian Dance Theatre's 2010 Adelaide Festival of Arts production, *Be Your Self*. He also regularly reviews science books for *Australian Book Review*. Ian's spoken word and electronic music have been published in *Going Down Swinging* and *Cordite* and broadcast on ABC Radio National. His sound videos have featured in South Australian Living Artists' Moving Image program. He collaborates closely with artists in public events to promote the common ground between art and science. He is also an avid windsurfer ...

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, big thanks to Friendly Street Poets for the strong and supportive environment they provide for poets of every ilk. Their publication program is a key element of their activity and I am both delighted and honoured to be selected for the Single Poets series. Special thanks to Thom Sullivan and Maggie Emmett of Friendly Street Poets for their support and advice in getting this book together.

Many people have encouraged and helped my writing in various ways, but I particularly thank Linda Cooper, Marcello Costa, Teresa Crea, Maggie Emmett, Sally Francis, Erica Jolly, Janice Lally, Natasha Mitchell, Peter Rose, Garry Stewart, Ronnie Taheny, Catherine Truman and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, for providing unique opportunities to inspire, critique and present my work. Much of what appears in this volume would not have happened without them. I also acknowledge the positive influence of the editors of poetry journals and judges of poetry competitions: they are faced with a task of extraordinary difficulty. I am always grateful whenever my words manage to survive their selection processes and I enjoy learning from the works of those who succeed ahead of me.

Urban Biology is strongly informed by science, science that is rigorous, rational and mechanistic, yet suffused with wonder and respect. I am indebted to the extraordinary environments of the Department of Zoology, University of Melbourne, where I was a student, and the School of Medicine, Flinders University, where I have worked since 1985, for supporting my efforts in the quest for understanding just how this world of ours works.

Special thanks to Judy Morris, who, amongst everything else, has provided the beautiful illustrations for this book. You can see more of her stunning work at www.judymorris.net.au. The 'we' in these poems most often refers to us.

Many poems in this collection have been published or otherwise made available in the public domain: 'Kites' and parts of 'With Body in Mind (After Vesalius)' in *Corridors*; 'Field Guide' in *Australian Book Review* (short-listed for poetry prize, 2007) and *Best Australian Poems 2008*; 'Beanie on the Moon', 'Dead Dog (Subtitled)', 'Window Seats' and 'Mutton Birds, ANZAC Day' in various *Friendly Street Poets Readers*; 'Esplanade' and 'Middle of the Road' in *Blast*; 'Types of Rain' in *Going Down Swinging*; 'Space Invaders' and 'Taboo' in *Transnational Literature*; 'Rules for Interior Design' and 'Love Falters at Darling Harbour' in *Blue Dog*; 'Turtledove', 'Lullabies, Gardens Road Cemetery', 'Local Knowledge' and 'Shuffle' in *Page Seventeen* (all competition finalists, 2008, 2010); 'Letter to Nature, 21st January, 2010' in *Newcastle Poetry Prize 2010*; 'Amazing Grace' and 'First Week of Winter' on-line for the *Max Harris Poetry Prize* (short-list and high commendation, respectively, 2008, 2009); 'The Science of Shark Fishing' on-line for *Friendly Street Poets Poem of the Month*; 'ecg' in *Challenging the Divide* by Erica Jolly (2010), part of *Hearsong* installations at Flinders Medical Centre and the Science Exchange, RiAus, Adelaide, 2009, and broadcast on ABC Radio National's *All in the Mind*, 2008, 2009; 'Thoracic' as part of *Not Absolute* exhibition / installation at Flinders University City Gallery, 2009; 'Abbess Chiara, Montefalco, 1308', 'According to Grey's (Meredith Lives)' and 'The Boy with Two Bodies' performed with videos and podcast as part of *Anatomy & Imagination* at the Science Exchange, RiAus, Adelaide, 2010; 'Dr Korsakoff and Colleagues Report' in *Southerly* (2012).

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*For JM,
lifetime collaborator in the science,
art and romance of Urban Biology.*

Space Invaders

Dropping in from 12 o'clock high,
you will barely notice our arrival.
Being neither green
nor of unduly small stature,
we blend easily
with the streetwise procession
of Friday night diners, party goers
and good-natured drunks.

Once we are here,
molecule by precious molecule,
we will infiltrate your haemopoietic stream,
until your body fluids flow as thin as solar wind.
Like bamboo beneath your fingernails,
we will reduce all communication
to compromise and distant comets,
adrift in the cloying starlight.

Already you can see the places we have been:
the sea cliffs fallen away,
ocean currents reversed,
corals faded to desert stone
and cyclones following our path
across land-locked harbours,
over clouded mountain ranges,
to your humble fragile abodes.

But for the moment
we are sitting unsighted
behind the silvered glass of the Spiegel Tent:
where now are the acrobats?
the tumblers?
the flying trapeze?
where now the sawdust?
the tattoos and scars?

For the moment, we imagine
the quiet hum of an air conditioner
bathing us with cool relief,
redolent with strawberries,
raspberries, milk-sapped figs,
the welcome fruits of your earth.
For the moment, as you can imagine,
we are sitting pretty.

Amazing Grace

If we were in the spotlight,
I did not notice. If there were
loudspeakers and megaphones,
I did not listen.

There were, however,
fields of sugarcane. Yes.
The juice fresh and clear and
sticky on our fingers and lips
and matting our unkempt hair;
like grit-ash between our toes,
the stinging cuts on our feet,
it would linger for days with
our sweat and the itchiness
in our skin, until the rain,
yes, the rain finally fell and
hit the ground and we wept
and washed and closed
our thankful eyes to Heaven.

Almost certainly, there were
cotton plantations and corn.
Yes. The husks dried, rustling,
the wings of beetles, snakes
black and lingering, tongues
afflicker, warning us to
stay away, to be wary
of where we should tread,
of where we should hide
and cower and speak in low
tones, bodies close to the earth,
to each other, to the dust
that covered us, for just a
moment or two, with silence.

Then there was the storm,
the winds and hounds, wailing,
and widows. Yes. Widows, as
palings clapped and tore loose
and the air filled with flood
so dark, so hard, we could
no longer stand, we could
no longer hold on, and
the trees fell fast and were
lost in the current, and when
day finally broke, finally broke,
and we found our hands
and our hearts still beating,
all you could hear was the

drawing of breath, yes,
the drawing of breath,
how sweet the sound,
how sweet the sound.

Love Falters at Darling Harbour

'... alternatively, we could walk to the Maritime Museum.'

She hugged him, kissed him. He looked down, counted the red-brick pavers between his shoelaces and the concourse seagulls.

And the answer? It depends: wide angle or long shot, polariser on or off, shutter speed, flash synchronisation, status of the battery charge.

Was this in the social contract? Was this the expectation when names were first exchanged? And the answer? Twenty-eight, give or take.

Twenty-nine? The bollards, at least. A decent place to think about nothing, observe the woman cocooned with yellow silk, an avatar or two,

practise untrained legerdemain, loosen frayed ropes of spellbound misunderstanding, misappropriated glances, subliminal attraction.

Maybe he could taste something in her sweat. Maybe there was some electrostatic force, like lightning conductors or black cat fur before a storm.

Would babies be involved? Don't they look the same? Don't they sound the same? Don't they smell of butterflies and booties and sour spilt milk?

A coin toss, for all it matters, a badly dealt card. But did she notice? A bird with one leg? Digital or analog? A submarine? A replica? And if someone

slipped? Too many questions without notice. But if his brakes were to fail? The surface of the water? How to move sideways? Is this, or was that, an ending?