

Mail on Sunday – You magazine – Nov 30th, 2003:

enduringlove

REMEMBERING ANNO

Anno Birkin, much-loved scion of the Birkin acting and directing dynasty, died aged just 20. But he left behind an astonishing legacy of poetry, which has been collected into a new book. Here the women closest to him talk about how deeply Anno and his work touched their lives

Interviews Catherine O'Brien



Who was Anno Birkin? It is something Anno often asked himself. Just before he died he scrawled that very question (similarly phrased but with an expletive inserted) in huge capital letters on the walls of the house he had been sharing with friends near Milan.

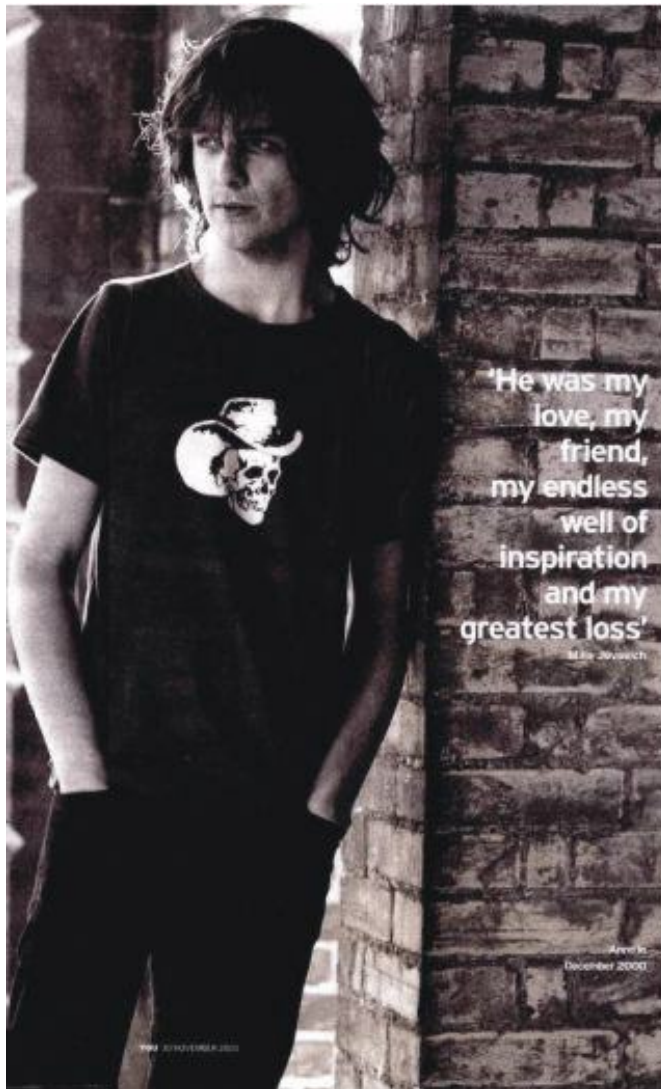
Anno, scion of one of Britain's foremost creative dynasties, belonged to a band called Kicks joy Darkness. Two years ago, KjD were in Italy, working on their first album, when one night, in thick fog, three of the four band members were involved in a freak car crash. Swerving to avoid a broken down car in the middle of the motorway, they crashed into a truck parked on the hard shoulder. Anno and his two bandmates were killed instantly.

Theirs is, in essence, a story of life's randomness – young men living on the edge, pursuing a dream, relishing a world that was theirs to conquer. And in a split second, it was over.

Yet with every life lost, no matter how short, there is a legacy. Despite being just a month short of his 21st birthday, Anno had already made his mark. He wrote poems – hundreds of them, in notebooks, on the backs of envelopes, on any scrap of paper that was to hand. Some of them became songs. Some of them were shared with the two great loves of his life, actresses Milla Jovovich and Honeysuckle Weeks, some were known only to his family. But most known only to himself.

Since Anno's death, his father Andrew Birkin, a director, scriptwriter, and the nation's leading expert on JM Barrie, has given over his life to collating all the words and music that his son wrote. Bee Gilbert, Anno's writer and photographer mother, from whom Andrew is amicably separated, has supported the exhaustive search as has Anno's half-sister Lissy, mother of his beloved neices Talulah and Poppy. Now the family is publishing a collection of more than 50 of Anno's poems, partly as a tribute to him, and partly also to raise money for Great Ormond Street Hospital and Sponsored Arts for Education (SAFE), a health education charity working in Africa.

To celebrate the publication of *Who Said the Race is Over?* we asked some of the women in Anno's life to choose one of his poems, and to tell us about the Anno they knew.



MILLA JOVOVICH, 27, actress. Milla was one of the great loves of Anno's life. They met in France when he was 17 on the set of *Joan of Arc*. Milla was playing the leading role, Anno was visiting his father, who had co-written the script with Luc Besson. Both were drawn to each other by their passion for music. In the year before Anno died, he and Milla met up in Berlin, Italy and America to work on songs for her album. He wrote *Anodyne* for her.

I am bankrupt for words when I want to speak about Anno. Everything freezes and my words dry up. I can only tell you about the wonder of knowing him, the wonder of being close to him, the wonder of his thoughts soaking into me. I remember being totally liquefied by his gaze. And I remember the absolute wonder I felt when he first wrote to me. I was bowled over by his choices, his words. I knew immediately that this person was going to teach me so much. He is the only man I ever met that gave me the fountainhead from which to compare all others after him. As of yet, the others don't even come close. Anno was my love, my friend, my endless well of inspiration, my sweetest, most painful memory and my greatest loss. He gave me the happiest and, through his absence, the worst days of my life. The only comfort I have is knowing that his words are out in the world now and that everybody can have the privilege of being privy to his precious thoughts.

Anodyne

[to DOWNLOAD this song, [CLICK HERE](#)]

Tearing down the air again,
trying to find a stare that's faint and haunted;
teased and taunted mind recedes –
diseased and out of fiction.

Belladonna anodyne, fill my blood and fill my world with lust ...
Roses sunk in cyanide, thrown aside and blown back by the wind ...
Do you see the ...
sinners drinking iodine, to cleanse their dreams and
rid their minds of thought?

And I've seen her rise ... at times ... at night ... her majestic pupils cast,
and setting stars ... are hung ... above ... horizons where you are.
Hot to touch and out of breath,
lost for words, it's best I just stay silent.

Upped inside and on the rise, I found a little low.

Do you feel these roots, so weak?
I'm paranoid,
and fear of rain has left a joy in storms ...

And in their eyes ... at times ... at night ... see the light of sudden stars,
etched in sand ... I'm walking on horizons where I stand ...

high on her eyes ...

high and I rise,

over the land.....

‘Anno is around me still, his gold centre melted into another form’



BEE GILBERT, 57, Anno's mother

So many of Anno's poems seem to have revealed a premonition that he would die young. I feel he left this one on the off chance that he might be right. It offers such comfort to us – the living – who miss him so.

Anno and I talked all the time – about books, music, emotions. He wrote beautiful letters to me, about his life and what he wanted to do. But I was never quite sure what form his spiritual beliefs took until one morning, about six months after he died, when I witnessed an old drunk collapse at a railway station in Dublin. Overwhelmed by the tragedies of life, and my tragedy in particular, I rang his past girlfriend Honeysuckle. Had they, I asked her, ever talked about death? "Oh yes," she replied. "We talked about it often. He believed he was in a borrowed body which he would occupy for a while, like one might rent a house. His philosophy was that when you die, you just move on to some other form – some other place."

I asked the same question of his father, Andrew. He told me that they had both concluded, while travelling in India in the spring before Anno died, that life and death were indeed just one part of the great adventure. So I carry this poem always, because it reassures me that Anno is around me still – floating in space, not destroyed, his gold centre just melted into some other form. If Anno believed he might visit through dreams, then I believe it, too.

He doesn't very often – I have only two remembered dreams so far. I suspect that in my subconscious I am keeping them at bay, wary that they might turn to nightmares. Instead, I have this poem to help me hold on to my last image: my Anno, golden, smiling, perfect.

Steal me.
Melt my gold centre.
I enter through your dreams,
where you're weak,
and where I'm clean of inhibition.

I'm killing this body, this prison of flesh,
this heart and this head that you loved – put to rest,
but I'll see you in sleep,
when I'm perfect.

Spring, 1999

Who
said
the race
over?



JANE BIRKIN, 56, was Anno's aunt. A singer, actress and human rights campaigner, she was a huge presence in his life.

Two years before Anno died, she introduced him to the work of her late former lover, the songwriter Serge Gainsbourg. She now sings Gainsbourg's songs and reads Anno's poetry to audiences around the world.

Anno was the sweetest, cuddliest, funniest boy. He and I were both clumsy. We split the coffee, we bumped into things. When I heard people say: "Oh Anno," I knew just how he felt. And then came the poems. He wrote so abundantly, that every time I went to see him, there would be ten more. And he had no shyness in showing them, because he wanted to know what you thought. I would say, "Anno, they are terribly sad." But the more I read, the more I appreciated their depth, chivalry, passion, lust and hope – I was knocked over by his talent. He was a boy who understood what it was to have your heart broken.

Anno wrote *Close to the River* for his mother. When I am on tour now, I read it. And every time I read it, I find myself thinking of Bee.

He was her boy, not mine, and I don't want to take any of the grief that is hers or Andrew's. But I know, from the way it touches audiences across Europe and in Canada and Japan, that it is a poem for all mothers. Many cry when they hear it. Some hold hands. In Algeria, all the women's arms shot towards me and they gave a great, compassionate sigh. Anno seems to have summed up in just a few words how every teenager feels. He is the poet we thought no longer existed.

Close to the River

The tower walls at midnight burn
with fraught desire, the rocks beneath
are taut and wet with fiction's blood.
Someone leaps. The other turns.
But who is who?

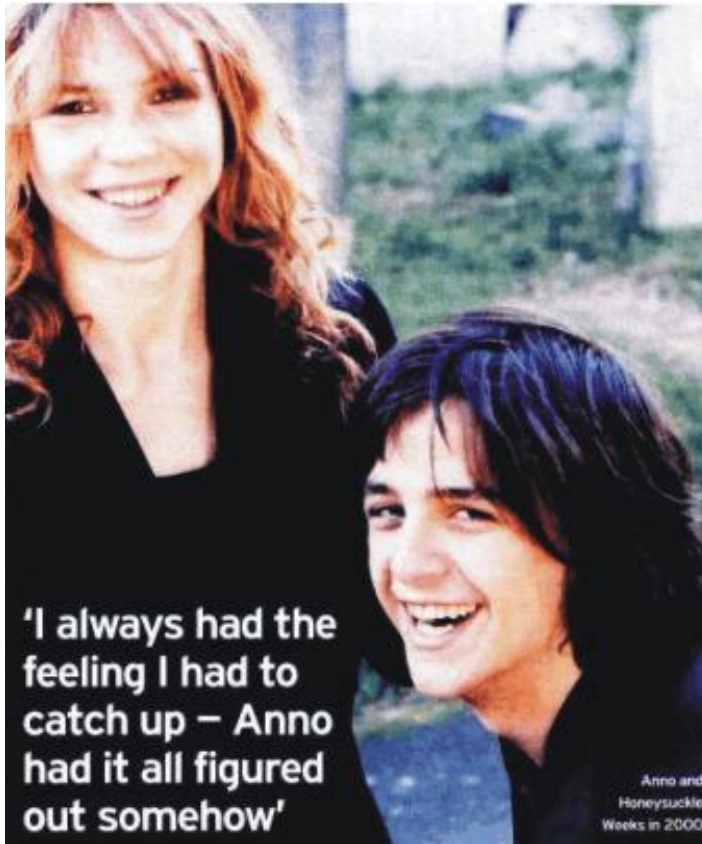
Forget what you want, but
don't forget the Link that grew me,
that travels deeply
through me in the form of every thought that I think.
The loathing and the love,
bubbling together at the
brink of my emotion.
This commotion started long before my face
was ever etched into the wall of time.
I have both your madneses inside me.
I am in constant disagreement with myself.
But I cannot leave me.
You both cannot leave me.
Nor each other. Believe me.
I am the ring that won't slip off with soap.
The armies have broken inside me, and now
they stand poised and opposed.
Now there is blood.
Now there is love standing covered in glory,
and honour lies covered in mud.

You and I, Ma, we built too close to the river.
Look at us washing our minds free of fever,
brushing off bird shit and bad dreams forever,
and never once turning the tide.
Thank you for pains and concerns that have
made me in turn more unhappy and kind.
I am proud to remind them of you.



Easter, 2001

Honeysuckle Weeks, 24, actress.



Honeysuckle was Anno's other great love. The two spent a year together when Anno was 19 and remained in close touch.

Anno wrote this poem a week or so after I confessed that I loved him, which was a terrible position to put him in because at the time, I happened to be entangled with one of his oldest friends. We had known each other since we were 15, but later, love just sort of crept up on us. We found that we wanted to spend all our time talking to each other.

He came to visit me at my house in Vauxhall Fields, and we bought tickets for a flight in the Vauxhall hot air balloon which used to be tethered right outside my front door. I think what Anno was doing in the poem – and in life – was trying to separate the pure from the sordid. Like a lot of teenage boys, he felt guilty about his own desires and he tried to elevate them through poetry.

I always had the feeling with Anno that I had to catch up – he had it all figured out somehow. Because he was so complete, so perfect, everyone wanted a piece of him – and now they can have it, through his poetry. He still affects everything I think about, everything I do.

The Great White Balloon was taken down shortly after the London Eye opened. But there is still a rough patch of grass where the moorings used to be and I will never forget being 100 feet above London, floating on love and hot air.

I sat by myself past the bridge by the great white balloon,
with my guilt by the great yellow moon.
This place where I ventured with fire and with fear
of the devil's omnipotent moon.

And the wound in my heart bled into my brain,
and the wind blew the rain in my eyes,
and I thought it was tears, and I cried at my being in love.
And I writhed in the light of the moon strung above –
that lunatic moon hung above.

My senses were sharp!
And volcanic her lingering, luminous soul, we had rolled in
the raw light of manic delusions and danced like the dead.

Her head in my hands, like a spell, like a charm,
like a luminous psalm for my psyche, my arms are wrapped
tightly. and loosely enfolding the night
are the folds of desire that are tight round my throat,
and the music of madness floats on hind legs
through the dregs of my sunken serenity.

Do you trust me to cling to your word? For I do –
every letter.
I'm better off burned by your fire than cold to the world,
my desire.
My earliest memory.

We're animals trying to be angels,
but we are not able to know without words;
yet we grow without knowing the verb,
and we love without grammar.

Summer, 2000



Alice Courthard, 22, was Anno's first crush. She is now an English student at the University of Liverpool.

I knew that Anno fancied me, but he never told me – I don't think you know how to when you are 12. We met when I was cast for one of the parts in his father's film *The Cement Garden*. I certainly fancied him. I wrote in my diary "I love Anno." He was chubby then, not the beautiful man he became, but he was always such gentle, easy company and he had those wonderful, almond-shaped eyes. Anno belonged to this unique Bohemian acting dynasty, and yet he never saw a difference between himself and anyone else. That was very endearing.



We stayed close. Anno was always going somewhere or doing something, but he would ring out of the blue and we would meet up. I knew he had this reflective, introverted side, but it is only now, when I read the poetry, that I realise what a big part of him that was.

Anno had this ability to think about death in a way that most of us can't without being freaked out. This poem talks about going to a place in the sky. It gave me goosebumps when I first read it – I feel I can see him talking to that star.

Anno's poetry filled me with sadness – I felt, when I read it, that there was so much about him I wish I had known before. But it has also been my comfort – the thing that has helped me come to terms with his death. I don't have to be shocked that he is not here, because so much of him still is.

The stars are out in hordes tonight,
and he's wished on every one three times.
He's out of words and he's out of rhymes,
so he pities himself and he lies.

And a star sees his chance and he beckons the boy
to give ear to the bargain he brings.

"I can see her from here," he says with a grin,
and a tone that is ridden with mocking.

"There! Out in the half light
She's out in the dark, with her sword and her spear!
And I'll give her a kiss for each tear that you've cried
in forfeit of both of your eyes."

"But what good are my other four senses!" he screams.

"What good is taste, with no method or means
to relate it to that of her tongue?

I can drink and get drunk on the same wine,
but it's not the same place, and it's not the same time,
and it's not the same look in her eyes.

And what good is smell,
when the scent that I let take my nose as a hostage
has faded and lost all its meaning?

I've been falling and feeling my way through the night
though I know it in vain
in some hope that I might find a flower that bore the same fire.

Restless and tired, I wake from my dreams,
and my nostrils are as clean as the sterile white bed
where she lay with her head to one side
as she called out *my* name in *my* night.

And what good are sound waves
that don't bring the noise of her name to my ear?
I thought once that fear came in silence.
Now, though I fear not, I loathe
just the violence of words that aren't hers.
And how can I know what she feels like to touch?



How can I know what is real and what's not,
when all that I've got here to go on is dreams,
and a sun that makes vows, that he's not what he seems?"

So he turned to the star and he threw him a smile,
and he said: "So you see, all I have are my eyes
and four coloured photos, and a few faded lines
that she wrote and left floating on sour white paper."

The star looked above to no maker and laughed,
and the boy cast his eyes to the west and laid claim
to a spot in the sky. And he gave it her name,
and he cried for the star, for he longed for a place
for those things that we treasure but hate.

Autumn, 1998



PIPPA HALL, 40, who was Anno's nanny from when he was five months old. She now works as a casting agent.

I was only 18 when I started looking after Anno, so I've always felt that we sort of grew up together. He was such a mad, adventurous, puppy-like kid. If he had had a tail, it would have been wagging from when he was three till he was about 12. His boundless enthusiasm meant he was always having accidents. He had a funny lisp and I am sure it was because he knocked his front tooth out on an ice skating trip when he was seven.

Anno was sensitive - he couldn't bear people to be unhappy. But he never brooded himself - if ever he was upset, he would just say what was on his mind. There were always big hugs and laughs when we were together – he had a wicked sense of humour.

I knew nothing about his poetry. Discovering it after he died was like finding treasure. I love *Nine More Years* because it reminds me of the first few days after he had gone. We all gathered at the family home in London, and it was an amazingly emotional time, but strangely, not gloomy. This poem expresses exactly how it felt – it was as if he were still there. He writes: "May I join you for a while." Anno, you are always with us.

Nine Years

Hold on to who you know – you are my dearest friend,
you've got me climbing in your heat and bending in my sleep.
I'll weep for those who dare not reap your wonder.
I wonder sometimes how you hold your ground
on an earth that's far too small yet too far ...

Round – drowned in whisky and wine to the sounds of crime –
may I join you for a while?

You are the king of kingdoms dark
that hold my sorrows and my sparks,

and hold my heart in icy brambles.
Got my eye caught and tangled in thorns –
remember floodlights on our skin.
Let us toast to the ghost of the future –
spread your dark angelic wings.

you suffer for our crimes you like it when it rains
I like it when you smile you like it when it stings
I like it when you reign.
Will you yield at the sign on the water?
Will you wait upon the waves?

Or in your clouds or in your cave or in your temple
at the weir of my dreams ...

justninemoreyearsuntilweleave

(For JS)

Summer, 1999



Pippa and Anno in 1982



JUDY CAMPBELL, 87, grandmother. Matriarch of the family, Judy is an actress who rose to stardom as one of Noel Coward's leading ladies in the 1940s. Anno was the second of her nine grand-children.

I think people were always pleased to see Anno, because he was pleased to see them. He lit up your days. I remember him taking me to the cinema. The only thing on worth seeing was Gladiator, and I thought I would be too scared to sit through it. But he bought us both tickets and then held my hand all the way through.

We had the best times together. A couple of summers ago, I was having a party. I didn't think he would want to come – but he did. I worried about who he might talk to, but half way through, I turned and

saw him sitting quietly to one side, writing. I like to think he was writing this poem.

Of all his work, this is the one that speaks to me. I am the one close to my grave, hoping for an intervention that will either take it further way or bring it closer, but just make it easier. That he, who was so young, could write about the feelings of his grandmother says everything about the bond between us.

Time, alone, spent thinking,
drinking sorrow in its purest form.
Time, spent waiting for tomorrow.
Time, or lack thereof, is taking over,
and my grave is getting closer.

And though I'm miles away, my arms are open,
and I'm hoping for an accident ...
Some tragic intervention of
the Gods.

Winter, 1998/99



LOU DOILLON, 21, actress.

Lou, an actress and daughter of Jane Birkin, was Anno's cousin. Although based in Paris, Lou spent many holidays and Christmases at the Birkin's farmhouse in Wales.

Anno was like my big brother, my man. He used to hug me so strongly, and that's been one of the worst things, - knowing that I will never have those hugs again. When someone dies, it is easy to remember their wonderful side, but I loved Anno with all his sides – laughing, giving, sad, crazy. And maddening - like when so often, I would try to talk to him and he would carry on playing his guitar, and ignore me. At family Christmases, he and I would talk all night – long after everyone else had gone to bed.

We made promises together. We promised that we would each have children, and that was why I was so angry when he died, because I was pregnant and he had promised to be there. After my son Marlowe was born, I instinctively picked up the phone to call Anno. I am still stupid enough sometimes to believe that he is alive.

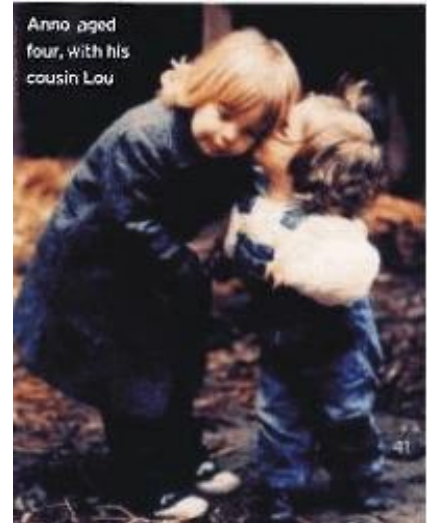
I can't listen to his music but the good thing about his poetry is that I can hear his fragile, beautiful voice without it hurting too much. I love *Touched* the most because whatever you imagine is behind it, it is a poem of hope.

Touched

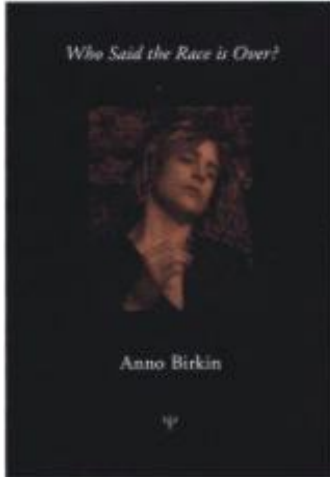
I saw from this place at the foot of my grave
I gave myself in awe to childish hope and promise.
The tomb it was dug by those whom you know
and love and trust.
There's just room enough to put you in.

And you fear that you lust,
and you know what you love must be clean.
And you fear what you've seen,
what you've touched, what you've been.
And I'm touched.
I'm not naming anyone at all.

I'm soon to return,
there's soon to be fire in my veins again.
I'm almost home.
I'm almost ready.



Summer, 1999



Share Anno's literary legacy

A book of Anno Birkin's poems, Who Said the Race is Over?, will be published on 9 December, price £6, with all profits going to charity. The book contains 55 semi-illustrated poems, with introductions by the writer/director Bruce Robinson, and Anno's former English teacher, Ian Warwick.

To order a copy for £6, or two copies for £10, plus 99p p&p, call the YOU Bookshop on 0870 162 5006, or visit www.you-bookshop.co.uk. You can also write to YOU Bookshop, Unit 17, St James's Court, Warrington WA4 6PS, enclosing your name, address and a cheque made payable to YOU Bookshop.

Dreams of Waking, the album Anno recorded with Kicks joy Darkness, is available from www.amazon.co.uk or through local record shops. A bonus CD of Anno's earlier work is included, as well as a video of Zie Punk Volk and Touched. These and other tracks can be heard online at www.anno.co.uk, which also carries additional poems, drawings, photos and video clips, as well as a downloadable Anthology – how Anno saw the world, and how the world saw him.



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