One's first impression when one meets Archie Hill is of a 14-year-old who has been in a roughhouse too many. There's a bobbishness about him, a schoolboy humour, a predilection for taking potshots out of windows with his air-guns. The scar over his lip and the slightly indirect route which his nose takes in its journey down his face look like battle honours won by a member of William's gang in the war against the Hubert Laneites. In fact, Hill is 31; and though much of his life has been a truant one, it has been frighteningly un-Williamish.

After a Black Country childhood of almost unredeemed bloodiness, he went through service in the RAF in the Middle East, where he became a drunk; he got a job as a police constable, and was dismissed for being incorrigibly tight on duty; he was incarcerated in mental hospitals and was given electric-shock therapy; he did a two-year spell in jail; and he struck rock-bottom when he landed up as a meths drinker under the arches.

If, to begin with, society was not kind to Archie Hill, Hill was even unkind to himself; he has been one of the maestros of the art of self-destruction, a determined suicide who tried to finish himself off in slower and more gruesome ways than any of society's executioners have ever contemplated.

The morning I met him, he'd just shot two pigeons. Yet, when we walked into the lane, he was troubled at the discovery of a dead fledgling at the side of the road. That small paradox offers an important clue. For there has always been a fledgling innocence in Archie Hill which even he couldn't destroy. It shows in his face and in his writing. When, years ago, he decided to give drinking, he began to nurse the fledgling in himself.

O
... and now he takes a just pride in the sturdy bird it has grown into. Archie Hill was taught to think of himself as worthless. His parents told him so—and so did his teachers, his jallers, his psychiatrists... even his fellow-winos told him he was rubbish. He has proved them all gloriously wrong, and he has earned his right to crow. Hill is not a modest man, at least not in the conventional sense. Almost as soon as you meet him you hear of his triumphs: he'll tell you how many copies he expects his new book to sell in the United States, and how big an advance he's going to demand on his next one. The first thing he showed me was a glowing review (in a trade paper for publishers) of the reissue of his autobiography, A Cage of Shadows. Indeed, he has a better memory for his good reviews than any writer I've met. Have you read what Tony Parker wrote? "Archie Hill has never learned to write"; and I hope to God he never does. Mr Hill takes the English language and batters it into submission."

I was pleased with that. Very pleased. I think that's good, don't you? He'll tell you how he once put down Lord Longford ("I told him he was having a love affair with God at an emotional level. That stomped him."). And, how he scored off the BBC Accounts Department when they were rather slow in coughing up a fee for one of his broadcasts.

I got straight back on the phone to Portland Place. "Hill here," I said. "I want to speak to Curran." They put me through right away, and there's Curran on the end of the phone.

"Lord Hill," he says. "No, Archie Hill, you aren't going to get any money." There was this long pause, and then he said. "Well, I suppose we'd better talk about it, haven't we..." Next day, I got my cheque.'

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When he read in the paper that a senior official in the Home Office, who'd told Hill that he'd always be a second-class citizen since he was an ex-convict, had suffered a heart attack. Archie Hill sent him a telegram at the hospital:

**CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR HEART**

He quicklygrabholdof:Plato, Christ, poaching, Ficino, the best make of airgun, Klaus Fuchs (the atom spy, whom Hill met in jail and who was his chief intellectual mentor), Beppe, the landlord of the local pub (a famous wit)...

His prose style shows the same haste and capacity. It's like a poacher's net, thrown out to catch as much as it can of experience on the wing. Every paragraph bulges with perceptions, some of them obvious, some gleamingly new. More than anything else, Hill's writing communicates his enormous excitement in just looking at, smelling, listening to and thinking about the world he lives in. If he's notably immodest about society, he makes up for it by being humble before life. Reading him or hearing him talk, you quickly catch that deep, modest, an invincible capacity for wonder.