

CALLING THE MOON

a selection of poems

by

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Kilnsea
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FOREWORD

Poems can come from a variety of sources but often they may be inspired by another person's chance remark, comment, or written word. I am grateful for such inspiration primarily and superabundantly to my wife, Jan, who is always my first and best critic. I am also grateful to some of my fellow-poets and friends on PoemHunter.com who have helped to inspire and suggest themes for many of my poems. They include – but the list is by no means all-inclusive – Tiffany Etter of Vineland, USA, Kavya Murthy of Bangalore, India, Rita El Khoury of Beirut, Lebanon, and especially Arsiema Berhane of Asmara, Eritrea, with whom I co-wrote the poem, *If There's Beer in Heaven I Want to Be There*. I also want to thank another co-writer, my neighbour, Sandra Shann, with whom I collaborated on the poem, *Spurn Light*. I am most grateful to them and to any others whom I may have omitted to mention.

INTRODUCTION

The selection presented in the following pages covers most of the poems that I have written over approximately the last two years from late 2002, when I first began writing poetry as a hobby, until the present, early 2006. The poems are listed in rough chronological order. They cover a wide range of both subjects and styles. Topically they tend to reflect (naturally) many of my own interests and preoccupations. Since I live just two fields away from the sea and have been associated with it and attracted to it throughout my life, there are many sea-related poems in the collection. Other themes stem from my interest and fascination with Egyptology while readers may be surprised by the number of 'rat' poems; it is simply because we have kept pet rats for several years and found them to be lovable and rewarding pets. I am not so sure about their wild cousins although two of them have provided subjects for poems! I like to experiment with different kinds and styles of poems so that here will be found humorous poems, serious poems, long poems, short poems, narrative poems, found poems, collage poems, and both rhymed and unrhymed poems. Some are written in blank verse while others are written in a variety of formal styles. Here I have been much influenced by Robin Skelton's rich source book containing descriptions and examples of poetic forms from all over the world, both ancient and modern; they are to be found in his *The Shapes of Our Singing* (2002), which I would recommend to anyone. Most of my poems have already been published on that wonderful on-line poetry site PoemHunter.com, and I am much indebted to friends that I have made on that site for help and inspiration with many of these poems.

High Tide at Night

I can hear the far off roaring
of the breakers in the darkness
as they pound upon the shoreline,
and the curlews softly calling
are but voices and as lonely
as the moon that calls the tides in.

On Holding a Granite Cobble Found on the Beach

How many tides
have rolled it round,
this stone I hold
warm in my hand?

Rose-pink and grey
it is, you'd say,
the sky at dawn,
or held this way,
the silver glitter
of sun on water.

Sea-washed and smooth
it seems to breathe,
familiar there
like an old friend,
or a father's warm palm
to the hand of a child.

Tidal Rhythm

River	like a
Humber's	
tidal	sleeping
	living
waters	creature's
ebbing,	
flowing,	gentle
	steady
daily	breathing
lap the	
shoreline,	never
	ever
rising,	ceasing.
falling	

Taking Shelter in a Summer Shower

Do you recall
That afternoon
When summer rain
Had soaked right through
To drench the boughs
Of the magical yew,
How the wine dark bark
Of the iron trunk,
So smooth and true
Beneath the leaves
Glistened and gleamed
With a glowing light
As rich and red
As the lowering sun
Before the night?

Hawthorn Blossom in the City

Some say that Hull's an ugly city
All grime and muck and traffic fumes
In truth a place that's far from pretty
But have you seen its hawthorn blooms?

We went to Hull by car today,
The sun was shining on the trees,
While here and there white-castled may
Reared crowns of snow above the leaves.

You could not see the muck and grime
Nor hear the traffic's constant bray
For here was other space and time
Where ruled the lovely flowering may.

After Rain

And now at last
the rain has passed.
See the flowers
freshened by showers
their petals bright
reflecting light
In garden beds
they raise their heads
and by the breeze
are gently teased
to fling off drops
Like little mops
in circles twirled
before they're furled
and put away
for another day.

The Pond

I know a secret place where time stands still
Nowhere so lovely on a summer's day
As that calm pond that lies below the hill
Unseen by folk who chance to pass that way.

Today we two in quiet contentment sat
And watched the damselflies electric blue
Dart in and out among the reeds, where gnat
And midges danced, and worshipped summer too.

Above the hum and drone of insect sound
Rich notes of birdsong filled the quivering air
Like incense clouds above this holy ground
Where with all life our happiness we share.

Nature by Night

Slowly the sun
sinks in the west
leaving the land
lonely, forlorn
lit only by
light of the moon.

Things of the night
shun what is bright.
Hear the owls hoot
hunting the small
creatures that dread
death from the sky.

High in the dark
under the stars
leather-winged bats
flicker and flap.
Better by far
biding indoors.

Wait for the dawn,
return of the sun
when we may see
what we prefer
Nature to be—
sweetness and light.

Avalanche

Beneath the clouds the rocky cliff
Rose up a thousand feet at least
And seemed to dominate the vale
Like some enormous castle wall
By giants built to subjugate
All lesser races such as we.

The climb was classed as 'very severe'
Far harder than I'd done before
But nonetheless the time had come
To kit ourselves with ropes and slings
With cramponed boots and carabiners
And all the tackle climbers use.

The rock felt good both hard and sound
As reaching up I slowly groped
And found a lovely 'jug' to grasp.
No other thought had I beyond
Where next to place my hands and feet
No time for fear to take a hold.

At last I reached my fellow climber
And found myself an anchorage
My back to rock on a narrow ledge.
It was a shock to see below
Between my feet like tiny flies
A flock of jackdaws wheeling there
In miles and miles of empty air.

And on the snaking valley road
A car and bus in slow procession
Unreal they seemed, like children's toys,
So far away they made no noise.
Alas I had forgot the rule
That tyro climbers don't look down!

Exposure hit me like a fist.
The ledge now shrank to inches only
And all my limbs had turned to water.
I could not move or think at all
Stuck half-way up a vertical cliff
One step away from certain death.

How long the fit of panic lasted
I cannot say, it seemed an age
But very slowly strength returned
And by the time I had to start

My feet could move to face the rock,
My thoughts return to concentrate
Where next to place my hand and foot.

We carried on that afternoon
Up chimneys, overhangs and cracks
Until at last the final pitch
And then what joy to reach the summit.
This climb is known as 'Avalanche'
It is the longest route in Wales.

All day we'd climbed without a rest
And lying on the springy turf
I realized I'd passed a test
And learnt something about myself
To help me fight the demon Fear.
Whenever now it shows its face
I simply murmur "Avalanche".

For Jan

In all the years we've been together
Long years that seem not years at all
Our lives are now so intertwined
Vines themselves could not cling closer.
Each day I think I love you more
Yes, more and more, it's true, I promise.
On this your birthday I rejoice,
Utterly glad that you're my wife!

Miss Nellie's in the 'Fifties

The pub is old and still is lit by gas
Its taproom walls and ceiling golden brown,
With faded pictures from a bygone age,
A moralizing text that's framed in oak
And last year's farming calendar, half-torn.

In quiet comradeship, and sitting by the door
As custom rules, the old men smoke their pipes
Tonight no different from a hundred such.
Across the room around a trestle table
Sit four young men with glasses of Old Ale.

With ears alert to calls for another pint
Miss Nellie, bent and frail, is busy at the sink
Her eyes are bright, her movements quick and bird-like
She wears a long dark skirt and neat black boots.
No-one would dare to risk her disapproval.

The four young men, embarking on another round,
Have almost reached that blissful stage wherein
One thinks to grasp Life's deepest inner meaning,
But strives in vain to put it into words.
Miss Nellie gently hints that time is "getting on".

The pub is old and still is lit by gas
Its taproom walls and ceiling golden brown,
With faded pictures from a bygone age.
Each night is played again this self-same scene,
The young philosophize, the old just dream.

A Surprise Visit

At four o'clock she knocked at the door
I'd never seen a goddess before.
She wore a dress of shimmering light
Around her waist a cord drawn tight.

Upon her head a crescent moon
(Not quite the thing for the afternoon)
And strangest yet a pair of horns
Such as you'd see on elves and fauns.

Her eyes below that rounded brow
Reminded me of a Jersey cow.
Those features soft and feminine
Demanded that I let her in.

She'd come to us with a tale of woe
Her car had stalled and would not go.
She had a meeting with Thoth and Isis
And other immortals, but now this crisis!

She'd lent her mobile to Father Ra
So was not able to phone the AA.
Her eyes began to fill with tears
As she recounted all her fears.

I calmed her down with a cup of tea
And let her use the phone for free—
Not much I know, I would've done more
For not everyone gets to help Hathor.

A Camera Has the Trick of Freezing Time

The photo's small and rather creased but there
We are, a family group in black and white.
A camera has the trick of freezing time.
We're posed before a boat outside our house,
It is to be a sort of caravan
For holidays. It has a cabin newly built
Upon a hull that's often sailed the Humber.
Each one of us is smiling in the sun.
The cabin's shadow says it's afternoon,
The trees' and hedgerow's leaves proclaim it spring.

The War is over now. My father's home
On leave and looks relaxed. My mother's pleased,
I remember how she wept and prayed for him
On D-Day when his coaster carried troops
And petrol to the beach at Normandy.
My grandad stands erect and rather stiff,
And grandma, too, sits very upright, posed,
For both were born in Queen Victoria's reign.
Their daughter, Eileen, looks so young. I think
She misses wartime dances and romances.

And is that me, that boy with folded arms
And hair as fair as any Anglo-Saxon?
I cannot now recall what I was thinking then,
What it was like to be a boy of ten,
Now that my hair is grey and I've grown old
And all those people in that photograph
Are talking, laughing, drinking, full of life
Within my head though fifty years and more
Have passed, and all of them are long since dead.
A camera has the trick of freezing time.

A Special Low-cost Shuttle

Consultants have been tasked with formulating
A special low-cost shuttle
To provide a cheap, efficient, and friendly service
Based on consensus and inclusiveness.
In a vast universe of 100 trillion galaxies
Chuck Hunter was given the green light
To find that perfect designer treat
Using symbols such as lighted candles
But the view of how the voluntary service
Should be funded is changing
And Pringle, Gucci, and Chanel
With the Royal underwear suppliers, Rigby and Peller,
Whose certification will be subject to character
 references,
Need to attract younger people and those from minority
 groups.

In Cactus Pete's Casino
Slicked lips are a summer must
With whalesong, birdsong and rainshowers
And madness is photogenic.
There minerals and true seeds
Of moonlight and pillows,
Tea sets, glassware, lamps, and toby jugs
Provide the embodiment of elegance and refinement.
At almost 8 trillion miles
The dark side of life is
A pinprick of light from a dying star
Where the term, 'Dark' simply indicates that we believe
 it is there
For the hand has full mobility
And the cord uncoils in the open casket

A collage poem – sources: *Holderness Gazette, Yorkshire Evening News, Sunday Times Magazine, Pan Newsletter, East Yorkshire Coast News.*

Our Earthly Condition

It's very odd to think we all
Live out our lives on a spinning ball
Along with creatures strange and various—
The situation sounds precarious!
We share our lot with lice and rats,
With things that fly, like birds and bats
And savage sharks that live in water
Maintaining life by daily slaughter.
We're all up there in empty space
Flying along at a breathless pace,
And where we're going no-one knows,
It's best not to worry I suppose.

I Have Not Gone Away

When I am dead my dearest
Do not give way to grief
But put aside your misery
And let your heart be glad.
Remember how we watched the moon
And saw the sun in beauty rise.

My ashes you will scatter
Upon our mother sea
Then when you hear the breakers crash
Or mark the seagull's call
You'll truly know that I am there
Within the heart and life of all.

So when again you feel the breeze
Caress your cheek or stir your hair
Be sure, its gentle touch is mine
And when you hear the roaring gale
Or crack of thunder on the sea
You'll know that I am with you still —

I have not gone away.

In Memoriam

Alas he's gone our little friendly rat,
we'll miss that trusting paw, those gentle ways,
as snuggling close to us content he sat.
Where now that little eager furry face,
those twitching whiskers, beady eyes? Such grace!
Poor Jack, you should have lived as long again
had you but had your rightful span of days.
You've left us now for where there is no pain,
which should console, but yet I must complain
to lose so soon this loving pet and friend.
The world may scoff and show its harsh disdain,
forget that we all share the self same end.
So Jack, we'll say a very fond goodbye,
rememb'ring that at last we all must die.

A Secret Whisper

I rarely go by bus but when I do
For safety's sake I choose a seat well back.
Today the bus was crowded like a zoo,
My seat companion wore a plastic mac
He looked quite foreign, dark, and rather nervous
To break the ice I said "It's very warm",
He rolled his eyes and said that God would save us,
Began to rant and wildly wave his arm.
I looked around but no-one seemed to notice,
And I am jammed against the window, blocked,
So can't get past this madman now at prayer
Intoning loudly "God will not be mocked".
To calm him down I asked "Why are you here?"
"Suicide bomber", he whispered in my ear!

Poor Brown Rat

Verdigris budgibus
Rattus norvegicus
Innocent animal
Shunned by mankind.

Creature unfortunate
Nonconfrontational
Blamed for the Plague, you were
Falsely maligned*.

* The Plague was caused by a flea
carried by the Black Rat (*Rattus rattus*).

The Villanelle

The Villanelle's a tricky poem to pen
Such rigid rules for rhymes you'll seldom see,
The same old lines keep coming round again.

Lines one and three must always finish when
Their final rhymes each with the other do agree,
The Villanelle's a tricky poem to pen.

Line three you'll see once more before line ten
(It's really nine but you will pardon me).
The same old lines keep coming round again.

It's back again at line fifteen, and then
At line nineteen—you've guessed—it is line three!
The Villanelle's a tricky poem to pen.

Line one you'll know, if you have acumen,
Is very much like three: their rules don't disagree,
The same old lines keep coming round again.

And now, thank God, it's nearly line nineteen
When from this poem's fiendish rules I'm free.
The Villanelle's a tricky poem to pen,
The same old lines keep coming round again.

First Love

My first true love was only seven
Her hair was fair, her eyes were blue,
She was an angel straight from heaven.
We shared a desk at infants' school.

Beneath its lid our knees were pressed
Together tightly, warm and friendly
Like two little birds in their own nest.
She was my love, I loved her tenderly.

The golden hairs upon her arm
Even today I can recall,
That clear skin and gentle charm
Of my young sweetheart, Ann Goodall.

**Sitting in My Garden on August Bank Holiday Monday
Afternoon**

The cheerful lemon yellow faces of the marigolds,
The pink flowers of the mallow leaning seductively out from the
hedge and swaying on their stalks,
The twisting column of beanstalks with their high red-lipped
flowers and the sinuous long green beans that hang below,
The tasselled tufts of the honeysuckle blossom,
The little black hoverfly that sits motionless on empty air,
and seems so intent on something in front of it,
The flies that suddenly appear on sunlit surfaces,
The busy buzz of a passing bee on an important errand,
The glory and splendour of the Red Admiral flexing its wings on
a spike of buddleia,
Three downy feathers floating in the dirty water of the bird
bath,
The black-capped great tit always on the look-out for its next
meal and quick to seize every opportunity,
The strident cheeps of the self-confident extrovert sparrows,
The starlings busy and bustling, coming and going,
The distant clanks of farm machinery,
The sea breeze that suddenly ruffles my hair,
And the high white clouds overhead in a sky of heavenly blue.

Joey Brown and the New Order

After the War new suburbs rose
And builders did a roaring trade
But as with every new advance
There is a price that must be paid.

Between the new neat bungalows
Lived Joey Brown, an ageing gypsy
Who walked about in tattered clothes
And kept a string of shaggy ponies,
A dozen chickens, goats and dogs,
His yard a meeting place for cronies
And children from the neighbourhood
Who gathered there to have a ride
On Joey's cart if they were good.

But his new neighbours found it hard
To live next door to Joey's yard,
Petitioned the Council to close it down,
A disgrace, they said, to Beverley town,
Remove the gypsy, dogs and all.
The Council resolved to build a wall
To hide old Joey from the public eye.
This wall when built was nine feet high,
A monument to the middle class's
Desire to shun the unwashed masses.

This all took place in Pighill Lane,
A name uncouth and far too plain
So now it's known as Woodhall Way
And quite unspoiled we're glad to say.
We keep up standards, guard our values,
That yard is now a courtyard mews!

Hymn to the Sun

All hail to the Sun at the dawn
Rejoice at his birth in the east,
Be ready to stand on the shore
Each morning to see that sublime
Sacramental ascent from the sea.
Give praise to the Ancient of Days,
The giver of light and of warmth,
Imperial ruler of Earth
And all of her planetary kin.
We bathe in his brightness and glory,
Give honour and reverence to Him.
His names are both splendid and legion,
Adonis, Sol, Helios and Ra,
Apollo and Titan and Phoebus,
He is both our Father and Star.

Hymn to the Moon

Sacred to Isis our mother the Moon
Ancient companion and daughter of Earth
Waxing and waning she marks out our days,
Changes our moods and the flux of our blood.
Mistress of tides of the sea's ebb and flow,
Lantern of light in the darkness of night
Let us give praise to her beauty and grace,
Lovely and slim as a maiden when young
Golden and splendid she shines at the full.
See how she sails through the clouds up above
Graceful and calm like a galleon she rides
Breasting the billows of night's flowing tides.
Goddess so beautiful, goddess of love,
Many have worshipped her down through the years,
'Luna', 'Diana', 'Astarte' the names
Given to praise all her beautiful forms.
Harvest moon, hunter's moon, crescent or full,
who is immune to her magical spell?
Queen of all heaven, she reigns up above,
Come and behold her in reverence and love.

September Afternoon

How lovely was that autumn day,
That late September afternoon
When the sun was high in a cloudless sky,
In an ocean of heavenly blue,
Just a gentle breeze to stir the leaves
Of the garden trees, while the hum of bees
Was soothing to those who lazily dozed
In the shimmering heat that made you believe
It was really July, and only the apples
That lay on the lawn made you remember
It was now September. The mallow flowers
Were still in bloom, and butterflies
Like handkerchiefs around them fluttered
Then flew across to the buddleia bush
With its bountiful nectar-rich blossom
And now and again a quarrel broke out
When the garden sparrows chirruped and chirped
And feathers flew, but it didn't last
For peace like a blanket floated down
While overhead the swallows swooped
And turned and wheeled in graceful flight.
Such light and warmth and teeming life
Uplifts your heart, makes your spirits sing
So glad to be a child again
At home in the bosom of good Mother Earth.

On Seeing Mars at its Closest for 60,000 Years

Walking
Last night
After dark
To the pub
At the side
Of the wide
River's mouth
With my wife,
And her brother
We saw
In the sky
Gleaming

Dull red
The planet
Of Mars
God of War.
It was brighter
By far
Than the stars
And closest to Earth,
We'd been told,
Since that night
Long ago
When those fur-clad

Slouching
And hairy
Neanderthal
Hunters
Had gazed
Up in awe

And surprise
At that red
Shining light
In the sky.
Perhaps it was seen
Beside a wide river

By a Neanderthal
Man and his wife,
And her brother.
Did they,
I wonder,
Have a name
For that light?
Did they,
Like us,
Think of war
When they saw
That red glow?

Did you know
That we all
Will be dead
Come the day
When Mars
Is as close
Once again?
Who then
Will there gaze
At that red
Shining lamp
In the sky?

The Once*

That afternoon though I had learnt to read
I found the public library rather boring,
My mother, wanting peace, said I could go
Upstairs alone to see the town museum.
I climbed the winding stair and pushed the door,
It creaked, no other sound and no-one there.
The air was still and angled light cast shadows,
The room was filled with cabinets and things
That seemed as though they all were waiting for
Someone to come into their quietness.

I tip-toed down the aisle with nervous steps
And passed the old town stocks in solid oak
Complete with metal clasps and ancient locks,
A row of slender clay churchwarden pipes,
A puffed-out fish of football size and spikes
All round its leathered skin – a floating mine,
And here a fire engine like a baby's pram,
Its handles hinged to make a water pump.

In this dark corner, glaring through the glass,
A creature like a leopard stands, as tall as me
And twice as long. I read its name aloud–
"The Once". It seems to crouch, about to spring,
With fierce glittering eyes and teeth like knives,
Its claws as sharp as broken glass, designed
To rip and tear at living flesh. It looked
At me beyond the glass and through the stillness
Of that quiet afternoon, and then I knew
This monster meant to get me, and I fled.

That night I could not sleep, I knew the Once
Had not forgotten me but was it still
Locked in its case or has it magic power
To step outside through solid half-inch glass
As darkness comes to shroud the silent room?
Does it softly pad along that quiet aisle,
Go past the fire pump like a pram and by
The puff-fish with its swollen leather skin,
The clay churchwarden pipes upon their stand?
Does it pause before the heavy door or pass
Right through and down the winding stair and out
Into the street to sniff the air and seek
This house where now I lie in fear and dread?

Is it slinking through the streets with measured tread?
Oh, is it coming here?

Last week I visited my natal town
And went to see the library and that room.
Perhaps I should have known that all things change,
The room refurbished, light and airy had
Become a gallery showing modern art.
I asked the staff what had become of all
The old museum stock, the fish, the pipes,
The fire engine that looked so like a pram,
And especially that animal, the 'leopard'.
They did not know where it had gone, but I—
I think I know.

I think it's slinking like a shadow still
Through silent streets, or padding softly like
A nightmare Nemesis along those dark
And hidden labyrinthine pathways of
My brain.

**Pronounced ONSE — 'Once', I later realized was a misspelling
for 'ounce'—the snow leopard*

The Millennium Yew

On Gallows Hill by Skidby Mill
There grows a golden yew
On ground where once the hangman did
What hangmen have to do.

The tree was planted in that place
To mark the new millennium.
Treat it with care, it will be there
For many a moon to come.

Unlike those felons hung by hemp
The yew tree's life is long,
A thousand years or more may pass
Yet still its growth is strong.

You can be sure that you and I,
Our very names obscured,
Will have become rich loam again
Before this tree's matured,

And Skidby Mill will lie in ruin,
Strange structures span the sky,
Ten thousand things will rise and fall,
And many live and die.

Long years will pass and dusks and dawns,
Cold winds and rain and sun,
The seasons each will follow on
And still the yew be young.

And when at last it has grown old,
How will the world look then?
Will Man be there, or will the Earth
Have said to us 'Amen'?

Rooks

This morning when we walked beneath the trees
Where rooks were busy building nests, you said
It made your spirits rise to hear them caw,
They brought you thoughts of spring. I disagreed.
When I hear rooks, I always think of Johnno.

We both were matelots and shared each watch,
He was a regular, I was National Service
And glad to hear the yarns that he could spin
About the many ships in which he'd served,
His runs ashore in ports like Singapore,

The time he'd spent in China and the girl
Who did his dhobeying there, and what a wrench
It was to leave, his sadness and her tears,
What it was like to sail aboard a carrier—
He much preferred a smaller ship like this.

And so we passed the long and quiet hours
Of the morning or the middle watch each night
While our fast frigate sped through northern seas
From Iceland's freezing waters to the swells
Of Biscay's Bay, and then swung north again

Past Shannon, Rockall, Bailey, on patrol,
And when from time to time the ship would roll
Unconsciously my watchmate turned his chair
And slid across the deck to where I'd wedged
Myself beside my set with headphones on

There listening for a brief transmission from
An 'enemy' (really Nato) submarine,
Then as the roll reversed he'd turn his chair
And slide right back across the deck.
We had this wireless office to ourselves

And got to know each other very well
Before we docked. I was the first to leave
The ship, for Johnno had a motorbike
And meant to spend the weekend with his girl,
Fiancée he had said (I wondered if

She knew about the Chinese dhobey lass!)
Before I left the ship I took my ration
Of tobacco and 'blue-liners'—cigarettes
And took the bus from Portsmouth to our base
Near Bristol, glad to be ashore again.

Johnno himself was not due back until
The stroke of oh-nine-hundred Monday next.
It was a lovely autumn dawn when he set off
But misty, thickening further west to fog
So dense he did not see the concrete post

Plumb in the middle of a roundabout.
He died before he knew what he had hit,
A fractured skull and multiple lacerations.
We all were shocked to hear such dreadful news,
He was so young and young men did not die.

That day I found myself enrolled to be
Included in his funeral firing party.
All week, we trained intensively and learned
The art of sloping arms, the proper way
To do the slow and ceremonial march.

We went by service bus to the funeral, dressed
Resplendent in white gaiters, caps and belts,
Stiff lanyards, silks and gold-badged number ones.
Even now I can recall the steps of that
Slow march, the country church, the open grave

The weeping girl, collapsed with hopeless grief,
The sudden crack, as we the firing party,
And Johnno's friends and shipmates fired a volley
And all the startled rooks gave voice and rose
Together in a cloud above the churchyard trees.

The Six o' Clock News

Tonight the tide is running high
And from my garden in the dark
I hear the hidden curlews call
And just beyond, two fields away,
The muffled roaring of the sea.

Above my head the empty sky
Save far away the shining stars
And lighted splendour of the moon.
The air is cold upon my skin
The wind has blown and moaned all day.

The lighted kitchen is inviting
I heed its call and go inside,
In time to catch the evening news.
Of great concern as usual
Is football, opium of the people,

A record transfer's fallen through,
Supporters clash, abroad a stabbing,
A player's failed a drug test,
Comments sought from managers,
The clubs, F.A. and Premier League,

And so it goes, until at last,
It's time for Northern Ireland.
And here we learn a new peace deal
That everyone had hoped would solve
That island's ancient tribal feuds

Has broken down, collapsed again
And each side bitterly blames the other.
The next item goes on to cover
The Tories' annual conference—
I leave the room preferring darkness and the moon.

A Japanese-English Phrasebook

From a news item reporting an assault on a Japanese tourist who had unwittingly insulted a person by using a phrasebook deliberately mistranslated by an ex-employee of the Japanese Tourist Board bearing a grudge against his former employers

The Japanese are said to be
Of all the nations in the world
The most polite and courteous
So it was strange to hear one say
"Excuse me please, you b----r, you
Can kiss my a--e, thank you, good day!"
It was not what he meant to say,
He simply wished to ask the way
And was surprised when he was slapped
Across the face and chased half-way
Along the street to his hotel
Wherein he learnt that others too
Had found the natives just as wild
And prone to sudden violent rage.

Ishuro Nakamura, clerk
Translator to the Tourist Board
Was sacked. He bore a grudge and planned
Revenge, compiled a travellers' guide
Containing mistranslations, thus
"What is the cost of X or Y?"
Became in Nakamura's book
A direct sexual invitation,
"How pleasant is this sunny weather!"
In Japanese was rendered as
"I understand your mother is
A prostitute", while "Kindly send
The chef my compliments" became
"This soup is vomit, take it back!"

The repercussions were immense,
No less than fifteen Japanese
Were summonsed to appear in court
On charges that they had disturbed
The peace and three were up for GBH.
The phrasebook had to be withdrawn
Some fifty thousand copies trashed.
Returning tourists flying home,
Quite traumatized, upset and shocked
Were offered counselling paid for by
The Tourist Board. There was no sign
Of Nakamura, he had fled;
His phrasebook now immortalized
Is greatly prized by book collectors.

Sartori

This lovely morning I went walking
In a meadow where the air was sweet
It made my feet go dancing over
Growing grass and clumps of clover
Bird's-foot trefoil, bedstraw, thistle
Nectar-sweet for butterflies.
Bright buzzing bees were everywhere
While in the air the gentle yet
Insistent hum of hoverflies
Seemed like a psalm to praise the sun,
And all around, above, beyond
Birds called and sang their songs
Of summer and of love until
Quite suddenly all time stood still
And like a dream I could not tell
Just where I stopped, and where all else
Began, and in that boundless state
I smiled for I had found the heart
Of my true home, my family
And I loved it and it was me.

The Tattoo

I bear a mark,
A spiral sign
In indian ink
Upon my arm.

No bigger than
A silver coin,
It calls to mind
A nautilus,

The yearly growth
Of mollusc shells,
The whirling winds
Of hurricanes,

Or spinning wheels
Of galaxies
Where stars are born
In clouds of gas.

It is a sign
Of nature's power
And energy,
The Universe

And All That Is,
Omnipotent,
And infinite.
Be glad, rejoice!

The Tjet or Knot of Isis

I own an amulet
of Ancient Egypt,
a magical charm
to keep me from harm.

It is a 'tjet',
the sacred knot
worn by the goddess,
mother of Horus,

the Lady Isis,
skilful and wise.
She will protect
who wears her tjet,

or so it is said
in the *Book of the Dead*.
Here I gaze at this charm
so cool in my palm,

the smell of incense
on its green faience.
I imagine it blessed
by a holy priestess

with sistrum and drum
whose steady low thrum
still reaches my ears
after three thousand years.

The Christmas Crib

From the crib in the pub
I carefully lifted out Joseph,
Set him up on the roof
Of the stable and then
Did the same with the infant, Jesus.
Getting into my stride, I put Mary
There next—it was easy as pie,

And even the kings gave no trouble.
Knowing oxen can often be awkward
And donkeys as stubborn as mules
I concluded it kinder and wiser as well
That the animals stayed in the barn,
But looking inside and seeing them there
All standing around, at a loss by the cot

I knew something drastic was needed
So I plucked from the sky that newly formed star—
So bright in the Bethlehem night—and put it inside
In the cot in the crib where the animals stood
And it gleamed and it shone and it glittered.
The shepherds were shocked but the kings understood
And the animals fell to their knees.

Mary and Joseph seemed secretly pleased
To take a back seat and be rid of the weight
Of such an intolerable burden. Baby Jesus kept mum
And, except for the ox, the animals stayed on their
knees.

In this straightforward way, without any fuss
Or palaver, I'm happy to say
I changed the whole course of history.

The Oil Painting

Across the cosy firelit room my eyes
Are drawn to rest upon the sombre hues
And heavy brushwork of a small oil painting;
It holds my gaze—the scene is strangely haunting.

Grey formless clouds drift by in a leaden sky
Above a domed cathedral standing high,
Tall-walled and casting shadows on the ground
Across the narrow streets and all around.

The darkened windows show no chink of light,
No worshippers will worship here tonight.
No sacred sounding music will be heard
Nor pious sermons on the Holy Word.

Beyond this Christian church of God
Lies wasteland and a distant pine tree wood
But nowhere in the picture as a whole
Can I see another single living soul,

This painting's like a window in the wall
And easy to get through if you are tall.
The air was cold and I was feeling stiff
As I approached the building looming like a cliff.

Its stones were damp and dripping wet with mould:
They must have been a thousand years old.
I found a solid wooden door and pushed,
It creaked ajar, then like a torrent rushed

All Mother Russia, tsars and peasants,
dancing bears and golden pheasants,
Volga boatmen, Leningrad mums
trilling pipes and beating drums.

Dancing, prancing down the aisle
came Rasputin with a smile
and hand in hand with Lermontov
was jolly Boris Godunov.

More and more came in procession
one by one in gay succession:
Pushkin's playing the balalaika
for First Space-dog, brave little Laika'.

Old Count Tolstoy is a brick
beating time with his walking stick;
in his beard he wears a rose
and plays clock golf with Gogol's nose.

Off they go into the night,
both of them a little tight,
Borodin and Dostoevsky
down the Rhine and up the Nevsky.

After them came good Prince Igor
marching his Cossacks four by four.
They each wore a medal of Peter the Great,
Tsar of all Russia and head of state.

Skiping, dancing, singing all
these jolly Russians had a ball,
lit up the night from distant Omsk
even as far as the city of Tomsk.

Whenever now that picture draws my eye
No longer do I feel I'd like to sigh
For I discovered in my sleeping trance
The soul of Russia still can sing and dance.

Beyond the Five-barred Gate

I know a secret place where time stands still,
It lies beyond a five-barred gate, enclosed
By hawthorn hedges heaped up high with drifting snow
In maytime when the barn owl glides, pale ghost,
Above the grasses. Here come timid deer
To drink beside the reed-fringed pond, it is
The haunt of fox and hare, a haven for
The hunted, safe home for mole and water vole.
At dusk you'll see white ghost moths dance above
The swaying rushes. Not far away from here
There is a place where others, too, may dance—
A druids' grove of seven trees that grow
In a magical ring, in a sacred circle of seven.
I'll give you their names, then when the next full moon
Sends down its silvery light you may join the dance
To celebrate our love for good Mother Earth.
Here in the ring the tallest tree is the cherry,
Then comes the crab, the copper beech, the rowan,
The stripling oak, the tree of streams, the alder,
And queen of all, that lovely small-leaved lime,
So let's link arms, and sing and dance, be merry.
Let the billow roll, let the wave of life uplift us
For it is Life itself we celebrate
In this magical place beyond the five-barred gate.

Happy Valentine!

How can I tell you what you mean to me?
All words fall short of what I want to say,
Proof of my love though deep as any sea
Perhaps must be expressed some other way.
You cannot know how each and every day
Very seldom passes but I think of you
And warmly smile within myself, and pray
Lest anything should come between us two.
Eternally to you I will be true
Nor will I ever leave you in the lurch.
True love will always by itself renew
Its own clear flame that nothing can besmirch.
No tempest, fire, nor storm or avalanche,
Ever, Love, can think our love to quench!

Like Hens

Like hens we humans love to turn upon
And peck the weakest birds within the roost,
It makes us feel a common bond of warm
Togetherness, where we enjoy a sense
Of moral worth and sinners get their just
Deserts. Sometimes the pack's attention's caught
By differences of race or colour, such
Is enough to make them targets for attack.
Sometimes it is belief or politics
That singles out the hunter's prey, just think
Of Salem, Massachusetts, and the zeal
With which the City Fathers sought out witches
Or Senator McCarthy's reign of terror,
And over here the bloody Gordon Riots
When Roman Catholics were hunted down.
Today's no different, we have not improved,
The targets now are Blacks or Pakistanis,
Asylum seekers, smokers, single mums—
Our species loves to hate, and what is more,
As Murdoch knows, it sells the tabloid papers.

Isis Reborn

Deep in the temple's dark sanctum stands she
Like a tall statue so still and so grave
Only the glow from her cheek and her brow
Speak of the heartbeat that pulses within.
Candlelight flickers between the twin horns
Lighting the moondisc she wears on her head.
Slim as a deer, see her shimmering dress
Fall like a wave from her throat to her feet.

Bare-footed priestesses praise her with song,
Dancing around her with rhythmical steps,
They rattle their sistrums and tunefully play
Hymns to the goddess on lyre and pipe.
Wife of Osiris and Horus her child,
Egyptians have worshipped her three thousand years,
Isis the goddess and mother of kings,
Healer, protector and maker of spells,

Bestower of blessings on all earthly joys,
Many have turned to her, sent up their prayers,
Gratefully raised to her temples and shrines.
Now in this land only Philae is left,
Built on an island beset by a sea
Walked on by Jesus, the new jealous god
Drowning in sorrow all laughter and light,
Raising the sword of religious strife.

Sternly he seeks out his rivals to crush,
So sent by Justinian to close down the shrine,
Christian zealots on Philae converged.
Grim Theodorus, the bishop in charge
Pulled down the statues of Isis with scorn,
Declared that he'd cleansed it of all pagan filth,
Installed there a church to the Christian God,
Named it for Mary, that virgin so mild.

But wisest of goddesses, Isis had power
Greater than Thetis to don a disguise.
Quickly her moondisc and sweet curving horns
Changed to a circlet of glittering stars.
Down came her shimmering goddess's dress,
Swapped for a simple and chaste-looking robe.
None of the Christians noticed the change
So now she is living in every high church
Patiently waiting her chance to emerge
As Isis the goddess of pleasure and love.

Mumab: the Mummified Man from Maryland

There once was a man from Maryland
Who lived in Baltimore.
He died, alas, of a heart attack
In nineteen ninety-four.

Before he died he had left word
That for the common weal
His body should go to scientists
Its secrets to reveal.

It went to the local medical school
At Maryland U.C.
It would be just the thing they said
For someone's Ph.D.

Bob Brier was the lucky man
Whose project seemed to suit.
He was an Egyptologist
Studying Hatshepsut.

He was into mummification, too,
And this was his idea
To make an all-American mummy,
The first for many a year.

The Dean gave him the go-ahead
And let him pick his team.
Before you could say 'Jack Robinson'
Bob Brier was going full steam.

You'd never believe how much you need
To make an American mummy—
There's animal-headed Canopic jars
For lungs, and liver, and tummy,

An embalming table with lions' feet,
Ushabtis by the score,
Obsidian tools to scour the corpse,
And amulets galore.

They went to Egypt for natron salts
To dry out the flesh of the dead
There, too, they bought a roll of cloth
Of finest linen made.

One day in May, when all was set,
Bob donned his Anubis mask
And they all went along to the Ibu Tent:
To begin their grisly task.

They extracted the brains with a pointed hook
Through a hole at the top of the nose
Then leaving the heart, they scooped out the rest,
An organ for each of the jars.

They filled up the spaces with natron and stuff
To dry out his tissues and skin
And when in the end all the moisture was gone
They wrapped him in finest linen.

In ancient Egypt mummies took
Seventy days to do
This one was done in half the time
Thanks to the Yanks' know-how.

Of course they had missed out lots of the spells
And prayers, and religious bits
Preparing the soul for the afterlife—
They thought such stuff the pits.

This mummified corpse was a great success,
The first for two millennia,
And just as good as Egypt's best,
What a triumph for America.

The mummy was given the name of Mumab
And placed in a golden casket
But whether it liked it or whether not,
Nobody thought to ask it.

Now it lies in a hall of the medical school
Of Maryland U.C.
Where it's visited by dignitaries
Of the university.

And if at night you go to the school
And wander its corridors
You may hear a sort of scratching noise
And seek in vain the source.

It's the Ka of poor old Mumab
As hungry as a horse
For they forgot to leave him offerings
Being Americans, of course.

So now for all eternity
His Ka must seek the crumbs
Dropped by careless sophomores
From crumbly cakes, and buns.

Litany of Hathor

Hathor of Dendera, great is your name
Lady of the Universe, the power is yours
Lady of the Sky, perfect in grace
Mistress of the West, source of all pleasures
Mistress of the East, fount of delight
Red Hair, Bright Hair, hear our prayer
Daughter of Re, raise up our hearts
Mansion of Horus, send us your blessings
Lady of Byblos, come and be with us
Lady of the Sacred Land, come to us
Lady of the Southern Sycamore, come to our call
Lady of the Headland of Manu, come and refresh us
Lady of the House of Jubilation, fill us with joy
You from Khemmis, may you be near us
You from the Land of Silence, bring us peace
Mistress of Turquoise, show us your beauty
Eye of Re, look down on us, shine on us
Storm in the Sky, send us your light
Great Wild Cow of the Marshes, may you sustain us
Twin Sister of Sekhmet the Lioness, be lenient and spare us
Mistress of Nubia, may we rejoice in you
Hathor the Golden, Lady of Heaven, great is your beauty,
great is your name.

April

Like a young girl
Running barefoot
Across the dewy fields
And meadows,
So April comes—
Welcome as the cowslips,
Fresh as the first lambs of spring.

Superstition

Never hang a mirror
On an outside wall,
All the wraiths of darkness
Drifting through the night

See it as a beacon
Calling them to light.
Through it they'll come crowding
Seeking warmth and life.

Hungry ghouls from graveyards
Will be hiding in your house.
Every room will have one
With its nasty ways

Bringing fear and sickness
Feeding on your flesh,
Sucking out your life force,
Sending you insane.

Better that you'd broken
Every mirror in the house.
What's a bit of bad luck
When a devil's at your throat?

So listen when I tell you
Before it is too late,
'Never hang a mirror
On an outside wall'.

Exchange of an Unsuitable Pet

In a little family group they stood
Aggrieved on the petshop floor.
"It bit me and me mam and our Gladys,
And 'im, that boy by the door".

The ferret dangled like a dishcloth,
Totally in disgrace
And listened appalled as its sins and shortcomings
Were paraded in front of its face.

The petshop assistant was doubtful, and said
They'd had it as a kitten,
And neither customer or staff
Had it ever bitten.

But when she'd seen the scars and scratches
On Gladys's hands and face
She said they might have another ferret
To take the miscreant's place.

"No thanks, no way", they said, as one,
"We'll have a different pet,
Something soft, preferably toothless,
Anything but a ferret"!

They humm'd and haw'd and messed about
With many a poke and dig
And finally chose in exchange for their ferret
A gormless guinea pig.

Where They Hung the Monkey: a Ballad

I think it was West Hartlepool
Or possibly Sunderland.
It was somewhere along the North-east coast,
I'm given to understand.

It was where they hung the monkey,
The one that came to be
Cast up on the sandy shoreline there
After a storm at sea.

It thought itself most fortunate
To see the land again
For all the sailors on its ship
Had drowned in the watery main.

It was a sailor's happy pet
And used to his gentle ways
So when it saw some men ashore
It gave its Maker praise.

And ran to them with happy cries,
Glad of their company
But all the men of Hartlepool
Thought it quite uncanny.

None of them had ever seen
Such a thing as a monkey,
For all they knew it could have been
A dressed-up courtroom flunkey.

They scratched their heads in puzzlement,
Some said it was a Frenchman,
But others disagreed and thought
It was the Devil's henchman.

The arguments went on and on
And no-one could agree
Until an ancient fisherman said:
"Now everyone listen to me,

It's plain this creature is a Frenchie
By Boney sent to spy
Upon the men of Hartlepool,
So, come let's swing him high".

The monkey then was marched to gaol,
It thought it was a game
And danced and skipped between its gaolers
As to the town they came.

And when they put around its neck
The rope that hung from the tree
It chattered with excitement
Recalling frolics on the sea.

When it was roughly pushed, to jerk
And dangle from the rope,
To change its view of all mankind,
There was not time, we hope.

A Rat in Springtime

It was a lovely day,
The hawthorn hedge
Was coming into bloom
And on the lawn
Just freshly mown
Something slowly moved.

It was a rat
So old its fur was caked
With dirt, its skin
Was scaled with scabs
And on its back
Like something

Pornographic or obscene
A tumour glistened.
It was the most
Disgusting thing
I'd ever seen.
It stumbled

As it made its way
Across the grass.
It did not seem
To match the day,
The singing birds
Now busy with their broods,

The butterflies
That fluttered in the sun.
This rat had had its day.
I tried to put myself
Into its head.
It could not see

Or hear the birds,
It could not smell
And was in desperate pain.
The poor thing
Was trembling,
And lost.

Have pity on this tortured soul,
It could be you or me.

A Fly in Amber

Swimming in its world of amber
The long-legged fly can still remember

The burning heat
Of the sun in the Eocene

From its golden sea, this fly has seen
The dance of continents, the rise and fall

Of all ten thousand things
Upon our planet.

In the many facets of its eyes
Seas have filled with water, deepened, dried,

Mountain ranges risen, crumbled.
This fly has seen the centaur and the unicorn

And the first Neanderthal.
Nations, empires passed before it,

Wave after wave in quick succession.
This fly was in its amber when

King Cheops built his pyramid
And Roman Caesar conquered Gaul.

Now with this ancient creature in my palm
I am become
The green flash of the setting sun.

Time

In wartime, I remember, once a week
My mother took me as a treat to town
Where we would make a bee-line for the shop
That sold small cactus plants in bright red pots,
Old stock left over from before the War
And each one priced at sixpence or a shilling.

In my collector's mind they seemed to glow,
Those magic shapes, exotic and unique
In those grey days of scarcity and dearth,
They were the only 'toys' I'd ever known
(You cannot count those flat unpainted pigs
And sheep in shiny lead that Woolworth's sold).

These cacti were the highlight of my week,
They seemed to brightly shine inside my head,
Each one so trim and perfect in its pot
Surrounded by a ring of silver sand
And neatly labelled with its Latin name,
Those occult names that I can still recite-

Kleinia articulata, the Candle Plant
With blueish waxy leaves like parted tongues,
The green *Nopalea coccinilifera*
And densely spined *Opuntia microdasys*,
Whose deadly barbs embedded in my flesh
I had to probe and pluck each time with tweezers.

I can recall the choosing, and the care
With which I carried each one home, like glass,
And like a miser gloated over it.
Now sixty years have passed, yet when
I go into my greenhouse, where row on row
Of cacti grow, I feel just eight years old.

A House of Light

From my cottage kitchen window I can see
Two fields away the blue, the shining sea
And ships that slowly glide to far-off shores
Each one a separate world with its own laws;

They pass beyond my window and are gone.
When morning comes that miracle, the sun
Lifts slowly from the sea, a sacrament
Of grace and glory, or enlightenment.

My cottage truly is a house of light:
By night shines Sirius, cold and bright
And in the afternoon our living room
Seems more like a sunny meadow in mid-June.

From it we see the sun prepare to slumber
Wrapped in the gleaming waters of the Humber
While to the south another lighthouse shines—
Peace be to Spurn and you who read these lines.

My Neighbour

My neighbour is a farmer, he has a hundred cows
Every night we're lulled to sleep by choruses of moos.
They come out in the morning and back they go at night,
There's big ones and smaller ones but all are black and white.

How he knows which one is which I really cannot tell,
But all of them he knows by name, Daisy and Tinker Bell.
If one gets up in the morning and says it's feeling ill,
It's put in a cosy paddock and treated with a pill.

Of all the farms in Yorkshire, this is the cushiest number
And cows queue up to join the herd at Kilnsea by the Humber.
The grass is good, the grazing fine, in the fresh sea air,
It is a bovine paradise with views beyond compare.

They're regular as clockwork going from farm to field
Filling their four stomachs to boost the farm's milk yield
It is a healthy life they lead with nothing much to fear
But when they cross the road, there's always one with
diarrhoea.

The milking parlour's spotless, famed throughout the land
And only when the power's off does he have to milk by hand
Then all the folk of Kilnsea stand by with bucket and stool
Ready to give a helping hand before he loses his cool.

Andrew Wells of Westmere goes up and down the road
He sits in his blue tractor carrying some load
Just where he's bound and what he does I'm never very sure
But I suspect it's something to do with cow manure.

Cows are bread and butter but there's time for fun and games
The Bannister Street Band they hope will make their names
Andrew is the vocalist in this Withernsea band
Wowing all the groupies at many a one night stand,

The Wells are a talented family, at the fiddle Tom is great
Hear ma, the new Larry Adler and sis' rehearsing her debate
While dad is plucking with his plectrum and looking at the
score
With these moos and caterwaulings I find it hard to sleep,
next door.

Life After Death, or, Sustainable Development

Do we drift into death as we fall into sleep?
Will we wake from the dark as a soul?
Our heart, is it weighed, are we judged by a god?
If we pass every test, will we sit with the blessed?

Or will we start from sleep to a slap
Delivered by a sturdy midwife,
Surprised into breath to begin once more
A life much like the one before?

Perhaps we may wake instead to find
We've been born again as a battery hen
Or a piglet intensively reared for pork
In a bright-lit industrial unit.

Better perhaps to sleep for ever,
Unconscious as we were throughout
Those long geological eras before
The earth bore witness to our birth.

That way at least we will go back
In the melting pot of the universe
To be re-used in heaven-sent
Sustainable development.

The Grandfather I Never Knew

It's a shame but he seems like a total stranger
Herbert Lacey, my grandfather.
He's just nineteen in the photograph
Taken, I'm told, in nineteen-oh-nine.
He stares unsmiling at the lens,
Strong nose, firm mouth, eyes set apart.

He has an air of innocence,
Seems ill at ease as well he might
In unfamiliar formal dress,
Stiff collar, tie, and Sunday suit.
A watch-chain dangles from the pocket
Of his tightly buttoned waistcoat.

He wears a cap that seems too large
And stands behind the studio chair
Rigidly gripped in his workman's hands.
Try as I might I can't detect
A family face, except perhaps
His ears stick out a bit like mine.

What was he like, my grandfather?
The photo gives no clue, although
I see he bit his fingernails.
Poor Herbert, young and ill at ease,
I do not know you but I know
How you will marry, have a child

Fall sick and seven years from now
Be dead so young and never know
Who won the war, how long it lasted
Nor how fair your daughter grew.
Now I your grandson growing old
Give you these lines in gratitude.

My Only Sister

I never met my only sister
Never saw her save in dreams.
Sometimes she dressed in drifting mists,
Or else in filmy robes she lazed
In shades of lapis lazuli and chrysose.

Silver rings on her slim fingers,
See her dancing in the moonlight,
Swirling hair and golden skin.
I never met her, never kissed her
On the lips, breathed in her incense,

Heard her sing. I often sought her
In the mountains, through the thickets,
By the sea. When she whispers
In the springtime as the sun sinks
In the west, I will follow

Her wet footprints through the sand
And down into the hollow caverns
Underground, hear the sound of distant breakers
On the shores of darkened seas
Where the serpent lies in wait.

Far, far away, deep in the night
Shines the light of a moving star:
Through the murk and the fog, fully armed
Her crew on the watch, a vessel approaches—
The Boat of Ra with all the gods.

My sister in her glory on the deck
Calls to me across the water,
Will I come and join the crew,
Sail with Ra and her to be happy
Ever after in the Kingdom of the Dead?

The ancient Egyptians believed that each night Ra, the sun god, with all his fellow gods and goddesses sailed in a boat through the night seas, fighting off all the evil demons and especially the evil and immortal serpent, Apep, which sought to swallow and destroy them. After what must have been a very stressful and tiring voyage they emerged at dawn.

And After Autumn, Winter Comes

Soft-footed as a mother when her child's asleep
So gentle autumn tiptoes in unseen
To take the summer's place. We are surprised
Each year to find the nights now cool, the evenings
Shorter. Yet signs there are for all to see:
The morning mists, the spiders' webs that hang
Their looping ropes of pearls to shake and tremble
In the silver light, the bright and golden fields
Of summer corn replaced by shining stubble,
And all to soon the plough and fresh-turned clay,
Along the hedges hips and haws gleam red
While purple elder fruits droop down in bunches,
A feast of welcome for the winter thrushes.
Now in the fields the birds begin to flock—
Rich golden plovers, lapwings, gulls—while rooks
Take to the sky in clouds like scattered leaves
That soon the equinoctual gales will tear
From twig and branch to dance along the lanes,
And over the plains and rolling hills of England,
Then when the days begin to fade, far off
We hear the heavy tread of dread November
And smell the smoke of smouldering leaves, and him,
The guy we burn each year in sacrifice
To grim King Winter, waiting in the wings.

The World in a Teacup

Swirl the teacup three times round
And stand it on its saucer upside down.
The leaves will tell of things to come
And brighten up your afternoon.
"In a three"—could be days or even months,
You'll meet a stranger, dark and tall,
He'll be important in your life
But do not fear for all the leaves
Around are bright. All will be well.
There's "something new to wear"
And "money" near the bottom of the cup
So don't expect it soon, and anyway
It isn't much—a small pools win perhaps.
"Cross words" there'll be with some one close,
A friend, or next-door-neighbour, even
A member of the family,
But do not fret for it soon will pass—
A storm in a teacup, you could say!
There is a tiny cloud of trouble,
A touch of sickness, nothing much,
So do not worry, it will not cause upset.
And nothing ever does! There is no death,
Divorce or injury, no heart attacks,
No cancer in these readings that my mother gave
To visitors, like Auntie Annie, in the afternoon.

Leisler's Bat

It wasn't so much the rounded ears
That gave the Leisler's bat such charm
As it hung head down on the outside wall
Of the old church tower, fast asleep.
What caught at the heart was its little feet
And the toes spread out like tiny stars.

The Pipistrelle

Our cat brought home a pipistrelle,
Intact but traumatized.
I held it up to fly away,
It would not leave my hand.
Its breast was warm against my palm,
I felt its beating heart.
So strangely intimate it seemed
That moment when two creatures met,
The one so large, the other small.

The Apple Tree

O wise and patient apple tree
Stirred by the wind from across the sea
Your branches shake unceasingly.

On sunny days your shining leaves
Give welcome shade and sanctuary
To cheerful sparrows, starlings, wrens,
Bright-eyed blackbirds, collared doves;
To all you are a place of rest
And peace, but seasons pass, leaves fall,

Then come the snows of winter when
Bare-boughed you slumber until spring
And every heart uplifts to see
Such beauty in a living tree.
In autumn when your apples thud
Upon the ground, we share them equally

With blackbird, thrush and butterfly
For you are generous in your gifts.
Like us one day you'll surely die
Yet unlike us you do not fret
About tomorrow, you take each day
Just as it comes and simply be,

So teach us wisdom apple tree
Whose branches shake unceasingly
Stirred by the wind from across the sea.

Black Hole

A black hole is hungry,
it swallows light,
even the odd galaxy
like a hoover,
but get this—
they say it blows out
(at the other end, I guess)
new universes
like frogspawn
or bubbles, just think:
a froth of universes,
each as big as ours
but all different.
Man, it's mind blowing!

Violets

When I was a child
My mother took me
To look for violets.
They grew in a secret place
On the edge of a wood.
Their petals were as blue
As my mother's eyes.
This was long ago.

Grendel's Mother

We never should have let her in,
Grendel's mum, you said that we'd be sorry
If we did, but I was feeling generous
After several double gins
And when she knocked at six o'clock
Quick up I jumped and called "Come in".
A thundercloud stood on the step!
It wasn't just that she was big,
She was obese, with eyes the size of saucers
And hot breath enough to burn the curtains
When she coughed. Like some enormous
Tyrannosaurus Rex she lurched
Into the room sending all the ornaments
Flying from the mantelpiece,
Splintering the floorboards, frightening the cat.
Then she started getting nasty
When I asked her to refrain
From chewing up the tablecloth
And spitting out the bits.
The telephone was still intact
So I dialled nine-nine-nine.
When the operator asked me
What service I required
I didn't want an ambulance,
I didn't want the police
I didn't want a fire engine,
Not one of them could cope,
So I screamed into the mouthpiece
As the monster ran amok:
"I need someone to slay a beast,
Please send St. George or Beowulf".

Sea Dreams

Mournful indeed sounds the bell of the buoy
That rolls in the wash of wave and tide.
Some places there are I've never been
Though I've seen them afar from the sea.
Now I grieve to think I'll never know
Those places that my ship passed by.

The Faeroes when I saw them seemed
A wonderland of mist and promise
With cliffs of cloud that towered beyond
The wavetops of that northern sea
But soon those islands' siren songs
Were lost in the wind and far astern.

Then on a sunny afternoon
Once in the Skagerrak I saw
The home of Thor, the thunder god,
Slipping away on the starboard beam.
Do we not dream sometimes our ship
Will alter course and let us land

On foreign shores where people live
By different laws, where we may find
Some special kind of Shangri-la
In which as children we believed
Or has our world become too small
And have we ceased to dream at all?

Persephone in Springtime

Persephone's on holiday from Hell,
Released a while from Pluto's iron spell.
It's springtime and the air is warm and sweet,
This lovely girl walks smiling down the street.
See how her buttocks twitch from side to side
Beneath thin cotton pants to match her stride.
With every step like bobbing apples in a bowl
Alluringly they curtsy, dip and roll,
Two peaches that invite you sink your teeth
Into the firm and juicy flesh beneath.
By such allures each year she brings to birth
With lissome grace the life of Mother Earth.

Moonrise

The sea is calm, the sun is going down
As side by side we stand upon the shore
And watch each wave take shape, run in, and break
Upon the sand. No clouds just sea and sky
Dissolving in the distance where they meet.

We gaze across the waters to the east
And feel the emptiness of northern seas.
Somewhere out there the moon will rise tonight
And like our pagan forebears long ago
We wait as if a miracle to greet.

At first there is a lightness in the sky
Then slowly rising from the sea, the moon
Is there—a white and shining globe of mist
As insubstantial as a wraith. It floats
Impossibly above the far horizon.

With slow solemnity we see it lift
Into the sky, solidify, and turn to gold
And I am minded of the priest at mass
Who kneels then raises high the sacred Host,
Plain wafer bread adored as living God.

Yuletide Wish

This is our yuletide wish for you—
May you find light in winter's skies
May you have peace in the midst of strife
May you have joy where sadness lies
And may you love and be loved all the rest of your life

Sweet Persephone

Sweet Persephone has gone from the land
And the swallow has fled from the sky.
Wind rattles the sedge that grows by the pond
Which once so delighted the eye.

Where now are the harebells that danced in the breeze,
The cranesbills, the clovers, the rose,
Those sweet scented flowers beloved of bees?
Perh'ps only Persephone knows.

But she is in hell beyond mortal reach
Unable to hear our poor prayer.
She is deaf to the sound of all human speech
In that kingdom of dark despair.

Here fields are frozen hard with frost
And the fog hangs around like a shroud.
Without any guide the traveller's lost,
The staunchest of spirits are cowed.

High up in a pine the crow sees a glow
As dim as a distant star.
This bird of the night is the first to know
That the door of the dead is ajar.

For Persephone's spell as the queen of hell
Has reached its allotted term
So sound the trumpet, ring out the bell—
Welcome, welcome spring's return!

In Greek mythology, Persephone was abducted by Pluto, the lord of the underworld, and against her wishes, installed there as his queen. Her distraught mother, Demeter, who was responsible for the growth of all crops, fruit and flowers on earth, abandoned her duties and global winter set in. In desperation, the supreme god, Zeus, organized a compromise that allowed her daughter, Persephone, to be released from hell for part of the year and only be returned to her husband for one season. Demeter restored fertility to the earth but only when her daughter was back with her. When Persephone was reigning in hell, winter returned.

First Snow

It is snowing in Vineland,
The first flakes are falling
Gently as blessings
Through the still air.
Who cares for the moon
When snowflakes are drifting,
Drifting so softly
Down through the darkness,
Down to the rooftops
Covering the sleepers,
The dreamers, in Vineland tonight?

*This poem was inspired by a work of
Tiffany Etter of Vineland and the poem
is dedicated to her*

A Spell to Catch a Rat

Come dear rat, gnawer of wood,
Come dear rat, hungry for food.

Come leave your home under the floor,
Come up through the hole you made before.

Come follow the scent that tickles your nose,
More sweet it is than any rose.

It's peanut butter, your favourite taste
So do not let it go to waste.

Come follow the trail of this lovely smell,
Be not afraid, all will be well.

Just a few steps and there's your prize,
To leave it now would be unwise.

There it sits in that beautiful trap
So in you go, there's a good chap.

Come dear rat, just step inside,
See how the door is open wide.

There's nothing to fear, the trap's humane,
I guarantee you'll feel no pain.

So in you go and take the bait,
Take it now, it's not too late.

Well done, brave rat, you've gone inside,
My spell tonight has been your guide.

The trap has sprung, the door has shut,
But do not be disconsolate,

I'll help you start a new career,
Though many, many miles from here.

Egyptology Lesson 3. Assignment 1:
Identify different images of Osiris and Seth.
Which one do you find the most appealing and why?

I can't really take to Osiris,
He has a green face and clay penis
And looks like a bit of a dummy
Dressed in the robes of a mummy.
He clutches his crook and his flail
But it's Isis who fights tooth and nail
To find all his bits and restore
Her lover to life once more.

Now Seth was something other,
Ran rings round his dozy brother
And although, perhaps, a bit of a lad
You wouldn't call him truly bad.
He looks so smart with his down-curved nose,
A devil's tail and a striking pose.
Although to Isis I must defer,
It's really Seth whom I prefer.

Oh, Be My Valentine

O Valentine, my love, will you be mine,
Become my loving sweetheart that we may
Entwine like twisting vine or eglantine,
More closely grow together every day?
You ask me why I love you as I do,
Vain would it be were I to try to list
All thousand things that make you specially you:
Lips like twin lotus buds just made to kiss,
Eyes clear and still like pools in which I'd lose
No time but dive within to sink or swim,
To lose all sense of time and place. I'd choose
In tenderness to meet your every whim,
No matter what you'd wish I'd gladly do
Except give up, or go, or be untrue.

Dream Encounter

Last night in my dream
I saw Philip Larkin.
He was talking to the teller
at the bank—heads bent
both whispering of money.
I asked him how he went about
the business of writing a poem.
"I always use a songbook",
he explained, "the words are almost
poetry already. It makes it so much
easier that way to write in verse".
Two sparrows by his bed
began to peck the crumbs
from the fragments of two cakes
on a plate, on his bedside table.
When they made as if to eat
the untouched chocolate cake,
I shooed them both away—
their flight was slow. I told him
Andrew Motion, the Poet Laureate,
had asked me to attend his reading
of a Larkin poem. He made a moue
but did not say I should not go.
Beside the bed and next
to the untouched chocolate cake
there was a very rotten apple.
Light as gossamer it was,
though when I picked it up to give to him,
he shrank away. His face
was slightly swollen. It seemed
to glisten. I thought he looked sickly
as he did the last time I saw him,
that time he smiled at me.

When I Was a Boy

When I was a boy
The world seemed a wonderful place.
Now I'm grown old—
And it still does.

Two Schuttelreims

I

Bleak Lilith haunts the night's dark streams
Disturbing sleepers with her own stark dreams.

II

Weep your tears good ladies, weep mothers, weep daughters
For your lovers are lost in the ocean's deep waters.

If I Were 21 Today

If I were 21 today
I think I'd dance the night away.
I'd drink champagne and polish off
Half a bottle of the best Smirnoff.
I'd carry on till the night had flown
And trust my friends to carry me home.
My coming of age they'd never forget
Nor I remember, you can bet!

Tony Blair & George Bush

I

Tony Blair, you can bet
Wants us to forget
His war in Iraq
But it keeps coming back.

II

George W. Bush
Would like to crush
Osama Bin Laden
But finds it a hard 'un.

Echoes of Egyptian Goddesses

Egyptians turned to her in crisis, Isis
Was the favourite of most mothers. Others
Tended rather to prefer her
Who appeared as a cow, how
I do not know, though
It was magic I suppose: those
Egyptian goddesses were very good at that!
She was very popular, the Lady of the Sycamore, Hathor,
Goddess of love, dance, and music, too. Who
Could not warm to such a one? None.

The Old Beverlonians: Where Are They Now?

They say that when we die we live
In the minds of those we've left behind,
And it's true—my mind is full of folk I knew.
There they are as odd as ever,
'Round Again' and 'Fitty' Eric,
Snowy Hall and Loony Lenny,
Hairy Old Twagger and little Miss Nellie.

Round Again was a German spy,
He pushed a little pram about.
From time to time, you'd hear him shout
"Round again, round again"
To let you know he was about
Collecting rags and tins for scrap.
Within the pram we children knew
A radio transmitter hid
Tuned to the German High Command.
And when Round Again was seen no more
We guessed he'd been arrested.

Just down the road in Pighill Lane
You'd see Old Twagger on his bike,
An ancient cove with whiskered face.
He turned the pedals oh so slowly
Moving at a measured pace.
Tied to the bike by a length of string,
His Old English Sheepdog padded along,
Slow, old, and hairy just like him.
The pair of them made a slow progression
Plodding along and all alone
While the world spun round on its axis.

Miss Nellie was the licensee
Of the old White Horse in Hengate.
She and her sister ruled within
As strict as Queen Victoria.
Miss Dorothy was tall and stately,
Her sister small and stooping.
Miss Nellie was quick like a little bird.
She wore black boots and often sniffed,
And her skirts came down to her ankles.

With his mother, Mrs. Taylor,
Poor 'Fitty' Eric lived. He was
Quite the fattest man I'd ever seen.
In World War Two such folk were few
And far between. He once had a fit

In Pighill Lane and lay across the road
Until some kind Samaritan came
And covered him with a tarpaulin.
By a passer-by he was mistaken
For a horse, deceased and awaiting
The collection cart of the knacker man.

Old Joey Brown down Manor Road
Kept donkeys, chickens, pigs and geese.
He was a former travelling man
But now he'd settled for a life of peace.
He drove about on a pony and cart
Followed by dogs, and children too
All begging to ride behind the pony.

Loony Lenny roamed the town,
Picking flowers from people's gardens
To put in his lapel or funny hat.
Shopkeepers gave him lots of sweets—
For free, as long as he would leave the shop!
Sometimes he wore a sandwich board
That advertised the films to come
At the Marble Arch or Playhouse.
I don't know what became of him
But I do recall his sunny smile.

On Hengate corner was Snowy Hall,
A former jockey who'd had a fall
Some time before and broken his back.
His shop had a curious window display:
In pride of place was a sparrowhawk
Carefully stuffed and in a glass case
With a label that named it a cuckoo.
Close by unpriced three volumes stood,
In letters gold their title read:
"The Horse in Sickness and in Health".
And next to them a fading snap
Portrayed a local football team,
The players all, moustaches drooping,
Wore shorts that came below their knees.
"Where are they now?" the label said.

Where are they now?—these long-gone folk
Who'd never seen a mobile phone
Or surfed the Web or watched TV?
Where are they now, these folk long dead?
I'll tell you where! They're in my head!

Weather Forecast

The weather girl
Is a priceless pearl.
Chic and smart,
She has the art
Of making weather
Altogether—
However bloody—
A pleasure to study

War of Words

Wise wizards
Work wonders
With words
While wanton
Wild warriors
With weapons
Wastefully wage
Wicked war.

Every Day Something New

Every day
Something new I learn.
Today it is
That fresh
Well-cultivated grass
Provides ALL the needs
Of the dairy cow
In ideally balanced
And readily
Assimilable form.
For this information
My thanks are due
To the Crown Chemical
Manure Co. Ltd.,
Now alas
Defunct.

Neonlit Apples

On the supermarket's shiny shelves
The apples are laid in rows
To catch the wandering eye of those
Poor hapless shoppers like ourselves.

First on offer is Golden Delicious
By size and colour classified
And regularly bathed in pesticide
Which we are told is not pernicious

But necessary for our health
Carefully guarded by the food purveyors
Who we trust would not betray us
Simply for the sake of wealth.

The other apples that you may see
Are Braeburn, Empire, Royal Gala
Each so alike in size and colour
You'd think they came from the self-same tree.

So few varieties are sold
Just eight or nine throughout the land
And every one insipid, bland
Not as in days of old, I'm told

When apples sweet and juicy grew
Warmed by the sun and washed by rains,
A thousand different names and strains
Of every shape and taste and hue.

Alas such names are not for us:
Peasgood's Nonesuch and Kent Hogshead,
Hagloe Crab and Michaelmas Red,
Monstrous Pippin and Ramping Taurus.

Both Bloody Turk and Slack-my-girdle
Have failed to clear the market's hurdle.
We seem to be stuck with Golden Delicious,
It tastes like paste and it's not nutritious.

Women

When I was in the RN
All of my shipmates were men.
For women all frigates
Were strictly off limits,
So no skirts or dresses
To be seen in the messes.

Now the thought came to me
In the long days at sea
That a bloke is just great
To have as a mate
For the odd run ashore
In, say, Singapore

But otherwise—
Perhaps no surprise,
I'd much sooner be
In feminine company
For women are much nicer,
Like Mona Lisa

They intrigue us men
And when
They smile at us so sweetly
We become completely
Under their spell
As they know so well.

Women are much prettier,
Their conversation wittier,
More subtle and more tender
Than we the other gender
So all of you take note:
To women I'm giving my vote!

Addiction to the Weed

Do you remember when you used to smoke
those times, usually late at night
when the shops had all shut
and you suddenly found
you had smoked your last cigarette?
Then the Hunt began,
a desperate search, a rummaging
through coat pockets
trouser pockets,
shirt pockets,
ash trays—looking for a single
smokable tab end. No luck!
So now begins the grovelling,
the groping down the backs
of arm chairs, settees,
lifting up and
looking under cushions.
Somewhere in the house
there must be one—
but no, so then begins,
all dignity gone,
the breaking up of tiny tabs
retrieved from ash trays and
waste paper baskets,
the gathering of the sodden flakes
like gold to be rolled in the folded paper
and licked into a
matchstick-thin
apology for a cigarette.
God, how glad I am
I've given up!

Something in the Wind

There's something in the wind tonight,
It whispers in our ears
News of omens, auguries,
Half-formulated fears
For each and all our future years
In the darkening of the light.

Shall we like Caesar scorn the Ides
Though yet our days be with us?
Do we heed not the rainbow's sign,
Earth shall not forgive us,
The seas and sands outlive us
Beneath the moon's drawn tides.

Let nature calm the troubled breast
Where in the thicket purrs the dove,
There listen to his gentle voice
Softly, softly call his love
Beneath the clouds that drift above—
Oh blessed peace, oh blessed rest.

Let us together save the light,
Protect it from the rushing wind
Of human greed and folly
Then whisper to the tamarind
How we have eco-sinned
And so dispel the darkness of the night.

Travel Tips

I was told by a
girl in Beirut to
beware of the heat
when I go on my cruise
down the Nile.
"It will be hotter
than England", she said
"For Egypt is ninety-per-cent
Saharan desert and sand".
"Tell your wife to take her bikini".

Butterfly Haiku

A fritillary
Has alighted on my sleeve.
Should I say thank you?

Beetle Haiku

This tiny beetle
That is walking on my arm
Has not seen me yet.

A Question of Philosophy

When evil strikes
In fire and flood
Or untimely death by dread disease
We sometimes wonder "What of God?"

The ancient Greeks
Long before us
On this very same question reflected.
Wise Epicurus put it thus:

"If God is willing but not able
Such evil to prevent,
Call Him 'God' still, if you will,
He cannot be omnipotent."

"And if He's able but not willing
Such evil to prevent,
God He may be, but I say
He is malevolent."

"If God is able and willing, too,
All evil to prevent,
Why in the world should pain and death
Afflict the young and innocent?"

Whispers in the Mind

The poems on the printed page
Began as whispers in the mind
But now attentively they stand
Neat artefacts in black and white
Catalogued and classified,
Crisp and neat, solidified.
Pick them up and put them down,
Let them fall upon the floor,
Scatter them upon the table,
Rattle them like poker dice
But have a care for they are loaded,
Less innocent than they might seem.
Beware their false solidity
And gaze not on them overlong
Nor let them rest upon your tongue
For poems melt in people's mouths
And warmed by touch or lingering glance
May be absorbed like tongues of flame
Within the labyrinthine brain
Wherein by alchemy transformed
The man of careful calculation
Becomes the shaman wild and strange
Under the moon and the cold night stars.

The Other Mary

Last night I dreamt
I was in bed
with Mary Magdalen.
We lay side by side
fully clothed
and discussed
her recent trip
to Oklahoma.
The scenery, she said,
was quite spectacular.

A Registered Vegetarian

At the tender age of twelve
my daughter, bless her,
was registered as a vegetarian.
She was duly accredited
with the appropriate documents
and vaccinated with chlorophyll.
Now she is authorized
to eat zucchinis, papayas
and winter cabbages
not to mention
French beans, celeriac
and best of all—
mouth-watering mangold wurzel.

A Farewell to my MZ ETZ 250

"MZs—built by blacksmiths"

Petrol seems to be sleeping
From the carburettor, it drips
In a gathering pool of sadness
Upon my garage floor.

Old lass, alas, you'll have to go!

Last week it was the throttle,
This week it is the clutch,
Your battery died on Sunday,
Today your tyres are down.

Old friend, I fear, the end is near!

I kick you every morning
A hundred times to start
And when your engine finally coughs
I'm just about a corpse.

For the sake of my heart, we'll have to part!

I know we've been together
Two decades on the road
And once we were unpassable
But as those days are past—

It's time that I should say goodbye!

Goodbye, goodbye, old ETZ
You've lasted many a year:
I shall swallow my pride
And unwillingly ride

A characterless Kawasaki!

A Window Seat

Five miles high
in our chartered jet
we fly in Fairyland,
all shining light, the
sky sea-bright, and
blue as lapis lazuli;
white as Dover's cliffs, clouds
form a floor – a field of floating ice
below, so cold, so pure
like summer
in Antarctica
before mankind.

Shut Your Eyes and Jump

Sometimes in life
it makes good sense
to close your eyes
and jump that fence
regardless of
all consequence.

For if you choose
to cringe and creep
and always look
before you leap,
you might as well
stay fast asleep.

Thoth

Skilled in magic and
funerary matters,
Thoth is the moon
god of Egypt and
sacred to him is the ibis.

Long after sunset
I saw seven ibises
fly in a line,
low over the waters
of the Nile.
They followed a path
laid down by the moon
to bring them home safe
to Thoth.

Alone out of time
in my mind's eye
still they fly
as they always flew
low, over the Nile
in single file
homeward to Thoth, who dwells
in a beautiful house
at the further end
of the silver path to the moon.

Waiting at the Bus Stop; or, Cotopaxi nearly blows her top

Bloody buses, like bananas, always come in bunches
But there are none to hand and the afternoon audition
Promptly starts at half past three so I will not pull my
 punches
When I write my nasty letter to the Transport Ministry.

I've got my mother's dress on, the one in pink with zinc
 paillettes
But it's getting wet and sodden in this sodding pouring rain.
While I am getting madder yet and sadder with a ladder in my
 'nets
And black mascara tears running down my cheeks and ears.

Forlorn now are my hopes to play the part of Cleopatra
Chances are my rival, a transvestite thespian Chinaman,
Will win today's audition though I'd like to place a fatwa
On his head, or better yet to put my asp inside his bed.

Ever since I was a girl, I've loved the esoteric
And chosen parts to play that mother often didn't care for.
When I dressed as Nostradamus she became hysteric
And we had to calm her down with herbal tea.

Oh, who would be an actress with no money for a taxi
And a parent who had named her for the stage? If only I had
 listened
When mother had me christened, for God's sake, as "Cotopaxi"
I'd have made it very clear that I wanted something better than
 the boards.

*Written in response to a challenge: "You are waiting for a bus
and are late for an important appointment. The poem can be
rhymed or unrhymed but must include the words 'paillette',
'Chinaman' and 'hysteric'*

The Rise and Fall of the Ten Thousand Things

Lao Tsu,
so wise,
believed
all things
that rose
in time
would fall,
the high
become low,
the low
become high.

Let those in low places
draw comfort from his words.

Beltane

Beltane tonight
so boys and girls
be glad,
leap,
sing and dance
around the flames.
All life
rejoice
in earth's
fecundity.

A Cure for Migraine

The Zomig Nasal Spray
Can cure migraine they say;
Or rather more correctly, its main ingredient can—
Zolmitriptan.

A Spell to Bring a Loved One Home

Come lover, come home,
Come from the sea,
Come home to me.
Come through the crests
And the troughs of the waves.
Come through the spray,
Come through the foam.
Come though the winds
And the waters protest.
Come through the fog,
Come through the storm,
The thunder, the lightning
That flashes on deck.
Come through the darkness
Of cold moonless nights.
Steer by the stars
That glitter above.
Steer for the harbour, the haven,
So safe and so calm.
There you will find me,
Loving and warm.

Night Thoughts

My mam and dad
made fun of death
like you do
when you don't believe
it will happen to you.
They talked lightly of
"falling off the twig"
And "leaving the village".
Now they are both dead:
they have fallen off the twig,
they have left the village.

What about you?
Do you feel the wind,
sometimes, shaking the tree,
blowing through its branches?
And have you yet glimpsed,
faintly, through the fog,
the last houses
at the edge of the village?

After-care of Your New Tattoo

Remove the dressing
after one hour
then wash your tattoo
with soap and warm water
until all the dried blood
has gone.
Rinse well with clean water,
pat dry.
After a few days
a light scab will form.
DO NOT PICK IT OFF.
Keep the tattoo clean,
avoid dust,
grease, oil, cement,
etc.
If you use a sunbed,
cover tattoo with a cloth
or tissue.
REMEMBER!
A tattoo is for life,
not just for Christmas.

Her First Tattoo

The oldest person he'd ever tattooed, he said
Was a widowed old lady of eighty-six, no less,
Who ever since she was a girl had longed
To have her very own tattoo, but first
Her dad had put his foot down on the plan
And then it was her husband who'd said "no",
So frustrated all her life, she'd had to wait
Until her husband had been laid to rest –
Now here she was! So taking a deep breath
Outside the tattoo parlour, and feeling rather
Nervous she stepped in. Among the punk-
haired girls with hollowed eyes and pierced tongues
And boys with metal belts and shaven heads
She felt a little out of place, but then
She saw the glittering samples on the wall –
A rainbow-coloured magic land of fantasy
With wizards, dragons, lightning, thundrerbolts,
Warriors with blazing guns – "Pow!" and "Blatt!" –
Wild horses and women with bayonets and blasters,
Leaping, screaming, long tresses streaming,
Bare-thighed, wild-eyed, untrammelled, free...
And in the quiet places on the wall
Red roses richly entangled in thickets of thorns,
Loving hearts and limbs entwined in blossomed
 arbours
Where swallows and lovebirds go swooping and
 looping in play.
When her turn came, she chose a purple dragon,
Fork-tailed and fiercely snarling, spitting flame.
She did not think her father or late husband
Would have approved its presence on her arm
But "tough!" At least she knew it would surprise
The maiden lady who brought her 'meals-on-wheels'
And if it didn't, she had been rather taken
By those slender silver rods for pierced tongues.

A Japanese Wedding

As for our wedding on December
it will do in the place of temple
at hotel: the god is enshrined there.
We do the wedding putting on the kimono,
that is traditional clothes of Japan:
the bride puts on the pure-white kimono
and the bridegroom puts on the hakama.

The holding a ceremony style changes
by the religion believed in.
Many hold a ceremony in the church
wearing wedding dress
because the person of the irreligion
without a special faith in Japan
has increased, though it is not a Christian.

Because we were the Buddhists,
and had the faith,
it decided to hold a ceremony in the temple
putting on the kimono.
My grandmother is very pleased.
The name of the future husband is Sosheki.
My dog, Mishima, likes him!

Calling the Moon

The oyster, the mussel, and pearl
belong to the Moon, it is said,
and when she is gone, like a girl
who is lost, you can hear them cry,
oh, longingly from where they lie
in the sand of the soft sea bed.

Too Late Now

In the supermarket car park
I parked my Kawasaki
400 ZRX, new and gleaming,
locked it took the key
and turned to go, when
I was accosted by an oldish chap
who praised the bike and we
exchanged some technicalities;
he'd been a dispatch rider
once, and he asked me if he might
look closer at my motorbike.
"You're very welcome, but I
will have to go now,
for I'm running late",
I said. Too late now—I wish
I'd given him my time,
not walked away, but stayed to talk,
for a look of disappointment
flashed across his face, 'crestfallen'
was the word that came to mind.
I realize now that what he'd really wanted
was a chat, and I had walked away.

A Yorkshire Ratcatcher

Always puffing on a pipe
You'd see him pedal his old bike,
Tattered old jacket in faded tweed
Trousers bottoms tied with twine,
Arsoowal's trade was catching rats.
He must have had a proper name
When he was christened as a child
But if he had, we didn't know it.
His naming ceremony came
That day we saw him riding down
The village street, apparently alight.
Smoke billowed from his trousers where
He'd stuffed his lighted baccy pipe.
"Mister, mister!" we all called
"There's smoke coming out of your trousers!"
In scornful disbelief he turned
And mouthed at us one word—"Arsoowals!"

Schadenfreude

When I was a student,
In Lucretius I read
Of the pleasure that people found
In watching from shore
The troubles of others
On stormy and turbulent seas.
It seemed to me then
And it seems to me now—
Mankind can be very unkind.

Spurn Light

Afraid of the dark I could not be
For I had a light that shone on me.
It swept away my fears of night,
Scattered my demons and put them to flight.

Its cheerful beam put me at ease
As it did all those who plough the seas.
The light beamed out for miles around
Preventing ships from running aground.

Alas this light is now no more
And darkness reigns over sea and shore.
Its days are done now radar's here
To tell all ships what course to steer.

Yet still I miss that friendly light
That brought me comfort in the night.
Sailors, too, have told me they
Were sorry when it went away.

The lighthouse though does yet remain
Commanding views across the main.
Tall sentinel of Spurn, for me
It is a treasured memory.

*Re-working of a poem by Sandra Shan
recalling her childhood memories of
an operational lighthouse that is no
longer functional.*

White China Tea

White tea,
aristocrat that once
an emperor's concubines'
slim fingers plucked
at dawn, dew-drenched
upon the mountainside,
rare oriental pearl, its
scent so subtle and precise
defies analysis,
is pure delight.
Within the amber
liquid lapped in
palest porcelain
tipped leaves uncurl
to leave a taste
upon the lips divine,
meanwhile like
mist or smoke
steam rises from the cup,
its wraiths unfurl
about its lip,
become a fragrant
kiss, a lover's tongue
that seeks a loved one's
tongue to touch
gently, tip to tip.

If There's Beer in Heaven, I Want to Go There!

When we were little, we used to adore
Our drunken neighbour who lived next door.
He was funny and clever but rather queer
Especially when he'd been on the beer.

After a glass or two he'd sing like a bird
The strangest songs you ever heard.
You should have heard him in full spate!
We kids all loved him, thought him great.

He seemed like one of us—I think
That's why we cried when he died of drink.
Poor old feller we missed him so,
We asked ourselves why he had to go.

"Oh, Mother, why has he gone from here?"
She said, "In Heaven there's lots of beer."
But although she said it for our sake,
I think it was a big mistake

For there is in Heaven, I do fear
Neither whisky, wine, champagne or beer,
But if I'm wrong and she is right
I'll start to say my prayers tonight!

*Poem written jointly by Arsiema Berhane of Asmara
and Peter Crowther*

Shangri La By Bangalore

Wild elephants roam this holy land,
This heaven's secret garden where
The leopard leads her solemn cubs
Whose pawprints star the soft stream-bed.
Know she is loved by those who tread
Familiar paths through trees and glades
By the banyan tree and the bamboo grove
Where butterflies like dancing leaves
Spiral and whirl in the sun-warmed air.
In this lovely valley, too, are birds
Like coloured glass or Christmas toys,
Flycatchers fresh from Paradise,
Sleek kingfishers that flit and swoop
Above the stream and through the
branches.

Here by the dam, the monkeys swim
In water warmed by the weltering sun.
The rains fill up the ponds and lakes,
Bring forth the rainbow-coloured frogs
Who play and sport quite unaware
That high above the serpent eagle
Surveys them all with his lordly stare.
The seasons in their turn pass by
When green gives way to orange, red
And yellow turns to brown but all
Is beauty here in Shangri La
Not many miles from Bangalore.

*Based on a description of the Valley
School near Bangalore sent to me by Kavya
Murthy*

My Father

My father was a seaman to his bones.
I see him now upon the bridge, legs braced
To counteract the motion of the moving deck,
His ruddy weather-beaten face aglow
With health, his cheerful grin as he stands there
Bare-headed in the breeze that stirs his curly hair.

He's telling yet another sailor's yarn,
I hear again his quiet steady voice,
Unhurried tone, unfold its magic tales
Of other ships and foreign ports and men
Like him who'd spent their adult lives at sea
Set free from petty cares of folk ashore.

I feel his warmth. His presence is so strong
It seems impossible to think he's dead
But yet I wrote the words that mark his grave:
"generous, warm-hearted, cheerful".

Just Felt "a Slight Bump"

A mother hare hit by a speeding car,
Blood on the road, disordered heap of limbs,
Fur, feet and floppy ears, what a mess!
Car driver, loud music blaring from his tape cassette
Scarcely noticed, but at night the leveret
Came out from where he'd crouched all day,
Approached the silent heap that was his mother,
Sniffed her gently, walked around but could not
understand
Why she was cold and stiff who had been warm and loving.
Fucking callous speeding motorists, too
Don't understand what dreadful carnage they can do,
What beastly pain and sorrow they can sow.

Hypochondriac

Feeling bad tonight—
If the worst comes to the worst,
I'll choose cremation.

Fearing the worst, see, I've penned a haiku
About death and my choice of cremation,
But I'm hoping it's only the 'flu.

A Night in the Old Lighthouse

The lock is stiff, the heavy wooden door
On rusted hinges creaks as I walk in.
Tonight I am to sleep here in this lighthouse.
It's twenty years since last its scything beam
Shone out at night to warn approaching ships
Where danger lay in sandbanks, shoals, and rocks.
For more than ninety years each night the light
Was lit and monitored by quiet careful men,
The lighthouse keepers. I can see them now
In dark blue uniforms and caps, brass buttons
Polished, mutton whiskers, waistcoats, pipes
And silver pocket watches hung from chains.
How different now, just empty rooms and ghosts
That throw pale shadows on their rounded walls.
I climb alone the winding spiral stair
And listen to the echoes of my steps,
They seem too loud and likely to disturb
The crowded ghosts that lurk behind each door
And might resent my presence here tonight.
The light that filters through the narrow window
On each floor begins to fade as finally I reach
The top and climb into the glass-walled room
That used to house the turning lantern light:
The sea is calm tonight and far below
The distant ships seem little more than specks
Upon the darkening waters of the coming night.
I'm loth to turn and leave this still light room
To pass those empty rooms and hear their echoes
Or see upon the curving stair some darker
Shadow that may be something lurking there.
It seemed a good idea to volunteer
To spend a night in this lighthouse all alone
But that was in the pub, all light and laughter.
I start reluctantly my downward steps
Below and know this night has scarce begun ...

Diminishing Returns

This pretty girl has style and flair,
Will she invite me to her lair?
I swear there's something in the air.

Should I invite her for a drink,
Suggest a date at the skating rink
(For writing an ode is a waste of ink) ?

These things don't come upon a plate,
Or if they do, they come too late
Like something nasty that we ate.

So, dear friend, please do not scold -
Our warmest days give way to cold
And youth itself like love grows old.

A Girl from Asmara

There once was a girl from Asmara
Who wore an expensive tiara
When they asked, "Did you win it?",
She said, "Hey, just a minute—
I got it from Che Guevara".

Our Little Bethany

Sweet child of love we welcome thee
To share our lives dear Bethany.
A tiny miracle you seem,
Perfect beyond our wildest dream,
Your smile, your hands, your little feet,
They are so lovable, so sweet.
We love you in so many ways,
To list them would take days and days.
Dear Bethany we'll guard you well,
Protect you from the witch's spell,
The unkind ways of man to man
As far as any parents can.
Our wish for you is joy and peace,
Throughout your life may they increase.
May loving kindness, beauty, too,
In all your days accompany you.

Eric Kamara

I am Eric Kamara,
son of Chief Vincent R. Kamara,
Director of Finance,
Sierra Leone Diamond and Mining
Corporation.

My agitation is real and
my word is my bond.

In this proposal my late father
diverted moneys acquired from
over-influencing of price of sales.

The amount is \$27, 000,000

(Twenty Seven Million Dollars).

All I need is your bank particulars:

- 1) account name,
- 2) account number,
- 3) bank address, telephone
and fax number.

I am compensating you with 12%.

All my hope is banked in you.

This transaction is real
and never a joke.

My father called me closer
to his bedside

before his call to glory (R.I.P.).

I do not expose myself
to anyone I see, but

this money is the hope of my life.

You will stand as co-beneficiary
and partner abroad—

all I need is your bank particulars.

Thanks and God bless.

Best regards — Eric.

*Based on a scam letter sent to me and others
as a message on PoemHunter.com by E. Kamara*

The Sea and I

As far as I can see, the surface of the sea
Is all a-glitter where
Bright sunlight sparkles on each ripple
Making stars enough to fill
A universe at least. Today
She is as calm and gentle
As a pussycat asleep, and I
Can scarcely hear her sighs that
Softly rise and break
Upon the beach. On other days
I've known her be a raging tiger,
Or a wolf whose gleaming teeth
Rip, slash and tear
Like a Viking gone beserk.
One thing I like about her is
Her honesty, she'll always say
Just what she thinks and what
You see is what you get. I've made a date
To join her when I'm dead. My ashes
First will float then sink into her waters
Sweetly so that we become as one.
We'll have our gentle moods,
Just like today
But I am looking forward to the time
When we go wild and run amok,
Make those ashore hoist warning cones
Along the coast. The sea and I
Will call up gales and thunderstorms
To join the fun. We'll have a ball,
We'll rage and roar, and laugh out loud to feel
The salty sting of driven spray
Upon our lips, upon our skin.

Late Summer Migrants

You see them in all seaside towns
Late summer, say, around the time
The schools go back. They congregate
Like swallows do on lines and wires
To rest before that long hard journey
From these shores, or like late autumn
Butterflies that find a warm
And sheltered spot late in the day
Before the sun goes down.

Basking there in the still warm air
It seems as if these too prepare
This afternoon for their long journey
To another shore. They softly twitter,
Snooze, recline in peaceful rows
On hired deckchairs in the sun
And like the swallows, in their bones
They know that winter soon will come.

Young Swallows

Three baby swallows
Sit waiting for their mother
Patient as Buddhas

~~~~~

Three baby swallows  
Bills agape, wings a-flutter  
For here comes mother.

## God Bless this Bread

"God bless this bread  
And God preserve  
The breadwinner", I murmur  
Making the sign  
Of the cross in the dough  
Though I don't believe  
Any more in a personal god.

Yet still I say this prayer—  
Say, twice a week  
When I bake bread  
In the way I was taught  
By my grandmother long ago.  
She learned the art  
Of baking bread and this ritual  
Prayer as a slip of a girl  
From the lips of her Irish mother.

I see her there, my grandmother  
Still young in her flowered dress,  
sleeves rolled, she bustles in  
And rakes the fire, puts on  
More coal to heat the oven  
Until it is just right.  
Breadmaking then was an arcane art  
Involving dampers, rods  
Pulled in and out  
Like organ stops. She played  
Whole symphonies upon that  
Kitchen range, while nowadays  
I use dried packaged yeast  
And turn the gas to number eight.

But yet I do perform, indeed,  
Could not omit, this magic rite,  
This ritual prayer of invocation  
And every time there comes to mind  
A winding line going back in time  
Of mothers and their dark-haired daughters,  
Beautiful soft-voiced Irish women  
Solemnly blessing the sacred bread.

## **Junk Mail and PoemHunter.com**

I never open envelopes  
addressed:  
"The occupier" or,  
worse still,  
"The car owner"  
especially when  
I don't even  
own a car—

you never get them  
to "The motorcyclist"  
or "The Pantheist" or  
even "Lepidopterist"  
(all more appropriate  
in my case) instead  
they come with promises:  
"We'll cut your bill",  
"Why pay more?",  
"We'll save on your insurance"—

To hell with them,  
in any case  
I much prefer  
e-mail now, except for scam.  
I used to love to see  
the postman  
coming down the street  
and hear the thud  
of letters falling on the mat,  
my heart would start to beat,  
accelerate, in fact.

Nowadays it's just the same  
but even better  
on Poem Hunter  
dot com. I think  
it is the child in me  
that gets excited  
when I see  
that yellow strip  
dance on the screen,  
with bright red letters  
that proclaim:  
"[!!!] You've got 1 unread message!"

Are you the same?

## **Man's New Little Friend**

Ignoble beast,  
despised little gnawer,  
persecuted, poisoned, trapped  
since time began.  
Now rehabilitated  
the rat's become  
Man's friend  
and little helper  
for him risking  
life, limb, and tail  
to find his unexploded landmines.

Lacking human speech,  
illiterate  
but resourceful  
it indicates  
the presence of a mine  
by subtle use of  
body language  
thereby displaying  
a degree  
of sensitivity  
hitherto quite unsuspected.

*"Rats have been recast in the role of saviour after being trained to sniff out landmines. The animals ... can cover an area the size of a squash court in 30 minutes ..." — The Times, Thursday 1st September 2005.*

## **A Childhpood Lesson**

Some call it checkers,  
I call it draughts.  
Don't play with me  
If you think it's just a game  
And you don't mind losing.  
I play a mean game. I play to win.  
Old Peter Salaveros taught me  
When I was a boy.  
We played on a scrubbed table  
In the seamen's mess,  
Just him and me.  
We played seriously.  
Neither of us smiled.

## On the Art of War

A display of local art was held today  
In the village hall and in the children's section  
I could sense their joy in life's good things,  
Spring lambs, bright flowers, the grazing cows  
Knee-deep in buttercups, the placid sheep,  
The boats, the ball-games, girls in summer frocks,  
All happy scenes so different from the ones  
I used to draw when I was young like them.

My pictures featured war. I drew  
Aeroplanes in dogfights, dropping bombs,  
Or falling flaming to the ground.  
I drew my planes with care – the tail,  
The cockpit, wings, and fuselage  
All there. The fighters had machine guns  
Fitted to their wings and fired  
Streams of bullets at each other.  
My Spitfires had roundels on their wings  
But Messerschmitts had swastikas,  
Harsh and jagged; they were the ones  
That always got shot down and crashed.  
You'd see them nose-dive down the page  
Smoke pouring from the fuselage  
As they plummeted, down to the ground.  
Most times the pilots could be seen  
Suspended from their parachutes,  
They were the lucky ones. Not all  
My planes were fighters, I had bombers  
Too, both Wellingtons and Dorniers  
On the German side. My favourites were  
The heavy Lancasters which had  
Four engines and a perspex bubble  
At the end, where crouched the rear  
Gunner known as Tail-end Charlie.  
My bombers carried loads of bombs.  
You'd see them falling down the page,  
Menacing and slightly bulbous  
Near the nose. I always took great care  
To draw the rear fins just right.  
Like stars the bombs exploded when  
They hit the bottom of the page  
Where searchlights probed the dark, and guns  
Sent streams of tracer through the night.

I was an expert in the art of war  
Yet strangely innocent for pain and death  
Had no dominion in my scheme of things.  
My bombs and bullets though so violent  
And explosive did not hurt or kill.  
My childish brain did not associate  
Its war with injury, sorrow, loss and death.

Alas, alas, how wrong I was!

### **The Egyptian Goddess, Nut**

I am the goddess, Nut,  
Begotten of Shu and Tefnut.  
Geb is my brother  
And lover.  
I straddle the earth  
Like a rainbow  
Sprinkled with stars.  
I hold up the sky  
On my sturdy back.  
Above me Nun,  
Ocean of chaos,  
Waters of darkness,  
Inchoate, formless,  
Presses upon me  
Like a shroud  
Weighted with lead,  
But I am strong,  
Strong to protect.

At dusk  
I take the sun  
Into my mouth,  
Swallow him whole,  
His boat and his crew.  
All night long  
The boat of the sun  
Sails down  
Through my body's  
Dark waters.  
At dawn he is born  
Radiant, new.  
I am his mother,  
He is my son.  
Through him I give you light,  
Through him I give you life.  
Without me you would die,  
Drowned in the waters of Nun.

## **Matins**

I am a poor sleeper and rise early  
But no need to sympathize,  
There are compensations:  
Most mornings I see the dawn  
How the sky lightens, colours  
Sometimes in delicate pastels  
Sometimes deep flaming reds  
Like war banners across the sky.  
Then the sun, huge, imperial,  
Mighty heaves himself up  
To survey his inheritance.  
What do I do to acknowledge  
This giver of all life, warmth, light?  
I fling my arms wide open, smiling  
"Welcome! Welcome! Welcome!"

## **Home Waters**

As soon as I step upon the deck  
Of any boat or ship afloat  
I feel at home and ready to roam  
The ocean wide come wind or tide,  
Cast off the ropes, sky-high my hopes  
And full of joy like some young boy  
So come with me, let's put to sea,  
Shrug off the years, forget our fears,  
Together sail through storm and gale  
Hand in hand and far from land  
Yet safe and sound—not homeward bound  
For home is here just where we are,  
Happy to be—safe in the lap of our mother, the sea.

## **The Geez New Year**

Eleventh September  
so please to remember  
in far Eritrea  
it is the New Year  
and I shall be 7 years younger.  
Geez! ! !

*Note: The traditional Geez calendar of Eritrea and Ethiopia calculates the date as seven years earlier than the western calendar so that 2005 is reckoned as 1998. Each family celebrates New Year by killing and eating a sheep.*

## **Useless**

*The names given here all belonged to  
real dogs that lived in Ancient Egypt*

Amongst the ancient artefacts unearthed  
were six dog-collars with their owners' names  
in hieroglyphs—three thousand years it is  
since Brave One and his master went to hunt  
for waterfowl among the reedy marshes  
of the Nile, near where, beneath a shady palm,  
the dogs, Good Herdsman and Reliable,  
stood guard upon their master's herd of kine;  
nearby North Wind (the fastest dog in Thebes)  
and Antelope strove might and main to keep  
penned safe a restless flock of bleating sheep,  
all steady dogs deserving of our praise.  
But who's that scruffy dog with lolling tongue  
and sideways grin that idly lollops by?  
A good for nothing sort of beast, he looks,  
too loveable to guard a house, too daft  
to herd a sheep and slow to bring back game,  
but you know his master must have loved him  
when he dubbed him with that name—can you guess?  
In hieroglyphs or English it's the same — "Useless!"

## **The Sacrifice**

I loved all three  
of my silver  
threepenny bits  
especially the shiny one  
with Queen Victoria's head  
so it was strange  
that I should drop them  
secretly, one by one  
in the church collection plate  
at Sunday Mass.  
I made myself do it,  
wanting to show —  
to prove to myself  
that I loved God more  
than my lovely  
silver threepenny bits.  
What a strange child I was,  
misguided, too, I think  
— perhaps.

## **A Biker's Funeral**

*In memory of Stephen (Reggie) Pearce  
of Kilnsea, 1980-2005*

The wind blows cold through the churchyard trees  
and sadly tolls the passing bell  
as mourners shuffle up the leaf-strewn  
narrow path between the leaning stones.

He was just twenty-five, so young,  
so full of life, and love of life  
and laughter – killed outright one night  
in a head-on crash on his motorbike.

From far and wide we've gathered here  
to pay respect to our young friend.  
I've never seen the church so full,  
oh death, how can you be so cruel?

Who will forget this funeral?  
Four hundred strong in the nave we stood,  
family and friends both young and old  
and a phalanx of bikers in leathers and boots.

Between the holy platitudes  
and hymns they played his favourite songs;  
one had to smile to hear within  
that ancient august church of stone

come belting out the vibrant tones  
of modern rock and heavy metal.  
Who can forget the coffin passing  
in procession like a royal barque,

the biker's helmet on its lid  
resplendent in heraldic colours  
– rich gules, azure, argent, or,  
a shining light of knightly splendour?

Who will forget that send-off from  
his fellow bikers when three score  
or more bright gleaming motorcycles  
with a thunderous roar led off the hearse?

## **The Photographic Competition**

This girl I know has seen a poster for  
a photographic competition  
with prizes for the best three photographs.  
Land transport is the theme –  
roads, highways, railways, bridges;  
the field of choice is wide.  
She thinks 'why not?' and  
straightaway decides to try to win.  
That night she doesn't sleep at all,  
her mind is full of thoughts  
of roads and highways, railway lines  
and plans. Next day she tries to borrow  
from a friend his camera but he's out,  
no matter, she will try again,  
meanwhile there's much research to do  
upon the Internet and using Google's images  
to check the many ways  
that roads and highways, too,  
might variously be viewed.

When Sunday comes, still camera-less  
she walks for miles  
to where the railway line is bridged  
and gives a photographic vantage point.  
Here once a week the track's one train  
will pass beneath the bridge.  
Today she reconnoitres, measures angles,  
sight lines, calculates perspectives, rates of speed.  
Tomorrow she resolves to check  
which day the train will pass along the line.  
Meanwhile a plan of action forms:  
she'll take a holiday from work that day  
and wait with patience and a camera for the train.  
She'll get her shot.

So far so good. She next turns over in her mind  
the strategies for roads and highways –  
a week at least for staking out  
locations, planning pics. She formulates  
a schedule in her mind –  
This girl is serious and intends to win  
like Soviet General Zhukov who  
in World War II triumphed against all odds.  
Her battle plans like his are based on Clausewitz,  
she's read his Art of War and follows,  
faithfully the principle he taught –

which is to bring a force that's irresistible  
to any problem, hitch or snag,  
and in that way to overwhelm  
and crush all opposition, totally.  
This is what it takes to win,  
and I am glad she is my friend;  
I would not choose  
to have her as my foe.

*The competition was won by the subject of this poem (written before the result), my Eritrean friend, Arsiema Berhane*

### **The Dressing Table**

I got to looking at this dressing table,  
the one we share, my wife and I,  
plain white painted wood with a backing mirror,  
she has the right side, I have the left.  
Between in no man's land presides  
a large moon-faced Akuaba, mother goddess  
of Ghana, whose tranquil gaze takes in  
impassively three family photographs—  
two nieces and a son and daughter.  
Just now, my side is cluttered and untidy,  
I admit. Some things are always there,  
my mother's crystal ball in which  
I've never seen the future, or anything at all,  
the wooden inlaid Indian box for polished stones  
and pendants, the Polish leather pencil case  
from Zakopanie, a wallet with my banker's card  
and sundry papers, all these I keep upon my side  
and would expect to find them there,  
but all these other things—a tennis ball,  
a plastic can of cashew nuts, "More Poetry Please",  
a packet of pancreatic enzymes for the stomach  
(three times a day with food),  
an "England's Glory" box of matches,  
a notebook, spiral bound, the pages  
filled with useful phrases in Tigrinya,  
and so it goes—a five-pence piece,  
a lens, a box for holding moths without a lid,  
a trading card from Carol Nashe promoting  
best deals in motorbike insurance,  
a pile of coppers emptied from my trouser pockets every  
night,  
a two-pin plug for continental sockets,  
a tape cassette, a Royal Navy seaman's knife,  
a tattered clipboard and two AA batteries, now spent.

My wife's side seems by contrast almost bare,  
a box for jewellery on which there sits  
a leather purse that holds an antique cameo brooch;  
it shows a lady in a dress beneath a tree  
beside a hunting dog and what appears to be  
a goat—it was my grandmother's once, I think.  
Next to it is a plastic stand on which like Noah's ark,  
two by two, neat pairs of earrings hang,  
half-moons and moondrops, clear stones,  
galactic spirals, silver ankhs and flowers,  
two cats and a pair of silver hares. Not much besides,  
just a long-tailed comb and a fluff of cotton wool,  
a pebble picked up from the beach, now dull,  
a small shell, and a length of folded string.  
Tomorrow I have resolved to put my side in order.

### **November Blues**

What is it about November  
that always gives me the blues?  
Is it the sky, heavy as sin  
or is it the wind that seems to whistle  
through the caverns of my skull?  
Is it the earth, once warm and loving  
but now grown hard and cold? Is it  
all the fallen fruit that lies  
and rots upon those grassy places  
where I tread? Everywhere there is  
the decadence and hush of dying leaves —  
decay and death, I seem to drift,  
a disembodied wraith, through mists  
that settle like a shroud  
upon that plain without a name —  
though some would call it Limbo —  
that land of stranded souls,  
lost, damned or just forgotten.  
Oh let me soon climb out of this  
slough of despond, and cast aside  
November blues to find delight  
again in love, colour, laughter, light.

## **Night Visitations**

There are times when I can't sleep  
so I lay awake and think  
or just dream of all the things  
that might have been, but soon  
new thoughts and old come crowding in  
to people every corner of my brain.  
Unsmiling, humourless, they clamour  
for attention, push and jostle  
to the front, shout out demands.  
Oh, what an ugly leprous-  
featured crew; so hard they try  
to tie me in their tangled threads  
of pseudo-logic and unreason.  
I turn and toss, bemoan the loss  
of peaceful sleep. Then come  
the conversations, imaginary ones  
wherein I seek to justify  
myself from accusations never made  
or formulate neat answers—  
brilliant ripostes, the ones that never came  
in those encounters that were real.  
And after conversations,  
it is time to bid a welcome  
to remembered humiliations,  
embarrassments and tribulations.  
See them march in rich array  
across the darkling plain;  
you may have thought them dead  
but here they are, alive and well!  
Oh woe is me! Who'd wish to be  
an insomniac? How we each long to see  
that little crack of light begin to creep  
beneath those curtains when we cannot sleep.

*For Arsiema Berhane who (unknowingly)  
wrote the first two and a half lines.*

## **Whose is this Hand I See Before Me?**

God, it scared me!  
Just woke up,  
looked down at my arm,  
hand still holding the pen —  
It didn't seem to be mine,  
the hand, I mean,  
I'd probably nicked the pen.

## The Parasitology Exam

At 7.30, after morning breakfast  
it was the parasitology exam ...  
I had some 40 worms  
to memorise –  
Latin names, contamination, size,  
colour, cycle, treatment, diagnosis,  
signs clinical and otherwise,  
as well as prophylaxy, reproduction,  
not to mention all the different  
types of eggs,  
their shape and size.  
These 40 worms I carried in my head,  
a salad mix you might have said.  
One question I found pretty hard  
concerned a man with diarrhoea,  
nausea and restless fever.  
I knew 30 worms that could cause that  
but this was special for the man  
had hypereosinophilia  
of five percent; percentages  
are different for each worm.  
I had a guess and chose  
the species, *saginata*  
of the genus, *Teniae*  
And thanks to Lady Luck,  
by all the gods, I got it right!  
Tomorrow we'll be tested in diseases.

*A found poem based on an account  
by Rita El Khoury*

## **The Friendly Pig**

Pigs are a lot like us,  
their skins are pink, or black, and bare.  
They're friendly and intelligent, if given  
half a chance and like it when you scratch them  
round their ears. I knew a farmer once  
who used to keep a special brush  
to groom his pig, an old enormous sow.  
She'd stand in ecstasy her eyes half closed,  
they seemed to have a special bond.  
Young pigs now scientists have found  
are playful and will thrive  
if children's toys are put into their styes.  
They'll play for hours with a squeaky doll,  
a plastic duck or a rubber ball.

Most pigs today are kept industrially  
in floodlit sanitised conditions  
on concrete floors in factory sheds  
divided into exact economic units  
calculated to maximise returns on capital  
so by and large there isn't room to play  
or even turn. Our pigs are bred for slaughter  
in sterile air-conditioned abattoirs.  
If you, like me, eat meat, you can't complain.  
Yet don't you sometimes feel a qualm  
of guilt? And have you noticed  
how, in graphic art, we always rob the pig  
of dignity? It seems we have a need  
to show this friendly fellow creature  
in a joky light, portray him as a  
cartoon figure out of Disney Land  
with his light-hearted cheeky grin  
and curly tail. It is as though  
we're trying to make ourselves feel better  
and believe the pig is really happy with us after all.

## **Anima – My Muse**

I used to pray to God as I was taught  
but it never seemed to work,  
and why should He listen anyway –  
like when disaster comes, all pray and  
some are saved, they praise and thank the Lord  
but what about the others that He didn't save,  
are they all sinners? No – it is absurd.  
Yet I find I miss the act of prayer,  
it used to be a comfort  
in times of stress, so now I choose  
to pray, but to my Muse, my anima,  
that hidden inner person in my personality,  
whom I am told for men is female and for women male.  
My female Muse I have neglected in the past  
but now I'm going to get to know her  
if I can – so what's her name?  
I think it must be Hathor for she always was  
my all-time favourite goddess in the pantheon  
of ancient Egypt – a sort of lovely Jersey cow  
with liquid melting eyes of love, and yet a lass  
who likes to sing and dance and drink  
to excess, she's also fond of sex,  
oh yes, She can be my Muse,  
and I hope she'll help me find some lovely poems too.

## **A View from My Window on a Late Sunday Afternoon in Winter**

The sky has cleared, it is a duck-egg blue,  
so still, so light, the clouds are few and white  
like Royal Icing on a Christmas cake,  
no wind, or very little. I watch my neighbour's  
chimney smoke across the road, it rises  
in a thin and fitful plume that gently drifts  
sideways, then soon disperses in the air –  
like prayer. On either side the window frames  
a lattice-work of branches, stark and bare  
against the sky, like Chinese characters  
in black ink or pebbles of dendritic agate  
such as one finds sometimes upon the beach.  
Beside the darkened escallonia hedge  
a cloud of winter gnats perform their dance  
in the lonely air, they rise and fall, advance,  
retreat, frail bodies that for a moment catch  
the misty light from the setting sun. There are  
no birds or other insects in the air.

### **At Four O'Clock This Afternoon**

There's a V-shaped gap where the tall hedge parts  
By the garden gate and it frames a view  
Of a sycamore tree with a field beyond.  
In summer there'd be a herd of cows  
But it's empty now – just a bare-branched tree  
And the high green bank of an estuary.  
At four o'clock this afternoon  
Behind the tree and above the bank  
I saw the sun about to set  
Orange-red in a plain grey sky.  
The world for a moment then was just  
A setting sun, a leafless tree,  
A field, a river bank, and me.

### **New Year's Day**

New Year's Day  
And here I am—  
A sadder  
But wiser man.

### **Taken Ill When Abroad; or, My Drozhky Driver Has Been Struck By Lightning**

"Good evening, can I help you?  
How is it going? How do you feel?"

"I'm not well, I need a doctor,  
I've got backache, I've got diarrhoea,  
I've got 'flu, my feet hurt.  
I'd like something for a headache,  
I'd like some aspirin, I'd like some bandages,  
I'd like a bottle of red wine.  
I'm English, my name is Pete".

"Thanks for everything!"

*Written with the help of my favourite foreign-language  
phrasebook.*

## **A Cold Day in January**

Last year my mother died.  
I was not there; she died alone.  
It was mid-winter when  
We buried her. The roads were treacherous  
That day, the coldest of the year.  
Few people made it to the funeral,  
The church was nearly empty.  
My son and daughter each  
Read out a poem  
She had written in her younger days.  
The priest, who had not know her,  
Said the prayers. From there we went  
By car, the tyres crunching on the ice,  
To where the grave had been prepared  
In the cemetery that waited  
On the outskirts of the town.  
The ground was frozen hard.  
We stood and listened to the prayers  
The priest intoned, tall and upright  
There above the open grave while  
All the time the icy wind blew  
Flurries of snow over the graves  
And by the groves of evergreens,  
So cold, so bleak, so utterly unforgettable  
The scene, but what was strange:  
I did not mind the cold,  
That seeped into my heart and bones,  
It seemed somehow appropriate.

### **St. Abune Teklehaimanot**

A more surprising saint there's not  
Than Abune Teklehaimanot,  
He is my all-time favourite saint;  
There is none other quite so quaint.

He spent his time converting kings  
And once he sprouted several wings.  
He was climbing down from Debre Damo  
When he fell off the cliff with a cry of woe.

His friends believed it was the end,  
But then he started to ascend.  
Six wings he'd grown, quick as a flash,  
To save himself from a nasty crash.

Three times round his home he flew  
So all could see what he could do.  
When he got old he lived in a cave,  
All part of a plan his soul to save.

In it he stood like a planted tree  
And neither the sun nor the moon did see.  
For years and years Abune stood there  
And never sat upon a chair

Until the day one leg fell off  
This very remarkable man of the cloth.  
Undaunted, Teklehaimanot  
Just stood upon the other foot.

He kept that up for seven years,  
Four of them waterless, it appears.  
So now you'll see why he gets my vote,  
St. Abune Teklehaimanot!