

# The Mansion Gardens

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# The Mansion Gardens

Alan Morrison

## Forgive-Me-Not

Let go. Forgive. Forget the bitterness  
That buttresses when love is dead:  
Most of what's said isn't meant;  
Most of what's meant isn't said.

*This collection is dedicated to my parents Andrew and Helen,  
and Lucía, mi flor silvestre.*

‘But I don’t allow it’s luck and all a toss;  
There’s no such thing as being starved and crossed;  
It’s just the power of some to be a boss,  
And the bally power of others to be bossed...’

John Davidson,  
‘Thirty Bob A Week’

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## Foreword

Alan Morrison is an extraordinary poet born for 1974. Reading him, you might think the poetry was written by someone active in 1974, though the language and poetics have clearly been rinsed in the decades that succeeded this. And the poetry is far finer than the average kind of polemical writing that Morrison has wedded his own gifts to. As a poet he is rooted in acute historicisms as well as a throbbing sense of what it is like writing as a convinced and historically aware Socialist in the early 21st century – indeed, exactly 100 years on from when one of his heroes, Robert Tressell started writing his great working-class novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*.

Poverty, family, Socialism, Catholicism often crop up (literally) in Morrison's work like stones in a garden of verses. This is unfashionable. There's a burdened obsessiveness with these themes in Morrison's writing, the kind that generates most real poetry. Themes like these currently marginalise anyone writing within them. Morrison is inordinate and alone as Tim Allen once said of Andrew Duncan in a similar context. He's also extremely bloody-minded and cannot rid himself of his themes. Nor does he attempt to diversify into sexier workshop-aided delicacies. He is perennially one might put it workshop-shy and would only tell you to hark back to the iniquities when English was hammered out through the workshop of the world.

His poetry though inhabits its own linguistic parabolias of obsession, crisis and occasionally Hardy-esque resolution. Morrison tends to the confessional long poem, not something that socialists are encouraged to indulge in. Indeed, Morrison's own obsessions cut across the very socialisms they promulgate. There is in a strict sense an indulgence in non-indulgence which operates as a compulsive re-ordering of the emotions generated, rather than putting on a face of purposeful optimism but the degree to which Morrison examines and excoriates the conditions of his own and his family's life, as well as other fantasias involving sympathetic alter-egos and sub-heroes, is quite unflinching. It takes in fact an extraordinary degree of courage to write such confessional poetry striated with such a Socialist edge. The themes itch against each other, one confessional, the other tight-lipped and thrusting such confessions away to quickly resolve personal difficulties without recourse to quite so many words. This tension makes Morrison's poetry quite unique and explains why the courage, often visibly painful, is not foolhardiness.

Morrison's poetic strategies take their bearings from several distinct sources, perhaps more than any other poet, John Davidson's influence (particularly in 'Thirty Bob a Week' and also in the later Testaments) have clearly enthused Morrison's exactly dour yet exhilarating details as well as occasionally his rhythmic inflections. Other poets like the more polemically-edged Romantics and above all Harold Monro, have sharpened the melancholia in his palette. Monro's sense of transience and halfway houses of recovery and damnation have bitten into Morrison's elegiac language like nothing else. If Monro as Eliot said of him 'has done what no other poet has done at all', then Morrison has done with Monro what no other poet has done or would dare to do with him. The curl and slap of Morrison's own particularity, his twitch disturbing Monro's onerously 'Silent Pool', is hauntingly memorable.

Monro lived as Eliot generously acknowledged on the cusp of Modernism; also, as Pound wrote to him in a letter, Monro was too generous to his fellow Georgians, promoting far too much 'second-rate lopp'. Certain of his poems don't escape a mild Georgian basileus rather as if he had left 'Milk for the Cat' out for a little too long. Morrison's Georgian tendencies are however not so personally sentimentalised as having Edward Carpenter (the famous Socialist poet) calling round on Monro in his sandals. Morrison shares nothing of the strangeness of certain of Monro's states, for instance, the wise desolation of 'Bitter Sanctuary' (but for stylistic influence see 'Infatuation: The First'). This, hewn out of earlier Georgian expansions, is the kind of poem which begins to emerge, roughcast, out of some of Morrison's desolate elegies ('The Cottage', 'The House of Sadness Past' and the epic 'Clocking-in for the Witching Hour' etc.). This attunement is where Morrison and Monro show their most natural affinity: isolation. It is not that self-excoriating isolation and hallucinated uniqueness of sensibility that produced, for instance, 'Overheard on a Saltmarsh' - that has a wildness and amused self-pitying tang that would be impossible to emulate, and even if it were, not desirable, except to the inveterately gothic. Morrison's unique voice is attuned more to the special melancholia that fuels the best of Monro; not the explorations of the latter's own haunted sexuality and alcoholism. Lucky for Morrison.

Morrison's poetry is not only like no other, it could never be so even if it tried. This is a test of true poetry. His language is by turns concise and honed in the lyrics and contoured with a curious lopp of its own in the longer works.

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Comparisons have been made to John Clare's nakedness of spirit. There's an affinity like slantwise rain to Alun Lewis, which is all in the tone and tangency of the writing and metre. There are of course signposts in a poet's development and the genuine awkwardness of somebody finding their own and not an easy contemporary way. Morrison's impulse is to build up, say like Montale (in Italian) not again like Ungaretti – the contrast is instructive. His partner is Spanish, and Spanish poets, too, though not the obvious models, have inflected his output. Most of all, though, try the imagined retro-Edwardian fantasias in a later city of dreadful nights ('Keir Hardie Street'). It shows the way he might develop. And Morrison is still developing quite rapidly; has not learnt except startlingly in a few poems and lines that luminosity won after an enormous poetic tension has been resolved, merely to reinvest itself in its own obsessions. But he's getting there; and a full volume is certainly due, if not exactly overdue, since he's still in his early thirties. And this decade remains rather a good one for the extermination of premature talents. His own gifts however are likely to endure.

Simon Jenner  
February 2006

The conflict between the poet and the performer is something Alan is confronting in all his work. His working through producing one pamphlet after another is a powerful and deceptively simple way of confronting the truth that is his own and nobody else's. We have areas of interest in common; we both love the work of Stevie Smith, a Poet and Performer who only really entered the public arena in the Sixties through her association with the likes of Adrian Mitchell et al.; we both suffer from OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder); and above all we are both indefatigable seekers after the truth that is uniquely ours. I believe, with more and more successful performances of his play for voices, *Picaresque* (see the favourable notice in the *Guardian Review* of Saturday December 17, 2005), Alan will write more and more for the stage. I shall be very surprised if this play isn't broadcast on Radio 4 in the near future.

He is a lot tougher and tenderer in all his work confronting what many poets would run a million miles from confronting. OCD is a particularly vexatious way of being made to go through life and Alan daily faces incredible challenges by producing works at the same time as editing other peoples' and the Survivors' Poetry magazine, *Poetry Express*. Through all his work Alan is an indefatigable

seeker – both with a Blakean and Stevie Smith-type vision; it's the conflict between how he would like his life to be and how it really is that produces the great diversification of his work. Indeed, some of Alan's epigrams have a Blakean feeling pulsating right the way through them. Every word counts. The poems, in their quirkiness, also remind me of Stevie.

Productivity in published poets and writers is often most unfairly sneered at – there is a great deal to be said in producing work in the way Alan does. It is the trial and error way and will help him to reach audiences he deserves through his great gifts as a poet and performer. He may not resolve that conflict – it is in fact his greatest ally.

John Horder  
January 2006

Alan Morrison has a 'voice' ("All that poets can have", as Auden said) and one entirely his own; electric. Seeing the 'specialness' inherent in ordinary phenomena is the essence of the poet's art and the unfolding of his personal 'take' is the principal delight of reading good work. Morrison does not flinch about 'coming out' as a sufferer from obsessive compulsive disorder: for this too he deserves the high praise his poetry demands. His work is an interesting mixture of innocence and experience.

Stanza 4 of 'Last of the Spray Carnations' is worthy of Pound. 'Tears of mustard sun' – I wish I'd written that! The shorter poems too are excellent – wise, witty and full of feeling. 'The Cottage' is marvellous. At 63 when I read his work I feel there's hope for poetry still.

Morrison is a hope for English poetry where hope is in short supply.

Barry Tebb  
2005

## The Water Shallows

As I was paddling in the water shallows,  
the ripples turned to waves,  
the paddling to a wade.

While I tried to shallow my tumbling mind,  
the thoughts that swam in the water shallows  
were chased as fish by the shadows of sparrows

## Nostalgia

Even in those golden days  
Life always left us wanting more -  
Why we loathe ourselves today  
Is why we loved ourselves before.

## The House on the Rise of Reversion

Regarding the house on the rise,  
Shabby, ramshackle, severe,  
Of crabby stone and rustic gate,  
Subjective views judge here.

Eyes entirely detached survey  
A shambling garden with scorn -  
Instead of empathising they  
Petition us to cut the lawn.

Greeted by a worn, cracked face  
A visitor digs up a dearth  
Of signatures - Dad's trampled eyes  
Displace the criticising earth.

Threats delivered, the visitor leaves.  
An anxious face of thwarted youth  
Twitches through reclusive curtains,  
Haunting a window's hidden truth.

Inside: a tea-dripped radiator;  
Kipling's If on a blanched wall fades  
In a crack of sunlight through a broken pane:  
Hide for spying listing spades.

Outside: a shoddy wire enclosure  
Mangy guards limply patrol,  
Possessive of a callous house -  
Snouts in empty tins, they troll.

Forsythia's golden petals glow  
Defiant, alone; the colour; the hope;  
The island of life in a rough sea of weeds  
Willing the rubble-bed garden to cope.

Here a sham-lawn's been flung like a sheet  
Over a bomb-shelter's furniture by  
An idyll's betrayal to spaded defeat  
For we who live in the house on the rise.

### In Search of the Haggard Ghost

It flitted down the lane  
past children's voices raised in play,  
tracing its steps long ago  
pressed into the mud,  
trodden on a thousand times since.

The brief trek ended.

Returning up the lane, rain  
in drips, hastened to penitent patters,  
pelted on the muddy puddles  
then intensified, sleeting -  
bounced off clenched fists of grass,  
pummelled flowers at the sides.

Standing silently, sullenly,  
as the children ran out laughing  
through a pasture gate, it stood there,  
still and quiet, and they didn't see it.

A shabby, bedraggled, sopping ghost  
orbited by a bulging black cloud  
sagging in readiness to burst.

## Dance of the Dragonflies

Around the still lake the dragonflies danced  
In a flurry of cobalt and green -  
They buzzed their glass wings and blindly chanced  
Skimming the water-sheen.

One hit the water then hurtled and skidded,  
Seemingly out of control -  
A pilot was drowned where the lily-pads lidded  
The mantle which merged with the shoal.

The pilot's son cried as he tried to forget  
But leapt up with a new sense of hope  
As he spotted a dragonfly, wings stuck with wet,  
Drag itself up the bank's sandy slope.

## The Mansion Gardens

Shall we stroll those mansion gardens,  
baize on baize of velvet grass  
so well-kept and un-walked-upon?  
Come on, love, we've cut the coupons,  
let's see those shouting flowers  
round grounds of ivy towers.

Shall we walk those mansion cloisters  
verged with portraits? There's the Lords  
and Ladies, and their ancestors  
hanging, framed and ashen-faced.

*But why are they ashen-faced dear,  
when they lived respectfully here?*

Shall we stroll those dust-still rooms -  
well, just alongside, take a little  
look at them, just peep inside?  
They're cordoned-off with red rope...

*just like our lives...*

oh, we'll cope.

Shall we pace those mansion chambers  
ringed by pasty-plaited rope...

*easily unhooked and disobeyed...*

No - that would be to abandon  
our law-abiding principles...

*what's wrong is always irresistible...*

Shall we recall those mansion gardens,

baize on baize of velvet grass  
so well-kept and un-walked-upon?

*I'm not envious: simply a dreamer:  
those lawns seemed so much greener...*

## Make Way

Make Way! their banners gallop  
In the choppy Cornish wind;  
'He Lives! He Lives!' crashes on cramped  
Coverack, Lilliput-twinned.

On the craggy harbour-side  
They rejoice their Saviour's Risen!  
And yet He's still invisible,  
While their clammed evangelism

Is vivid and immovable  
As Coverack shacks' limpet-cling  
To granite rocks; or barnacles  
On the moored hull of *Tamarind*.

Rustling tambourines displace  
The shingle's cymbal hissing -  
No footprints to be made out on  
The sand because the tide is in.

In Chapel they all clap their hands,  
Sing with palms splayed up in prayer  
Spun by a cardigan-man on guitar  
Strumming in a thumping chair.

In among the rocking pews  
The Not-Yet-Born-Again's found out;  
Someone nudges me: 'Come on,  
Clap!' - the spell to cast off doubt?

Into the street they pour their peal  
Pounding on my doubting brow -  
Bashing tambourines they dash  
My faith like fish-brains on a bow.

## The Corn Thresher

1

I gather the corn-strands from the field,  
bind them together to force them to yield.  
My act is assertion of mastery  
over my nature - whatever that be.

2

A Confucian in my down-cast stare,  
all green without spoil seems barren and bare  
to my tampering eyes and grappling hands  
that wrestle with Nature till She understands.

3

Onto my threshing-floor I step  
binding tighter my thoughts like old men, regrets -  
or confessing Catholics the sums of sins  
their intermediary's stale ear wins.

4

Then I wield my flail for the threshing  
like the Father incense for blessing  
the echoing house of his God on high,  
to fumigate and purify.

5

When the job's almost done I grip  
the bound corn tight in my fingertips  
and perform the threshing manually -  
with my chore I achieve true harmony.

6

My eyes, full of purpose as bales of hay,  
roll about with an impulse like clouds during day,  
as the grains of corn sheaves spill out free  
like beads from a broken rosary.

7

I am a thresher of the corn  
working the field in the chilly dawn,  
I bind my thoughts tight in Belief  
and thrash out all the grains of grief.

8

With every thresh of the flail I delve  
into the Truth gripped in the helve;  
my binding my thoughts is my will to believe  
I shall resurrect like corn from its sheave.

## Dole and Genealogy

1

The fireplace littered with Carlsberg cans  
 he sits, disconsolate.  
 Concentration fills his hands:  
 his hobby gropes to compensate  
 for his neglected state.

From chair to chair he'll stumble  
 mapping out ancestral pasts;  
 in fogs of nostalgia he'll fumble  
 through fictitious fasts.  
 Traces the line the light casts.

Dimming light. Dull evening glow  
 displays his only pride:  
 ancestors' names, row on row,  
 dead before his time although  
 he feels they're tutting by his side

judging him. Tries to appease  
 their disappointment in him  
 by tracing ad infinitum  
 far into his fantasies,  
 fizzing cans, full ashtrays.

2

I find him foraging for childhood,  
 sleep-lost in stolen pasts  
 where memory graves are his mind-food  
 for hope; stale bread that lasts  
 till shattered like plaster-casts.

What use is love? Over us looms  
 a quiet Catholic God, aloof  
 from our penniless misfortunes,  
 old invisible heirlooms

flogged long ago to keep this roof  
of poverty's brooding proof.

Can I convince my maltreated father  
God is on our side  
when our cramped prayers have scrimped an after  
of comfortless dark? Time and tide  
long passed on the other side.

In creeps a torrid afternoon  
of brief self-pitying;  
more motherless sobs fill the room,  
nothing can lift the casting of gloom  
over the sound of a grown man crying.

3

I pity the prowess with which he heaps  
more shame upon himself  
as he lumbers his dad's damp-blotched books  
onto the listing shelf –  
sad tributes to a faded wealth.

More than any other member  
of his leafless family tree  
he personifies the motto  
*Forgetful Of One's Own Interests*  
warped through verdigris.

'I've done my duty, I'd done my best'  
he mutters to a mirror  
repeating this and all the rest  
that still he is no winner  
but definitely a sinner –  
always self-accuser, never self-forgiver.

4

He slips to sleep and dreams of more  
sleep; cuts adrift from the shore

of consciousness.           The more he copes  
the more he reeks of cigarette smoke  
that fogs the fact his nerves are broke -

and what chance did his nerves have  
when at the age of three his skin  
was blistered to the third degree?  
Sixty years on his hands aren't ready  
to keep their cigarette fingers steady.

I see his eyes are blurring again  
back to blood-shot bleariness,  
tired whites slowly yellowing -  
I see him trace the family name  
back to the safety of the past -  
but how long can nostalgia last?

...long as lamplight puddles pages  
of photocopied parish records  
he trains his straining sights towards -  
as the light begins to fail  
his mind will slowly gather sail  
and trace the print like mental Braille.

In the dark, he'll bite his nails.

---

## A Summer Night's Travels

### i. on embarking

in a stale airless bedroom  
she lay white as sand  
on rock-pools of crumpled bed-clothes

through tousling cigarette smoke  
I sailed to her side,  
smoked with her a while,  
stroked her bare leg noticing  
the structure of her smile

she found my smooth hand pleasing,  
I, her pleasing stare,  
for once I felt unembarrassed  
travelling down there;

in love with innocence of touch:  
(instinct's simplicity sent ashore  
with straying hands):

*infatuated with the tangible side of desire:*

fingertips interpreting  
goose-pimple braille indenting  
shining moisturised skin...

### ii. the calm

I snuggled closer to her  
under blankets, fathoming  
for sexless moments, satisfied  
with just mattering...

## iii. the storm

clambered to her mouth,  
prised her lips, sampling  
salt taste, warm pepper breath

her tongue was swelling like a whelk  
inside its shell

I burrowed down to berth  
in clammy shallows

she rose to sink her coral teeth  
in my crow's neck,       sank back  
into the bruise of night

I keeled onto my side -  
she reared up like a wave  
dashed herself on deck...

## iv. the wreck

undercurrents stir the wreck  
of twisted bed-sheets,  
tissues tentacle like seaweed flames...

memories limpet the mind  
in tides of minutes,  
fill the sooty hold with split  
licks of spitting fire...

*infatuated with the tangible side of desire...*

### The China Kingfisher

Dubbed useless for most of his days,  
He saw himself in a similar light.  
Counted hours in the window's haze;  
Inert; a bird without flight.

Time tapered by, lost to a chair,  
The nest from which he's seldom stirred;  
From a window-ledge he flies the air  
In an ornament shaped as a bird.

Imagines the wings that spirit away  
Wishes set free from the mind of the wisher;  
Pictures a lake on a still summer's day,  
And flitting about it, a China Kingfisher.

## Few Never Envy

All I have: this shabby room  
 furnished grandma-style:  
 carpet muddy umber,  
 thin beige curtains pile  
 like luminous mosquito nets  
 over the draughty window-pane.  
 A lacquered table's centre-piece  
 where I eat cold meals, scrimp an aim

inkling in a typewriter.  
 Plastic clatter of tone-deaf keys  
 scores each curtained, fiction-night:  
 a blind mind tinkling ivories.  
 Breaks spent on a spineless bed;  
 fingers brush the woodchip Braille,  
 step across the blue-tack path,  
 trip to creak of banister-rail.

I stare up at a blanched Van Gogh  
 by the toothpaste-spattered sink;  
 the ticking of the crippled clock  
 decides it isn't time to think;  
 I rise to wash: chalky water  
 chokes out to the rusty squeak  
 of the stiffer tap; over my shoulder  
 a back-to-front Thirty Bob A Week

reflects in the mirror that traps me.  
 Smoking soothes as doubts unroll.  
 My only other luxuries: tea  
 and sleeping pills when I get my dole  
 of hardship maintenance that feeds  
 my lapsed Protestant shame  
 (though I was born a Catholic  
 I'm English all the same).

Few never envy others' lives  
with their ambitions in arrears;  
only thoughts that telescope  
help one cope - focused years  
blur the edges of fogged progress.  
Lungs fangled for spearmint fags  
purse their pockets. Abstracts heap  
like half-p's in the money bags.

## Destiny

She's push-chaired in on every shift  
by a mother who sighs with coffee sips  
cauterizing suicide no doubt  
or some other similar way out:  
a bit more brown, another score  
might push things on a little more.

Destiny sits there taking it in  
with rag-doll's eyes, still, unblinking;  
eyes no child should see with; no shine;  
a grubby-faced Little Mother Time,  
her mother's troubles sitting  
on her marble brow's dark knitting.

I search for some sign in her eyes  
of something like infant surprise  
but the sharps of her mind are cluttered up  
with images of her mother jacking up  
in nightly attempts to numb the pain  
coursing through syringe-thin vein.

Does Destiny deserve her name?

## A Day at the Council Estates

We took part in a car-boot sale  
to flog some old toys for our lack of money;  
forced by circumstance to compromise  
our impoverished principles, capitalise  
on this opportunity in the council estates,  
we touted our out-dated merchandise.

But father, no salesman, bit his lip  
as he witnessed the scruffy kids stare in awe  
at chipped Britains' soldiers and Star Wars figures  
their frustrated parents couldn't afford –  
we wanted to give them away there and then,  
but poverty pressed us to set up a pitch.

Stood gormless in labyrinths of open boots,  
prised oysters on a shabby asphalt bed  
of playground, I saw a grubby child tugging  
his father's sleeve, eyes glued to our toys  
like price tags. Something died in me then:  
I couldn't believe in anything again.

Seemed to me truth was cheap and nasty  
like the plastic toys we recycled for sale  
and I felt crippled with sympathy  
for a child who was wearing old jumble-sale clothes,  
a urine-stained t-shirt and filthy corduroys,  
who knows all he sees, and sees all he knows.

### My Life in the Shade

Since I was sunburnt as a boy I learnt to love the shade,  
Spared me from the heat where the other children played -  
But I was tugged out in the sun and punished by its light  
Turning from a shadow to someone in my own right,  
Found that I'd preferred it when I'd felt invisible.

*Sometimes I wonder whether I was ever here at all.*

I've always loved so easily and pitied anyone  
Who showed signs of remorse for the wrongs that they had done.  
I've struggled and I've buckled under every thought I've had  
As if the mere imagining of bad events was bad;  
Pursued by Furies of my own phantasmagorical school.

*Sometimes I wonder whether I was ever here at all.*

The more I've lived I've lost myself and drifted far away  
From the busy worlds of others and the places where they play.  
As if I died some time ago and turned into a ghost  
Haunting all the places that I used to love the most,  
I've lingered like a shadow where my own shadow should fall.

*Sometimes I wonder whether I was ever here at all.*

I came to fear feelings of love for how they made me see  
The image of myself through the eyes of those who loved me.  
Until I was obsessed with being gone in all but mind  
Sharing in the mourning with my loved ones left behind.  
But I'm still here; still in the shade; trembling in its thrall.

*Sometimes I wonder whether I was ever here at all.*

---

## Tales from the Empty Larder

I can't stand scant catechisms  
of tremors in an empty stomach;  
the stench of hunger-scented breath  
where a full belly's the only tonic;  
the famished itch in-between the teeth  
where only food can feed relief.

The stain won't shift: mean-spirited strife  
spoil my appetite for living well;  
splintered my spittle with bitterness;  
chipped my shoulder with its scrimping chisel -  
I taste it still in weak stewed blends;  
in sickly stings of singed dog-ends.

I suppose the harsh lessons I scribed  
inspired in me a need to dream,  
to believe in insubstantial truths,  
for you need a God when you can't keep clean  
and hope, when your faith overflows,  
socialism will cure most ills.

But it's often the morbid human way  
to come to love what you should despise  
just as, in depression, sadness comforts  
with blessings of tears in tea-strained eyes;  
so I feel perverse nostalgia  
for those hours of hunger-fed neuralgia.

I've said to my brother, it's strange to think  
amid the dirt we found ideals,  
a sense of justice in second-hand clothes  
and transubstantiated packet meals -  
the dark of a larder's empty shelves:  
where we first found ourselves.

## The Cottage

For all the breath-smoked winter nights  
we shared some misty summers  
drifting off to light tunes' fall  
like balsam on the garden  
from my brother's bedroom window  
jarred with grandma's *Iliad*;  
sunbathed with mongrels at our feet;  
plucked blushed apples from the tree beside  
the cement-filled well, where we planted  
hope for rescue from this rustic lull  
false as our restless wishes were,  
still yet to be weeded.

Father's face hair-line cracked  
as the crumbly stone of the cottage walls;  
mother's nerves fragile as  
the shaky glass of the greenhouse grave -  
I'm sure she's shrunken in this shade  
all these faded years;  
given the choice she wouldn't leave  
this place for ties still tested like  
the trembling washing-line.

This is where we dug-up doubt  
fossilized in the outhouse stone  
like stories of our mythical home;  
where we first came to believe  
in not believing, with the countryside,  
that simply is. How could we leave.

## Old-Fashioned Sun

Eleven years old, I tried to reclaim  
the past, inspired by a cottage's gloom -  
the countryside is always the same  
no matter what year: I furnished my room  
with my dad's dog-eared books caked in damp-stain  
from *The Black Arrow* to *Allan Quatermain*.

On brumal mornings as a pale sun  
lit thin curtains that filtered its rays,  
I'd stick Holst's scratchy Jupiter on  
summoning my father's schoolboy days -  
Somerset, Nineteen Fifty-One,  
in the ghostly warmth of an old-fashioned sun.

But there's a book-end to the shelf of time:  
one can't stay absent from their age  
in the fusty clutter of historic shrine -  
so I parted the curtains, tripped the page  
to the post-imperfect future time,  
where pop lyrics strip the Kipling rhyme.

## The Ring

No wizard there as our guide -  
Poverty's spell casts all else to one side.  
Father's face grey as Gandalf's gown.  
He always told himself he'd let us down.

Love is its own darkness, slowly binding.

One day my mother had to pawn her ring,  
But kept it secret till we'd finished eating;  
Her finger as it was before their wedding.

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## A Hamper from Landrake

In the creel of a slate-skied Cornish winter  
we caught a scraping sound outside;  
a huge mass landing, heavy as the weight  
my father prayed would be lifted from  
his jobless shoulders scraped and bowed -

cold wind shot through the hallway, lo!  
we beheld a hamper packed with tins  
and vegetables - no Christians,  
just a scribbled note blown on the lino  
saying *from the Parish* - my father scowled,  
now he was obliged to let them Save him.

## Infatuation: The First

Infatuation? It didn't last  
 Beyond rosy, rough-and-tumble days,  
 Gooseberry sweet, no sour aftertaste.  
 Time didn't intimidate the infant; time was sky.  
 The love, the bond that tore our hearts  
 Strained too far, sighed out to die.

*Time's the face you love  
 but are tired of looking at.*

Bitterness of callow apples, raw,  
 Windfall-bitten, sour out the tongue  
 With immature spices to subtle in  
 Its un-acquired taste – sap squandered on  
 Those who sample before ripe; spat out;  
 Wiped clean by sleeves it bruises on.

*Time's a face you love  
 but tire of looking at.*

Time takes long to trickle on; to traipse.  
 Rich spit of first kisses infiltrates the rest.  
 He: *life's not long enough for love.*  
 She: *love purses lips for death;*  
*Familiarity and death: the same.*  
 We tied knots in our stubborn bond; our breath.

*Time's a face you love  
 but are tired of looking at.*

Feelings home in unhealed sores;  
 In lichened ruins bonds re-build  
 On slippery foundations – love clings on;  
 No shutting off till we're told – mistakes,  
 Only palpable once trampled past,  
 Form the pattern of the human face.

*Time's the face you love  
but tire of looking at.*

## The False Confession

English Martyrs Primary School  
Taught us hymns, Hail Marys, guilt;  
On asphalt playgrounds, chalked pitches,  
We played out innocence to the hilt.

One lunchtime, strayed to the other school  
For spastic children, sat in class -  
As I froze over a moment's thought  
My friends face-aped them through the glass.

Walnut-faced Miss Wall called us  
Into her plimsoll-smelling office;  
Pitting us against each other  
x2 chances to confess.

Five 'No's later, our only escape  
From standing shame in assembly  
Was for me to say Yes on their behalf  
(A revelation to me).

Now I stood, the guilty of the three,  
Accused of betrayal by the other two  
By confessing to what I didn't do -  
But who did I betray? Them or me?

## The Rosary Beads

Dour Miss Wall casts dark on our  
pale foreheads, fingers the rosary beads,  
makes us chant a Hail Mary  
for the rub of every wooden ball -  
morning instruction in future obsession  
at English Martyrs Primary School.

9 'o'clock cold polished floor  
grounds our numbers' numb bums in  
an overcast assembly hall;  
Calvary clouds crowd the windows;  
the dark jackdaws like a flock of crows.

*Morning has broken...*

pince-nez pinched, beak-nosed Miss Blades  
perches like Professor Yaffle  
at her wood bookend piano,  
marches thimble fingers on  
the thumping ivories...

*He's got the whole world in his hands...*

one hundred and something O-shaped mouths  
chorus OHP-penned cant:

*Do not be afraid...*

The music dies; lift of spirits  
sinks to sighs.

Miss Wall re-manifests, impresses  
guilt, our holy catechism -  
without speaking issues this instruction:  
Question your desires.

My eyes restrain tears.  
My thoughts leap back.  
Each bead sticks in my throat,  
imagining Hell's fires...

## Candles and Anglicans

Father, the ethical, earthed C of E,  
called us Roman Candles teasingly,  
took his bread un-leavened;  
spread butter on only one slice of his toast,  
spared the other half austerely;  
stuck Anglican rationality -

Mother, Obsessive-Confessive, prone  
to genuflecting superstitions,  
self-prescribed Lourdes' potions  
for a phobia of pills -

but they shared one sparking trait:  
waxen self-sacrificial wills.

A spark lit flames of Roman Candles;  
two sons' indivisible aim  
harmonised from sparring angles:  
to make sense from a martyr's name.

One of us struggles with old confessions;  
both, with pulling our mother out  
from her un-absolved obsessions.

Dad stares sad like a foreigner;  
speechless; un-translated.

Our parents' bond endures but gone  
their vintage conversations -  
ex-communicated.

### The Glove Compartment

In the thrumming back of the car  
my legs cramped by bagfuls of things  
mother's stashed here for fear of swallowing,  
I help her focus from the back seat,  
her saner side, shut off with the powdered  
glucose sweets in the glove compartment.  
My eyes cast back to the bags at my feet.  
She throws a panda-eyed stare  
from the dark rear-view mirror.

Through the smudged windscreen my mock  
composure shivers with leafless trees  
twisting in the wind. Stark markers  
for my probing on limits of time;  
waning strength; deathly sky.  
I'm lost in myself for grim minutes;  
struggle to trace true bouts of substance  
in outlines of thought-shaped clouds.

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## Mother Mouse

My tiny mother in her tiny kitchen  
Rinsing the washing up -  
A poem warped above the sink  
Entitled *Don't Give Up*.

But Greeting Card wise pearls aside,  
Sentiments tire now;  
Thirty-five years she's survived  
Each wrung-out wedding vow.

For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer,  
A shine for bees-wing eyes -  
A sud-filled cup for a moment's doubt -  
Some sparkle for disguise.

She scurries around her mental wheel  
Like an obsessing mouse,  
Spins her chores like effortless confessions;  
Swallows her sobs as she tidies the house.

## Little Hells

Sun streaming in at seven 'o' clock  
my fibrous nerves crumpling to  
a pile of vampire bones in its light.  
My refuge, pillbox dreams last night.  
Life's lightning fork, indiscriminately,  
charges me up with a pulsing shock.

Too stimulated by light, you'd think,  
to appreciate it leisurely;  
live afraid but inspired in anxiety;  
primed dynamite - tensed, rhymed  
for fear of letting go; cerebrally  
greyed while young,  
I flirt daily with the brink -

lead on my bed, morning's nerves revive me  
pushing light in my head;  
little Hells rise early.

## Spiritual Gin

The lights are on in the Methodist Hall,  
Shadows smudge through the frosted glass -  
Come in ye thousands, come in ye all!  
Bash out belief in a bible class.

The lights are on in the Methodist Hall,  
The lights are on - is someone in?  
It's cold outside in the chill of the Fall,  
So come, tot up on spiritual gin.

It's grey outside and the windows glow  
Like a giant cave troll's oblong eyes -  
What goes on in there? Who's to know?  
Better to doubt on the cold outside.

Those hall doors open to swallow some in  
From dusty old ladies to faded old men  
Sunday bested in berets and blazers -  
They all wheeze in to praise their saviours.

Thursdays let in the down-and-outs  
Dishing them out clean needle alms -  
Visions of Jesus as they gouch;  
Beatitudes like numbing psalms.

The lights are on in the Methadone Hall,  
Opiums, masses, miracle cures free -  
Come in ye thousands, come in ye all!  
(This Church only seats 93).

## Death in the Height of Summer

The day's dark in treacle-thick summer,  
thunder claps applause for a mummer  
of dark masks rumbling the sky. A smoke  
to exorcise thought-ghosts. A poke  
in tired eyes as reality bites –  
beggars petting their Diamond Whites  
in leathery hands with *Night of the Hunter*  
knuckle tattoos, eyeball each punter  
burping out from the pubs, with dim  
pickled-egg pupils, gormless, unblinking,  
dodging each-others' stares; the skies  
blot more with inky cloud; light dyes.

Mind, turn-tabling away, too tired  
to lift its stylus, unwind; so fired  
with simmering intensities,  
numbed in unrealities –  
glimpsed down every passing side-street,  
in pale faces I try not to greet,  
in gaps between railings, fume-stained buildings,  
is Death; in minutes' endings and beginnings,  
in your difficult breath, your typical sigh,  
Death hovers in the corner of the busy eye,  
swells in the back of your mind, waiting  
like a larvae saving up its sting.

## Catching Sight of the Urban Fox

A bright May morning glows the supermarket bricks  
Satsuma-orange, ambered by the sun  
like blanching pages of light-warped paperbacks  
in Oxfam's hothouse racks, two doors down but one.

A more debonair of down-and-outs,  
a tramp who's used to tramping about,  
so does in a mature, dignified manner,  
pushes his supermarket trolley of belongings  
- as if a golf bag in the absence of a caddie -  
piled full with plastic bags, empty Coke bottles.

Comes to a philosophical halt  
in nice patch of sun, meticulously tips  
trolley on side, flaps out his coat-tails  
like a pianist, then balletically sits.  
Checks himself, nose twitching, ears a-flicker,  
in his vast shaving mirror, the glass wall Waitrose  
politely provided him and those of his sort  
who need to keep check on their manicuring.

A very true gentleman, truest of all:  
less incentive than most to keep himself tidy;  
looks most refined, gentleman's tweed  
cap positioned in perfect symmetry  
with his clean-shaven face; thinning grey  
straw-like hair neatly combed out  
of all its irritating mites.

Only thing letting his apparel down  
is his hole-torn rain-mac, a dust cover for  
his more dapper fox-brown overcoat -  
he looks like a fox, not crafty and devious  
as Beatrix Potter's, but pointedly razor-  
red of face (burst vessels from cold,

not booze; no soberer man has tramped  
in such immaculately un-scuffed shoes);  
alert, sharp, proud; most of all, free.

Spit of an eccentric country gentleman  
unaccustomed to hustle-bustle bristling city life;  
quite out-of-kilter in a Mad Hatter-ish way -  
used to see them all the time, swinging on lamp posts  
in Nineteen Seventies' Goring-By-Sea;  
Mad Hatters we labelled them Carrollishly.

It's rare to get so close to an urban fox  
scrimping in its stubbly native habitat,  
licking mitten-paws to wipe its side-boards clean -  
but he can't see me, doesn't sense my stare  
depicting him in my bus-window hide,  
invisible as a flea in his itching hair.

## The Commuter's Last Stop

He stopped in his office eleven minutes late,  
Face white as a plastic cup  
Betraying twenty years wrung in shifts -

The only thing left in his life that went straight  
Was his corporate noose and ironed-out cuffs.  
His mind was an office without any lifts.

That day he was absent though he was sat there  
Thumbing through paperwork, counting the clock,  
Numbed to the plastic tap of the computer -

A blind typist deaf to his own dulled despair.  
He swept up his desk; left early ad hoc -  
Next day his train missed another commuter.

## Lovers' Tiff

A romantic crisis breaks out like sweat  
outside this steamed-up, greasy spoon pane -  
I'm not concentrating on my chips and fried egg,  
not seeing all the things in the street,  
I'm looking straight through the passers by  
as if they were daytime phantoms of life's  
shadow dance round my sedentary thoughts.

I'm focused entirely on the face of the boy,  
his pleading eyes trying to penetrate  
the shaded emotions through his girlfriend's sunglasses,  
tears slowly beading the rims of the lenses -  
what's he trying to tell her as she trembles?  
What's he struggling to express as he fingers  
her tissue-clenched hands - mouths aren't moving -  
whatever language they use it's not the tongue's.

Is he trying to let her down slowly while she  
appeals to his conscience with troubling muteness?  
Or is she turning her feelings from him  
while he pleads silently with arresting eyes  
for a second chance with her, which thus stirs a conflict  
in her tangled feelings? Has he been disloyal?  
Or is there an excuse in my following pun:  
there's something more in this long pregnant pause?

As their bus pulls up, they slow-motion to it  
and alight like lost love, and I know I'll not solve  
the clues to their crisis, the time I've invested,  
the thoughts I've commissioned to be interested,  
my mind's curiosity stalled unrequited.

## Life's Brief

Where you're going to there'll be no memory  
to hamper you; no memory of who you were before;  
it'll all be different - but I can't say how; not exactly;  
but you'll comprehend it when you get there;  
all will become less obscure like mists lifting.  
You'll forget yourself and be something-else.  
No more understanding for you, no more need  
to understand; just being. At first you'll not think,  
you'll not question, you'll not need to, any more  
than a tree feels the need to fathom its own origins  
or be aware of how many centuries it's lived -  
only later on will you see that there's new  
comprehending to do; new doubts to stall at.  
Now you are nothing, but there you'll be something,  
and will have to get used to purpose; a sense  
of being known, yet lost; of being  
innocent. They have a name for this state  
and it is *life*.

### Death's Breathtaking View

We clutch the threads that stitch our seamless lives  
Immersed in glass routines like black shark eyes;  
A sentence hanging over all our heads;  
The grimace of a clock face offering  
No other explanation but its ticking;  
A faceless wall at the foot of our beds.

All we can be sure of is powerless doubt  
And the door we came in will invite us out  
To nonsensical oblivion or bliss;  
Or a frozen limbo while turning the bend.  
So we burn the candle at both ends.  
In the meantime all we scrimp is this:

Faith in the soul, a light that leads us on  
Through the dark to terrifying perfection -  
Anything but nothing, to be lost in the night,  
The pitch-white mist of a fog-bound sea,  
The unthinkable smallness of eternity -  
Anything but the turning off of lights.

Some seek solutions in the superstitious;  
Gregarious others simply drink like fish  
Clinking glasses they can't see through -  
Salvation: saliva of the garrulous.  
Perhaps the only sanity is madness  
When comprehending death's breathtaking view.

Some take the plunge, pre-empt the sea;  
In spite of being contradictory,  
Cancel dark with dark. Obviate  
The inevitable? Impossible; we know  
All we've come to love one day has to go -  
But what could be more morbid than to wait

Until the darkness swallows us? And yet  
No sense in stubbing out lit cigarettes;  
Best to leave just ashes for the ashtray;  
To try and come to terms long in advance;  
Stretch perception of deceptive distance;  
Put off the problem for an umpteenth day.

### Captain Parker's Trunk

Take a peep inside Captain Parker's trunk,  
rummage through saffron-coloured photographs,  
potter through old foreign objects,  
bead photo-frames, bundles of First World War  
scribbles indistinguishable from zareebas  
of mummified spiders; finger  
the bilious brass of grandfather's  
medals, sneeze a salvager's sneeze  
as further finds surface and dispersing dust settles –  
it's an excavation with hands for trowels  
but you may finger the bone-fine pipe,  
the mouldy tobacco tin and khukuri knife.

Inside this lucky dip no toys,  
but chipped regiments of broken model soldiers  
buried in a cotton-wool cushioned box;  
the same my father used to mummify  
in tissues and hide in a drawer of the dresser  
so my tampering fingers couldn't take off  
the paint of their delectably coloured tunics  
(now put away for good  
with innocence and childhood  
since I've grown up, lost interest in  
pith helmets and Sudan campaigns).

Little remains of the trunk's namesake,  
or his exploits; trips to distant shores;  
salvage of Cleopatra's Needle  
hauled from its bobbing grave;  
his discoveries of Eskimos,  
two of whom he chaperoned  
back to Hull, housing them  
in a shed in his back garden  
(they pined away like stranded huskies  
in their wooden igloo, lasting only  
long enough to be frozen in a photo).

Little too survives of his Whaler son,  
Captain Parker the second, save  
a frame from which his sea-green eyes  
stare at a bare landing wall;  
vast canvas of black and amethyst waves  
toiling beneath the ghost of his ship.

Grandfather paid tribute to his ancestor's  
vessel by easing it into a bottle,  
unfurling its paper sails with the pin-tug  
of an intricate, miniature pulley system –  
a marvel for father's childhood eyes  
to *a fishy on a silver dishy*.

Most memories bundled in this trunk,  
those of father's times: photographs  
of his proud-faced father and kind-eyed mother,  
and other dust-caked deceased ancestors  
heaped deep in piles like shelves of the earth.

Father, family curator, tinkers  
here to forget the present that pales  
to the glow of the past; the sweet reassuring  
smell of dust, relic, damp and nostalgia.

After something like a hundred years  
sliding about on the creaking planks  
of an oak-panelled cabin's floor,  
Captain Parker's wooden trunk  
is still in one piece and miraculously standing,  
a tomb of mementoes, their sturdy refuge  
from the dampness setting in on the walls by the landing.

## The House of Sadness Past

After this fruitless time, the strife  
 of fifteen garbled cottage winters  
 dimmed in Trematon, I didn't  
 bid goodbye to the shrunken shack  
 bribed us to sojourn for time  
 unmarked by ageless slate West sky.

Chance missed to lay a lifetime  
 ghost to rest; leave behind  
 a difficult friend I fell out with  
 but stayed close to the bitter end;  
 a bond built on month-hours' foundations.

Too late to improvise goodbyes  
 in haunted stares, self-pity in rooms,  
 unrealised; plaster-pink walls,  
 unpainted; a damp-aired landing's  
 centre-reign, half-suggested...

\*

I reassemble that tomb of stone  
 in its clump of weeds; hinge-creaked gate;  
 blue gloss door with Picksie latch;  
 derelict sunlight splintering where  
 twisted limbs of an apple tree  
 choked rotten spoils – soft crinkled skins  
 bruising to the touch: moth-thoughts,  
 hovering, tumbling numberless  
 as pebbled beds of crouching flowers  
 in those imprisoning mornings.

A cow-bell clopped to the overflow;  
 a carcass of glass spilt stinging nettles;  
 a cement-filled pebbledash well  
 pushed up shrubs of wishing petals.

Morbid, our umbrella word,  
groping for a foothold in  
laboured hours, weight of sadness  
(there's the other word) as if  
we lived our purgatory blurred in;  
misting lives in suburbia.

Darkest nights I'd known;  
moths, grotesquely outgrown;  
hand-size spiders tapping on  
peeling posters, clicking time  
to the clock's taciturn ticks.

\*

Bowed by the bent beam gazing over  
warped books on the blistered sill  
to the trampled sadness of our garden,  
a tumble of nettle-tangled troubles  
pouring from the house's mouth,  
sculpting sorrows from sad panes –  
a battered hat of buckling slates  
trilbying its pockmarked face  
of swollen stone: this house is ill.

Sold us as idyllic, white-washed,  
it was a starker face: our own  
little crumbled House of Usher  
obscured by prouder abodes,  
confiscated from the hamlet's view –  
a disgraced sight set back from the road.

\*

Stone-cool lounge, summer hung  
thick outside, a fog of dream  
struggling to wake the room,  
bore in through the thought-sized crack  
in the gloomy two-way pane;  
the sooty cave of the fireplace,  
focus of our shade - in winter,  
of crackling logs' gooseberry-glow  
spitting bilious flame.

Cuckoo-broken silence versed  
with upstairs' floor-boards creaking  
in an empty bedroom - a reassuring  
ghost too shy to haunt us or  
the panting scrape of earthly mother's  
cobwebbed broom brushing the floor.

Some houses have souls, memories,  
haunting them - this one had:  
a sadness past remained, served  
to feed ours with historic force.

I'll return, through the ghostly photo  
of hollow windows' gormless glare -  
an emptied relative's frozen stare;  
grope up the slanting path into  
its blossom-grey, cabbage-white  
wintry circumstance, now time's  
passed trace of us there...

## Last of the Spray Carnations

Everything's through a haze today,  
a nervy bleach, blurred photograph  
exposed before developing  
like a crippled Spartan baby;  
a saffron-starched, sun-blached album  
family image, except it isn't  
my family I mingle with, but a stunned  
white drift of sun-paled faces probing  
lichee-eyes into market bargains.

As if I looked at this bustling rock-pool  
speculum of life through frosted glass  
or a thick honey-coloured vase.

I trip on, lost to the fogged outside  
of myself, part-deaf to the touting shouts  
of the cod-eyed fishmonger, the sun-flushed  
apple-shaped pink lady, lamb-shouldered  
butcher with a scrag-end face, his  
white coat reeking of bloody meat.

Everything, poetic and pathetic  
at once, in a burst of cheap-side sunlight  
scooping a pool on the scene.

Even the vivid spoils of the florists  
appear pitiful: a cluster of pink  
and white spray carnations,  
green at the edges of thirsty petals  
poking from a dripping bucket, a bunch  
of scrunched-up tissues saturated  
with tears of mustard sun.

## The Gospels of Gordon Road

In parroting streets the Parkers lived  
 in an outburst of spilt belongings  
 by a pet shop perched on Gordon Road,  
 No. 31 - one score left to them;  
 muffled fluster of cockatoos  
 scratched the front-hall walls;  
 terrapins, tropical fish  
 splashed in a backyard aquarium  
 for a ghostly public, unforthcoming.

### *i. The Gospel According to Beryl*

Obese-limbed Beryl, name the colour  
 of her bilious coat, avocados  
 she'd bleach with vinegar  
 supping on stories of Roaring Uganda,  
 kept a trove chockfull with spoils  
 of childhood paraphernalia:  
 a blanched pith helmet, *Elephants in Finja*,  
 ebony carvings, tusks and tales  
 of a slate-eyed Scottish father  
 telegraphing the veldt  
 and ivory white goddess mother  
 biting poison from Boy on the veranda.

Composer of saccharine-pen letters  
 to all and sundry: from the star  
 of *The Flame Trees of Thika*  
 to Mrs Thatcher for being the first  
 menopausal PM - Iron Beryl,  
 fulsome as lukewarm Stout.

Her mantelpiece of miniatures:  
 a small glass Buddha with an ochre flower  
 in its bloated belly, 'if you rub his tummy  
 it'll bring good luck' she'd mutter through

the cryptic slit in her age-stitched skin,  
 with other superstitious snippets:  
 ‘pray to St. Anthony if you lose anything’,  
 but he never recovered lost marbles.

Beryl believed in blonde baby Jesus,  
 cribs, clans, papacy, tooth fairies,  
 Clarabelle, Tinkerbelle, plaster saints  
 and table-salt superstitions – held  
 chair-ridden court cushioned in  
 upholstered throne, all swollen shins,  
 tortoise-shell glasses and netted hair.

*ii. The Gospel According to Harold*

Her trilby-humbled husband Harold  
 limped in slump of self-belief,  
 stick to buttress his step,  
 stocky North Londoner, Gunners supporter –  
 shuddered at jellied eels, bow bells,  
 ‘I’m not a cockney’, he’d puff and profess,  
 proud of his old china tribe.

A rifle-butt buffeted his spirit  
 in a German camp, buffered him  
 with fits of temper, trembling limbs –  
 from Corporal Parker of the Buffs  
 to Private Struggle pensioned off  
 to the tyranny of landlords  
 and the mush of meals-on-wheels.

A legacy of long-term concussion:  
 de-mobbed prompt in ’45;  
 assembling dolls’ limbs in factories;  
 spell as shopkeeper bankrupted off  
 to last stop by Balfour Road.

In mouldering, damp-walled winters,  
bereaved by his worshipped wife, coped  
through a series of botched episodes:  
Catholic conversion, gulps of pills,  
macabre bed-time reunions  
with his spiritual Beryl.

Harold went out like a flare in a trench,  
refusing Last Rights in rabid-eyed rage,  
leaving the Priest and the Pastor speechless  
as the plastic Christ on his bedside table  
he mistook for Mary as the beard had faded.

Four campaign medals, absent fifth  
for a brave act screened off in gun-fog;  
captured; tortured; frozen to snow  
for escape attempts – never escaped  
the stalking of the swastika's brand.  
His prime predisposed to put him out in time:  
namesake of his mythic brother,  
killed 'spiking the guns' in the First,  
smudged out with led like his last  
pencilled scribbles blunt as his fate.

Harold rationed out his days,  
guilt-inheritor, warped by self-blame  
for the world's unanswerable blunders;  
his prize: some debts and a pauper's grave.

*iii. The Gospel According to Gordon*

The Brighton Parkers played host to  
a cadaverous bachelor, physog threadbare  
as his wicker sweater, also Gordon,  
who lodged one ruptured flight beyond  
obscure parameters of absent banisters  
up a scupper of cuttlefish stairs.

A bachelor but for the merchant sea  
he married, Gordon cut a skeletal shipmate  
in his fisherman's cap and tweeds,  
spruced on canine piss and bird seed.

Shut off in the trill and chirp of his  
lemon-curd/sky-blue budgerigars  
caging his company as a cancer-  
growth his old dog Tony,  
the gruff old lodger shrugged off thoughts  
on gossip of souls and salvation:

'I don't believe in Heaven; nothing  
after this 'far as I'm concerned;  
best make the most of your pension'  
he'd glibly comment if invited in  
to give his shilling's worth of philosophical rent.

God scarpered from his dingy digs  
in Gordon's head long ago to find  
new lodgings in more malleable minds.

How odd him not believing in God,  
I thought as a boy - my oblivion,  
being alone - couldn't comprehend  
his atheism, not knowing then  
the dormant terms of my own.

*iv. The Gospel of Gordon Road*

We believe what we want to believe;  
time buttresses us with splints of insight,  
feeds us lies to starve doubts, to cope;  
Gordon's tools, the mental present-ness of pets;  
Beryl's, rent-book resurrection;  
Harold's, ball-points on football pools.

*Some make themselves their own God;  
some spend their lives fishing for stars;  
some endure all with a humble hat's doff;  
some keep budgerigars.*

## Obverbs

*Motto for the Mountaineer*

If you try to reach the summit  
You're likely to become it.

~

*Age's Hill*

Young Puritans of austere will  
Grow cavalier past age's hill.

~

*-isms*

Capitalism spouts from city walls;  
Socialism mutters in draughty halls.

~

*Damp-Stain Angel*

The vicar couldn't make it out at all:  
a damp-stain angel on his chapel wall.

~

*Fear of Blindness*

Believing in God for a dread of death  
is living in darkness for fear of blindness.

~

*Death's Dress Rehearsal*

Romans called asthma rehearsal for death;  
life, summed up as a shortness of breath.

~

*Sleepy Head*

The man who looks like he hasn't slept well  
has a face like a bed that's been slept in.

~

*The Girl with the Dirty Hands*

She held out her hands, begged for a fag  
 she got from the boy with no jobs in the bag.

~

*Binds & Threads*

From school to work there are common threads:  
 Clambering into winter out from warm beds.

~

*Day & Night*

The night can be what we want it to be  
 but the day shapes itself.

~

*The Inevitable*

Death is inevitable, but so is life -  
 Life is inevitable!

~

*Failure's Finger Nails*

Failure bites at its own fingernails;  
 Only fate's interpretation fails.

~

*Class & Punishment*

Grandfather took a horse-whip to father's arse  
 for asking him if he was working-class.

~

*Sheds*

We're apes with infinity in our heads;  
 we cut down trees and dream in sheds.

~

*Graffiti*

Graffiti is the spoor of dissidence;  
claw marks of desperate residents.

~

*Poetry Kills*

I read the warning in my short breath:  
Poetry's a slow and painful death.

~

*The Inevitable II*

The prospect of dying  
almost drives me to trying.

~

*While I Waited*

What did you do today while you waited?  
*I read a bit, slept, then masturbated.*

~

*The Till-Girl*

The Slavic till-girl with the harassed eyes  
Scrapes a Co-Op opt out from blasted skies.

~

*CV*

The gap on my CV:  
The time spent being me.

~

*Curtain Call*

If the world is a stage  
That makes me a page.

[Note: Obverb = the author's coinage for obscure proverbs]

### Dark Advice

If someone's about to kill themselves - distract them!  
Asks what interests them, can't do any harm,  
But if they really want to jump, let go of their arm:  
At least that way they won't do it again.

Thing is, the only real danger's fear itself;  
You might argue with this but you're wasting breath:  
Suicide's the only way to kill off fear of death.  
All best ways of soothing pain undermine your health.

---

## The Buzzard

At a safe distance its stare exacted me  
from its golden hay-stacked throne,  
shining with all the bravura of the sun;  
big-limbed king of Cornish ramble-lands,  
stubble-fields and ragged hills -  
talons size of manly hands;  
on prehistoric scale  
to my eyes cowering their ground on a hay-bale  
by the cottage back window for retreat if needs be -  
the Buzzard kept still, its feather-crown's plumage  
ruffled by the breeze-brushed sway of its dynasty.  
I was too cautious to take a closer look,  
could only guess if its royal stare  
translated the thought: which subject sits there?

### The Sunday Poem

After I'd read the Sunday poem  
I strolled out for the afternoon  
to find some inspiration  
leaving thick-lens-d middle-men  
ink-thumbng through supplements,  
completing crosswords while church-goers,  
through cryptic sacraments, solved their  
morbid ruminations  
with breathless prayers  
and sighs like silent skies.

### Adam's Nib

It wasn't a woman tempted me  
Into my fall, into my fall;  
Just a piece of paper and a pen -  
The imperfection of it all.

### Signature like a Squashed Spider

You could have been any person,  
You could have been any age,  
Your signature could have been anyone's;  
The proverbial spider squashed on a page.

### Brain Smoker

If suddenly interested  
he'd light up a Superking  
cough up some knowledge  
on this, that and everything;  
only person I knew  
who'd sigh with enthusiasm,  
treat convert-sation  
as a syllabic spasm -  
think while he talked with visible ease;  
at a slight interruption,  
intellectually sneeze.

### Meeting the Paint Eater

I saw a man with candles in his hat  
trying to capture the moon -  
as I passed by I said to him  
'it's going to be supper time soon'.

His foggy eyes acknowledged my words:  
he brushed his stubbled chin,  
put some crumbling paint to his lips,  
smiled, and started eating.

### The Backpacker

She travelled to discover Truth;  
Had photographic proof  
Of how she found it by herself  
Without the aid of parents' wealth  
But through money she had saved -  
Well yes, her job was quite well paid -  
But she did it all off her own back:  
Stashed the truth, a grain each day  
In Kenya, Thailand and Bombay  
On hash-stained postcards in her backpack.

## RIP Lives

How many millions of Reginald Perrin's  
Sigh at their ghosted pinstriped reflections  
Stuck on the same cryptic clue every day:  
*Bolivian poet catches flu reading Proust*  
(Seven letters) – broad-sheet handkerchief  
Crumpled in stale office-smelling suit-pocket;  
Reflecting, regretting, returning to thoughts  
Battening obsessions in clattering tracts,  
Retracing tracks like commuter trains  
Of reeking seats, rocking compartments  
Conversationless as Surrey scenes  
Smudging through the carriage-panes.

## Gasping

Finish it up! Don't pour it down the sink  
just because it's got too cold!  
There's people **GASPING** for a cup of tea  
on the other side of the world!

### The Battle of Trafalgar Street

A laid-back lackadaisical day -  
patisseries, espresso houses, busily  
about their business - across the street  
a tiff broke out like a summer sweat,  
heated and burning-tyred: his bike  
fell from under him with a punch -  
people stopped as boot stamped face -  
I froze on the spot as blood gushed out  
from the football-head, flooding the street -  
pummelling done, he belted off -  
someone phoned for an ambulance.

### Moleskin Man

A bedraggled stray slumped in dark tweeds  
scribbling gibberish (?) in a rain-warped journal,  
clutching a tennis ball, his latest find,  
a curiosity purposing his tissue hands,  
scuffed feet twisted in concentration  
his whole world's belongings neatly dumped  
in Sainsbury's bags - I can't touch him.  
How can I help him? What can I do?  
Bury him in my moleskin binds;  
put his impotent life in a poem -  
a paper scrapbook specimen -  
then tip him out into other peoples' minds.

### White Collar Rhyme

I found my purgatory in typist's pills -  
salvation in secretarial skills -  
glimpsed infinity in filing cabinets,  
oblivion in invoices, audits,  
spurred on to hanker for escape,  
to rape  
surplus paper supplies, pilfer  
sheets to print my poems on -  
a pinstripe poet out-of-kilter  
with his misplaced gifts; ambitions  
perpetually in delay  
piling up in his in-tray.

### Composing by Post

R.V.W. composed his letters  
like his symphonies, green-sleeved he'd write  
'My Bonny Boy' by formal post -

his feistier pen-friend thundered back  
with striding Jupiters, signing  
*Your Future Inspiration, Holst.*



### Miss Clarke's Finishing School

Never write a poem with defective feet;  
Never trust a poet whose eyebrows meet:  
They're style's lycanthropus, hairy inside,  
Celtic on the surface but English as the seaside;  
Only rhyme if it's strictly necessary  
Like at a poem's end to give more impact 'see;  
No abstracts, just write about rrrreal things:  
Shells and Welsh cakes, wedding rings;  
All manner of tangibles; amethyst, jade;  
Salt breath of caves; tongue's dragon tails;  
Woe-betide those who forget they're from Wales.

### In The Laps of the Gods

I worship you because you give me love and warmth  
with the magical touch of the strange white glow,  
the smell of heat, wood-cool of ground  
in summer, like outside, in the garden the air  
blows our coats, fanning our stifled fur -  
and the scent of the out: the leaf, the earth,  
the language of dirt-tracks, the freedom, space;  
the clinging scent of your hand as it strokes my hair  
reassuring me with its familiar smell  
when I grow lame and can't get around,  
out of LOVE for me you'll put me down.

### The Guilty Building

The eyes of the windows were guilty, shut  
above the baroque walls of the bank,  
shadow hovered behind their gaze,  
the mouth of the polished Georgian door  
closed mutely on the street - no sound  
issued from the impartial building,  
or did but wasn't detectable for  
the whispers of shoed feet on the ground.

### A Photo of Vaughan Williams

Clouded, the colour of the composer's eyes  
for the photos in black, white and greys -  
the misty grey of wistful Wilfred's parted  
in the centre stare. Pipe, woodbine,  
props to compliment enigma - smoulder  
stinging foggy sepia pupils - there's  
a face for inspiration, the flash of an artist  
about it, despite the battledress, no doubt  
who snapped it up had that intention.  
Can the camera capture the soul?  
Can it photograph the God in us?

### Don't Envy the Empty Sun

Ponders the park, mustard of leaves  
canopy lovers from pelting solitude –  
no self-imposed ice-queen cooped up by choice  
in a vanity palace, more Sleeping Duty  
who never quite woke up despite pills  
and acupuncture to stimulate  
time-numbed nerves, lift her from  
the mine-shaft of sadness before it caved in.  
Shouldn't envy their empty sun. Droll  
pond life doesn't ponder its reflections.  
Only those mind-incarcerated like her  
in protracted correspondence with the soul.

### The Poet Tree

We left to make home in a shell of stone,  
garden left to ramble overgrown  
making itself notoriously known,  
overblown, wouldn't be mown,  
as a mop of unruly hair won't stand a comb.

All dandelions and weeds; a sun-starved tree  
couldn't bear fruits – we had to show it  
by planting another in its shaded view.

But in time a home had grown;  
daffodils twinkled; the shy, leafless tree  
blossomed into a poet.

### The Blackboard

My first glimpse of oblivion:  
the school blackboard, to me then  
my life seemed like one scrape of chalk  
smudging into the dark.

### Innocence Twisted

Too soon some said he spoke  
with a sour taste,  
and saw how innocence  
twisted on his face.

### Chasing Shadows

Tipsy with nostalgia we  
miss those times of Time's slower pass  
when we were children trying to chase  
our shadows on the grass.

### Spilt Milk

Sometimes I think I'm just soul and mind,  
A spirit without a jacket of skin,  
No flesh and bones, just pockets of air;  
A milk-filled statue of porcelain.

## Intrusive Thoughts

Outnumbered by invisible bullies  
punching at my equilibrium,  
bruising with intrusive thoughts,  
I despaired (can't think of a better word)  
as I followed the other boys down to  
the muddy pitch: scared of stopping  
loving my father, though impossible,  
it tormented me for frozen moments;  
I panicked; couldn't figure it:  
numbed by the obsessive buzz  
of fear-bees bumping about my head.

## The Drive

Either to be a premature dread-end  
or terrible beginning, my thoughts juddered in  
my darkening humid mind overcasting  
with summer storm cloud maundering  
from the blind east; tight eyes straining  
to fathom detail of relentless hedgerows  
cramping our car on narrow lanes  
horribly idyllic in stretch - rain splattered  
in harassing spits drumming the bonnet,  
obsessing a web of drops on the windscreen -  
the wipers screeched *Can't Cope! Can't Cope!*

## Orange & White

High above Granada's green fountains  
and orange tree vistas, the mountains  
smudge through the mists of summer.  
The sawdust earth is a bull-ring colour.  
A moth cavorts in the sun-blached grass;  
A dark thought hovers past.  
Houses below slabbed like ice-cream  
Wafered with roofs of orange sheen;  
Spanish vanilla melting in the glow  
of the incessant sun - *naranja y blanco*.

## Beatitudes

Today, everything's resolved: the man  
with the rainy Sunday face has found  
a smile's an inspiring beam of light  
in his outlook; the senile lager-breathing  
dragon of withered scales, forced to forgo  
his habit for the day, is the better for it:  
sober and brave; the two middle-aged  
friends have let bygones be for a change;  
the doubting housewife's found her faith,  
vacuuming behind the chairs.

### Five Minute Infinity

In the space of five minutes I held you, said,  
half to myself, half to you, 'how did I  
deserve you?', thought only of my fear  
of dying, tried convincing you  
of the soul while I wasn't convinced myself;  
and you said you'd no fear of death only  
of lingering suffering (that atheist chestnut)  
- but why don't atheists fear death  
when they're more certain of it?

Who fears death needs the crutch of faith;  
who fears pain needs the crutch of death.

### In The Mist

Church bells' chime in pea-soup September,  
sirens of sea-gulls dispersed by their peals...

mist shimmers in from the hills  
smudging its presence on city mills...

invisibly drifts like spirits by  
trees crucified against the sky...

the church bells' stop chiming...  
lives chime by...

## Death Wears a Homburg

With some pills and booze he took off his shoes,  
scribbled a note 'stead of learning his lines;  
in a sedated haze, coined his last phrase:  
*things just seemed to go wrong too many times.*

A sad washed-up clown with a long dog-jowl frown  
his life seemed a mess like the sheets on his bed,  
so with one final sigh and no look in his eye,  
he put his life down like a book half-read.

## Identifying Tim

*He took his life too seriously.*

Would he have been so serious now  
if he'd had a united identity -  
not talking, stopping, listening, brow  
creased in concentrated scrutiny  
of private voices - would he now  
be tucked up early in eternity?

*He took his life too suddenly.*

### The Cripple

See his skin distemper  
To laburnum-green -  
His eyes dart like a dog's  
That cannot tell its dream.

### The Brain of God

I used to wonder if the earth  
was our creator's cerebrum,  
and the universe, the space  
inside His cranium.

### Flowers in the Vase

Suddenly a fire stoked up inside me -  
It was something someone said.  
I thought the flowers were in the vase  
But they were still in the flower bed.

Something someone said - shhh -  
Or the sound of the fire fizzling out in water,  
The dirty water which, hissing, said:  
*The flowers in the vase are dead.*

## Mist

Missed  
while here  
like mist  
in rain;  
once gone  
forgotten  
in all  
but name.

## Cradle to Grave

We all fall from water  
and slide into flames  
to the funeral organ's  
bellow and wheeze -  
start out with birthmarks,  
end up with carved names -  
from seeds grow to weeds  
that cradle our graves.

## Footnotes on Faith

I've seen insane old men still masturbating  
after they'd drawn blood, wringing  
their foreskins of every last feeling -  
where are their souls? Where's their God?

F.N.: Their souls have long since departed.

Since when? Since they last voluntarily farted?  
Before their bowels broke down and went it alone?  
Before their drooling and bedwetting set in?  
There's no light within; no justice; no sin.

F.N.: Just a stubborn unwillingness to give in.

## Faith Flowers

At the end of a smouldering cigarette  
at the end of a mental tether -  
ectoplasms of smoking breath  
frozen in tousles on a misty day -  
sky, sterile white as Sartre;  
bleak, precise, spiritless, stark,  
starved of sunshine and faith flowers.

## Hell or a Better Hand

Some of us already suffer  
torments of the damned –  
but is this to prepare us for  
Hell, or a better hand?

## Biography of a Ghost

Died in 1985  
but thought he was still alive:

continued in his habits  
breeding like white rabbits.

Stabbed his finger at the air  
while listeners threw their eyes elsewhere

appearing to ignore him.  
Drifted like a smoke ring

casting swirling shadows  
on tablecloths of tarots,

dead but haunted by a dread of dying.

## Grandma's Ingredients

I discovered at a tender eleven  
Grandma was made of buttons,  
Brooches, rings and leather watch-straps,  
Gift-wrapped in cellophane for heaven.

## Oblivions

The sun, the sky, the land, the sea -  
*it's all been a bit too much for me.*

To smell, to taste, to touch, to see,  
to think, to feel, to love, to be -  
*it's all been a bit too much for me.*

By finding the oblivion in me  
and the oblivion in you, might be  
the end to my sensitivity -

but the need to belong, to be free -  
*it's all been a bit too much for me.*

## Infinite Things

I can't enjoy anything that must end;  
Infinite thoughts and feelings with limit;  
Mortality's labyrinth trails bend on bend  
But leads only to what is in it.

## Timétations

### i. The Bin of Time

Browbeaten by routine's tyranny  
 ravages of wasted time  
 cuttlefish your luminous brow,  
 sleeping-pill white, marble eyes:  
 pay with daytime drowsiness  
 for nocturnal sedated bliss  
 numbing your mind, cushioning thoughts:  
 well-punched pillows supportable for once.

### ii. Time Bites

Hours hover, mothballing minutes  
 in static dust-clots, stick in the throat  
 as pills without enough water  
 to dissolve to flakes; time,  
 the irritable master it is, spits ticks  
 of rhetoric in gusts of stale breath  
 humming from a scoured tongue –  
 time bites like sharp radish,  
 a taste relished by the toothsome  
 while wisdom mints it out with gum.

### iii. Closing Time

In cigarette-mist of a smoke-filled pub  
 he sat hand on head, wrist on chin,  
 'I'm trying to keep my brains in', he said.

Tears of snakebite streaming down  
 in lagered trace, misty eyes  
 disguised his tears, wasn't the place –

frozen, beered up, numbly waiting  
for another round, dreading last orders  
beckoning through tobacco smog -  
could see his life half full, half empty,  
clinging to his pint till closing time.

iv. White

Luminous cuttlefish sky stares pearly eye,  
vast blank page, junket white winter sun  
cocking a snook through parted clouds;  
ghostly pale agoraphobic pate  
parted by net-curtains' communion veil;  
page of skin clinging, clinging;  
sockets for eyes; cod-fish white glinting,  
grinding nerves to powder, grinding  
like the famished teeth of time.

v. Out of Clock Time

The soul knows no limits - I sense  
this in my silent times - ticking  
digits count only bodily lives -  
but the soul, the self, the spirit lives in  
its own domain outside clock-time -  
ghosts, some think, cross to our side,  
sometimes - a bit like obsessives popping  
back to check they've remembered everything:  
the gas; the keys; watering of ashtrays;  
or simply to remember to collect what they  
forgot to the plodding tock of days.

## vi. Old Father Time

Time is a bitter, morbid old man  
 who can't hear what you're saying  
 or just can't understand.

## vii. Time Anxiety

Life without the anxiety of Time  
 Might prop us up in our tripping prime;  
 If we could cut down clocks like trees  
 We'd put the branches at their ease.

## viii. The Clock That Forgot the Time

*What Time is it?* asked the clock who'd forgot it.  
*Well if you don't know, how should I?* replied  
 The Memory that couldn't remember. *What's the Time?*  
 Piped the poor Clock once again, then sighed.  
*That's like asking . . .* said the Memory - . . . *no, I forget it.*  
*I would have asked Death,* said the Clock, *but he's died,*  
*And Life's far too busy regretting it.*

## ix. Little Father Time

Pallid offspring of future-minded parents,  
 torn too soon from nursery rhymes  
 thrown into dingy itinerancy  
 of rented tenements, uncertain tenancy,  
 a rag doll dragged through Christminster streets  
 by the scruff of the cockerel's neck,  
 son of two fugitives in limited times,  
 protector of wind-bitten little siblings,

windfall babies, daren't rock-a-by  
them lest crimped cradles fall -  
pale twisted innocent, twisted by love,  
hair sweat-greased from compassion's high fever,  
all the world's troubles rub his marble brow  
as if to polish off all infant fortitude -  
*Is there nothing to do? Is there nothing to do?*  
'Nothing' sounds out like a terrible blow  
to his callow, cramped conscience, perilously raw;  
nothing to do but sacrifice the lambs  
then atone with immature martyrdom -  
hung by shoe-straps, hands pillow-soft,  
a crime of compassion in a child's despair;  
a scribbled note slid under stool-wedged door:  
*becos we are too menny.* How many more?

### The Need to Dream Forever

I remember I was barely fed,  
Eleven or twelve, in a freezing bed  
Damp with doubts, wanting outs,  
Drift off and dream forever...  
Thought I wanted to be dead -  
'Go to sleep', dad said.

### Poem on Empty

Sat on the rag-and-bone sofa smoking  
a singed dog-end in my ripped pyjamas,  
staring at mug-stains on the lamp-lit table,  
I said to my father, suppressing the groan  
of my empty stomach, 'just to think  
no one will ever know of this...'

### The Coin Foragers

In darkling days of testing means  
we found distraction in playing games;  
one comprised four players,  
rules always the same:  
each foraged for mouldy copper tokens  
hidden in the scrimping room,  
collecting as many as they could find.

Some stuffed in the glooms and crumbs  
of the settee's cushions; some  
stashed in the clutter of the kitchen dresser.  
The winner: first to disinfect their treasure.

## The Stain

you can't wash out  
no matter what powders you use;  
the bitter taste you can't rinse from your mouth  
with sap from a toothpaste tube;  
the tactless smell you just can't shift  
despite your effort trying;  
the pasty stain your face is stuck with  
that can't be changed by dyeing.

## Dead Reminder

Thought-shelves list through lack of means:

book-binds losing stick split their seams,  
prop each other up, nodding down-and-outs,  
no one caring what they blurt about.

Tales aren't tall as bills, poems don't pay rent.  
Pencils crack their points in tensing hands.

Tie a noose with plastic rubber bands:  
find a dummy bouncing like his cheques.

## Heirlooms

Starting from scratch, a clean slate, no class  
Dismantling the furniture of the past -  
I'd take a kit of tools straight away to this task  
But sadly some furniture is built to last.

## MIGHT

Why did some of us come to believe  
The Left is in the right  
When it has a massive clumsy body  
And wings too small for flight?

## Death of a Socialist

‘It’s easy to be a socialist when you’ve only yourself to think about’  
muttered the veteran gargoyle of the left with bitter irony,  
features crumpled as a rolled up *Morning Star*, front page  
scanned, contents skipped by the masses it calls to arms  
‘- having kids taught me how honour has to scrape and bow  
for the sake of love. No greater cause. Socialism knows  
no get-out-clause: Marx, like Christ, asks us to  
sacrifice private interests for the public good;  
turn our little families into big commun-  
-ities. Well if everyone else did,  
then I would.’

## Riddle of the Sphinx

### *Riddle*

What creature goes on four legs in the morning;  
Two during the day;  
And three in the evening?

### *Solution*

The worker who begs on all fours for a job;  
Gets up on two to paw for his pay;  
Then limps with a stick when forced into leaving.

## Aneurin

He was every Welsh housewife's hero,  
every miner's pride;  
all their children cherished his stories  
tingling by the fireside -  
how Kier Hardie's ghost showed him  
in the pit a glimpse of Heaven  
in the minds of men, *And you*, he said,  
*will fight to build it, Aneurin Bevan.*

## The Dark and Keir Hardie

Coal-blind Hardie learnt to see,  
At least metaphorically,  
As his stinking fish\* lit up the way  
To a dazzling Socialist day -  
The autodidact stood to be  
First Member in the menagerie  
Of all things Parliamentary;  
Formed a workers' party -  
Tea-sipping Fabians admired his free  
Messianic zeal but in his shabby tweeds,  
Found him altogether unsightly.

\* [Note: some miners used to use rotten fish, which glowed in the dark, to light their way in the pits]

## The Sound of Eating

My great grandfather, a Fabian,  
never skipped a single meeting  
to discuss best ways of feeding  
empty bellies of the down-at-heel.

(Privately he ate his meals  
in his study, apart from his kin:  
he couldn't stand the sound  
of other people eating.)

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## Victuals

### i. Transubstantiation

First Communion: First Sin:  
Forgot, God, forgot to go Confession:  
No Absolution: maybe Damnation?  
Incensed Him in initiation.

I open to receive His Body nonetheless,  
Innocent to my callow sin's trespass.

They'd said the bread, unleavened,  
Would taste a bit like Heaven:  
Had my taste-buds given up at seven?

Confusion at the flavour of the Saviour:  
*It doesn't taste of anything.*

### ii. Holy Roofs

The roof of the church  
caked in tasteless Salvation  
like the roof of the mouth  
at Holy Communion.

### iii. Absence of Butterflies

I recall as an altar boy watching the priest  
breaking the unleavened bread,  
placing one half in my hand which I placed  
on my tongue where it transubstantiated;

now, as an adult, my doctor prescribes  
a pill for my thoughts; nightly I break  
a little white sleeping pill to attain

peace of mind and body; to slake  
pins and needles of my nerves; numb  
my stomach's downhill roll, steep rise -  
but when I wake, like doubt from faith,  
I feel the absence of butterflies...

### The Fade

Life's a string of mistakes -  
the best ones, those  
we don't know we've made.

Love's a dying high -  
a favourite song  
going into the fade.

### The Linger of Yearning

I'm left the shadow of your memory,  
a linger of yearning to know  
if there was no other what light you'd throw  
on the room in your cramped heart for me?

### Reversing Charges

Undressing her speeches, making love to her  
over the phone while she  
breaches the silence by spilling her change  
and sending some sighs back to me -  
the reversing of charges adds up passion's largesse  
and mad sense of urgency.

## The Commuter Belt

Reflections smudge on carriage-glass,  
 Darken to the howl of an underpass,  
 Screech of a fast concrete  
 Monster with stout stone feet  
 Planted either side of the snarling track.  
 Elephant thoughts lurch back  
 Intrusive trunks to hose the moment  
 With sprinkles of obsession: cogent  
 Trains of thought are stalling now;  
 Brass-horns signal the blousing plough  
 Of a steam engine's crutching ghost  
 Chuffing its pistons, pitching the post,  
 Summoned, a hunter of ivory  
 By trumpeting elephants - predatory  
 Ruminations distemper the tongue  
 With acid-stabbing, thought-bubble gum;  
 Invade the mouth, fleshy fumble,  
 Stinging sweet in tongue-and-tumble,  
 Swelling to bursting point balloon -  
 A stark, pulsating, light-bulb moon -  
 Deflated by the prick of a star  
 Hisses serpentine sighs of sin, sssaaaah!  
 Singling you out as guilty because  
 Someone has to give shape to a cross.

\*

Hunter, hunted? No more sure  
 Than a profligate of expenditure,  
 A gambler of chicken and egg,  
 A beggar of how best he can beg -  
 An obsessor who seldom remembers  
 His Augusts, only Decembers,  
 Forgets how he came to his vocation,  
 When, at what platform location;  
 All but the in-growing image

Expanding brain muscles with spinach  
 Of rumination; the terrible picture  
 Pre-Raphaelite in vivid tincture,  
 Nightmarishly lurid, grotesque  
 In feverish colour - no sketch  
 But a study in detail on detail  
 Glossed over, re-coated for retail  
 To parade on taut hangers to browse  
 Over strait-jacket to blouse.

\*

A blowzy commuter with infinite ticket  
 Has counted each twig in the thicket  
 Blurred between Bognor and Havant;  
 Possesses an obsessive talent  
 Obscure, not totally certain  
 It's lifted its long dusting curtain -  
 And what of his spirit, its scraping by  
 Halfway between the trees and the sky,  
 Burnt to a cinder in ashtrays of scrub,  
 Singeing the end of a butt you can't stub  
 Out, though you twist it to squeak its last  
 Ember, it burns on igniting the past,  
 Till you're grateful for stops at bland platforms:  
 Mundanity massages mind-storms,  
 Brushes cobwebs of doubt, frees the crane-fly  
 From spiders of worry spinning you high,  
 But this spell of bliss is too brief  
 Like lapsing from faith to belief,  
 Depending on what you're believing  
 Can be paralysing/relieving -  
 But Belief only limbers a bit of the way;  
 Doubt's sun pours down in the panic of day.

\*

Beads of sweat drip down, rivulets  
 Of irrational currents, face reflects  
 Shimmering in hazy shallows of the glass -  
 Scrappy escarpments, allotments pass:  
 Cabbage patches stand on parade  
 For wheelbarrow-men to inspect from the shade  
 Of sheds; unsettling; the rut of the line  
 Scratches tracks for the trillionth time  
 But there's safety in whooshes and clatters,  
 Newspaper Hares and Sane Hatters,  
 Crumple of supplement, cling-filmed eyes  
 Frozen east as the stone crow flies -  
 Sardined in seats of dark tartan  
 Designed by meticulous Spartan,  
 Passengers parley eyes with scuffed shoes  
 Upturned dung-beetles that hum where they choose  
 Fuming compartments with odours as stale  
 As passage of time on the dragging of rail.

\*

Time's no great Healer, Time's a slow burner,  
 And this particular victim, slow learner:  
 A mental escape artist who can't escape,  
 Long lost his knack, long out of shape,  
 Still handcuffed by attempts to resist  
 So doubts pursue, obsessions persist,  
 A humming swarm bumping in his mind  
 Stumbling indefinitely behind  
 Every feeling, impulse, implosion,  
 Every moment's mind-blowing explosion  
 Shooting splinters of shrapnel throughout  
 Each labyrinthine turning of doubt,  
 Coursing through tunnels of thought  
 Ploughing deep furrows, a demon dreadnought  
 Cruising to freak waves, crashing the surf  
 Muscling through, sucking its girth,  
 Chugging on dumb to the end of the track -

It's prize: not having to trundle back.

\*

But the commuter belt loops on and on  
An unrelenting, morbid song  
Locked on track to a stalemate station  
Departs before arrival - destination  
Eludes its trick-snaking trickle through  
Countryside of continuous view,  
Changeless panoramas: paeans  
To thoughts mutating in their trains...

*Sui Oblitus Commodi*

I came to know my father's parents  
 through dandelion recollections  
 scattered in their Crematorium.

Recognised John from a photo:  
 hook nose cushioned by strict moustache;  
 listened intensely to his crisp voice,  
 faint but distinctive,  
 slicing through hissing speakers  
 interspersed by clattering crockery  
 courtesy of his second wife's porcelain hands:

saintly Lily, preserved in sepia  
 snapshot from Heaven's after-flash;  
 those soft grey eyes epitomize  
*sui oblitus commodi* –  
 she lived a secret in their stark house at Rock;  
 father often found her knelt, a grounded angel,  
 scrubbing the floor, chained to chores  
 as a suffragette to railings:

she fluttered into strictness' ether;  
 groomed in contradiction by  
 a Fabian father who dined alone  
 throwing Baptist scraps at the poor;  
 inherited his sentiments  
 (and sensitive stomach)  
 sweeping her Socialism  
 under a patch of carpet.

*My country right or wrong* rang hollow  
 from the pipe-propped mouth of her patriotic husband,  
 a splinter of rhetoric lodged in him  
 like a papery Kipling battle scar;  
 no stomach for Sassoon as he

had none for his son's *guts-ache* music,  
Walton/R.V.W./Holst.

She: no stomach for selfishness  
in her domestic soldiering;  
strain of countryside seclusion  
wrung her threadbare fibre dry,  
manacled in phantasms;

her nerves took on the jolting force  
of housebound bomb-shock (triggered by  
doodlebugs she'd body-sheltered  
her son from back in wartime Windsor);  
no outbursts, just shattering silence,  
obsessions cobwebbed about the morbid  
cottage of her thoughts;

'My face has gone' she'd say in horror  
before the mirror, 'I can't see it,'  
or proclaim she'd lost her nose –  
abstraction's Harpies plaguing her  
with fears of blindness, formless impulse  
throwing her from cliff edges  
of thought, fed off her dread of dying,  
her frightened love of life.

She laboured on to know one grandson,  
witness the birth of a second, held him  
in her thin, bone china arms,  
hushabying under thundering breath.

Perhaps a little of the light in her  
brushed off on me before it passed:

I share her sensitivities,  
phobias, foibles, beliefs,  
yet these in-grew as I grew out

from childhood's idolising of  
her husband's disinterred ideas:  
subordination of the self  
for the nation - in that sense  
a different ideal still deserving  
*sui oblitus commodi.*

---

\*forgetful of one's own interests

---

### Only Rosie Smokes

All rickety wood desks and chairs,  
Garish matt-lemon pimply walls;  
Unlit corridors that trail to stairs  
Where a ghostly hum summons from the hall:  
The irritable lift, grumbling empty -  
Deep in this labyrinth of gingery glimpses  
Into hobbit-offices shut off like thoughts  
On problems that haven't solutions  
Bides faded, buck-toothed Rosie wrinkled  
As a walnut, sole heir to the privilege  
Of lighting up at work, poised with  
Perpetual Silk Cut as she hunches,  
Screwing her eyes at faceless audits  
In the swirling vapours of her vice  
Like Lewis Carroll's Caterpillar.  
Fogs of rank fag-smoke for six hours  
Percolate with the filtered coffee  
Like the scent of hash in a Kashmir arcade.

## The Renewers

i.

There's a reverence to a library,  
hint of the Catholic sanctuary  
for the skint, culture-hungry public  
to life's open polytechnic  
who can only afford to borrow words.

In monastic shade, off a Protestant street,  
nun-like librarians abide by silences  
vowed on Job Centre referral forms.

Stamping issues, re-shelving returns  
in alphabetical sacristies;  
renewing sinners through confessions,  
some long overdue.

Battered books, bindings splitting,  
hard-back, soft-back, dust-jacket souls  
issued, renewed, returned, absolved.

ii.

Lovers of words, cerebral lepers  
shiver in jackets outside the library  
queuing in bookish solipsist politeness  
for mind-almshouses to be meted out,  
nourish their souls and intellects  
with recycled scraps of escape.

One, old and faded of cover, coughs  
with grind of tired lung, looks  
a well-seasoned apple-scamp  
through dim windows at greengage books,  
thirsting their ripeness to renew.

10'o'clock gives twitching introduction  
so in the letter-lusting file  
for their cud of fact or fiction.

## Jerome's Last Judgement

*A Tribute to Jerome Moross, composer (1913-1983)*

Adam and Eve on horseback  
Gallop roughshod down through the canyons  
Ricocheting contrapuntal brass,  
Strident strings, trumpeting stampede -  
Giddy-up sin in the Valley of Gwangi  
Vine leaves for saddles, apple-stalk stirrups  
Steering their stallions onto the climax  
Of cymbal-clashing Culpa Felix -  
What better crescendo for the Fall of Mankind;  
Why not rouse the spirit, shiver the spine  
Into new territories: *Eden – The Western*.  
Temptation's volleys career until sundown  
In Eden's Paradise Chaparral -  
'This Garden ain't big enough for both of us, Satan!'  
The Cowboy composer breaks through the corral  
Of symphonic mores, gifts us a vision  
Of God just a bit like Charlton Heston,  
Lassoing Creation from under a Stetson.

### Three Scores & Tea

Elfin Stevie, flame-haired naïf,  
frocks and socks at forty-odd,  
stamping her iambic feet,  
casting spells to filibuster Time  
who shrugs Its shoulders, admits defeat,  
lets her off all-tainting certainty  
blanching the couch in the bay window glare.

Death comes even to suburbia.  
Aspidistras wilt like shadow spinsters.  
Doily wills curbed by window-sills  
turn in on themselves for three scores and tea  
in Aunt Lion's best-china-rattling tray -  
one lump or two to spirit her away.

Poor jilted Freddy, cup-sipping pity,  
might have patched one flesh together  
had she pinched her nose,  
held her breath  
but as wife she'd very little to offer  
but bitter wit and junket;  
an infantile infatuation with Death;  
besides, her typist's fingertips  
were only prone to wander keys.

Shelf-in Stevie, faded old maid,  
her life, one long settee sit-in  
on timeless catnapper, cigarette-  
-singe verses to stimulate her mind  
deeply morbid in the thundery gloom  
of static parlour, crochet dull -  
she'd have believed in God had He  
not been a vengeful, damning one  
but she could never reconcile  
the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hull.

## Martin Goth

Martin, Martin, Martin, I remember when  
 You erupted in the night shelter threatening  
 To heed the voices, spectral tempters,  
 The invisible tormentor you pointed to  
 Over my sentient shoulders  
 When I spoke with you about those old coins  
 You collected – your limbered limbs  
 Brimming with adrenalin from one hundred press ups  
 A sweat-stench humming like an aura  
 Of possession about your gangly body –  
 ‘I am not insane, there’s nothing wrong with me’  
 You asserted with a dark and stabbing stare,  
 Livid to why the ‘mental health team’ came  
 To the hostel to check on you – ‘If you’re quite sane,’  
 I started with untypical Odyssean guile,  
 ‘Then why are you so scared of seeing them?’  
 Your aggression subsided: ‘Ok then’, you said  
 And, fooling for my logic trick, tripped in to see them.

Well Martin, it seemed you convinced them  
 Of your ‘stability’, for the time being;  
 That or your adamant refusal to take  
 A hospital free trial or medication  
 Stalled them in facilitating your salvation.

I recall your obsessive vegetarianism:  
 You suspected meat harboured alien properties  
 Poised to contaminate you with mind-altering extracts –  
 That time I picked the meat bits out  
 Of your dish of rice, you still detected  
 The presence of animal chemicals  
 But you weren’t in possession of all the fats.

I cast a dark eye back to your  
 Monochrome presence, long gothic-black

Straggly hair, scribbling dis-  
-connected lines in a moleskine book,  
Sketches of intricate spaceship designs  
To counteract the alien invasion -  
Always the sight of you talking intently  
With an invisible, Harpy-like antagonist  
Picking the scraps of your festering sanity.

Four years on I spotted you  
With shorter hair, more together in a way,  
At least sartorially - did this signify your rise  
From schizophrenic street messiah  
To sheltered, medicated mind?  
No-one's so simply solved or saved:  
Last saw you brandishing Big Issues, lividly  
Gesticulating to that invisible tormentor  
While you were invisible to everyone but me.

## Hell's Full of Early Risers

I

In the dark time of whitewash light  
 Heaven was walled up from sight,  
 A jury of bills reigned on the mantelpiece  
 Obscuring ginger Jesus' stern brow crease  
 And sincere stare – *He looked at Peter*  
*And Peter remembered;* the faulty heater  
 Stuttered its last, the flame turned blue  
 As Christ's resurrected aura: cue  
 For father to prise his slippers free  
 From dogs' worshipping jaws, slide the  
 Dying warmth away from its space  
 Sealing the empty tomb fireplace,  
 Scrunch newspaper into little balls  
 Stuffed in with wet twigs and dampened coals,  
 Flick out a lighter run out of fuel,  
 Curse, sigh, flare at futility of rule;  
 Striking matches pinched out by the draft,  
 His fingers not nifty enough for this craft;  
 The wind pounding loud on the old cottage door  
 With gaseous fists – its dog-howling roar  
 Unsettles his spirits, sets his nerves a-jinx,  
 His mind cursed by riddles to fox a Sphinx;  
 Still barely morning, the Furies still sleep,  
 Dispossessed sons dream upstairs one flight steep,  
 His wife fights her shift at the nursing home  
 While his thoughts seek employment – nail-bites alone  
 Faith-destitute; at five he'll awake,  
 Resurrect sharp and abrupt for the sake  
 Of his sanity – can't lie-in:  
 Anxiety's heave sends his stomach plunging  
 Into early reveille – now a bit wiser:  
 He's learnt Hell's for the early riser.

## II

Seems this intuitive wisdom runs through  
 Genes and traits of those who issue  
 From one's reproduction - few know this  
 Better than this slipper-footed genealogist:  
 A quirk in his youngest heir's mentality  
 Traced through a hiccupping ancestry:  
 A chemical mutation behoves serotonin,  
 Gifting a spirit-level of coping.  
 Difficult forgetting days pre-diagnosis -  
 Dark age of tipping dubieties (: neurosis,  
 Obsessions, phantasms, intrusive thoughts),  
 School register crosses outdone by noughts;  
 Stomaching puberty in bottled-up Hell  
 (Hell I feel would describe it well  
 Depending on one's own patented idea  
 Of such an abstract place). Sharp fear  
 Would push him out of bed before break  
 Of day prised his eyes, clammed for the sake  
 Of his consciousness-shy head;  
 His mind tug back its curtains with dread  
 To behold another new day of old doubt,  
 Compulsions to somehow clamber out  
 Of himself and dead-end preoccupations;  
*A miniature saint bedevilled by temptations*  
 His despairing father romanticised  
 Spying in his son, inhibited-eyed,  
 Chalk-white-faced, paper-thin-willed,  
 A glimpse of his wife when her thoughts spilled,  
 Before she found methods out through learning:  
*Put a knob of butter on anything burning.*

The Furies chased his son despite his hesitation,  
 Elastic-stretched till the next generation -  
 His hunted offspring no longer foxed  
 By obsessions he borrowed, doubts he boxed  
 In attics of his mind, coaxed out by the

Preventative spells of CBT\*;  
 He learnt early on to be none the wiser:  
 Hell's reserved for the early riser.

### III

Might be illuminating to cite one more  
 Dimension to genealogical law  
 (If you go in for the old forgotten gesture:  
 We all come from the same primogeniture):  
 One last strand to the lineage of suffering  
 Limbers absent-mindedly in the dim lighting  
 Of a white night shelter where his second son  
 Put on his Socialism as one  
 Puts on a shirt, combining dreams  
 With ham-fisted grabbling with shabby means,  
 Spill a little bit of idealism in  
 To reality's uninspiring reasoning,  
 Shake off his interests as if they were fleas  
 Bristling in his hair-shirt, take up keys  
 To forgotten doors while he could sustain  
 The daily weights of spiritual strain,  
 Try and scrape some happiness  
 For those Society deems to dispossess  
 Through factories that reject and replicate -  
 Squinted beyond knuckled *love* and *hate*,  
 Ravaging addictions, self-inflictions,  
 Blotches, rashes and fag-reeking fictions  
 To unspoken stories of glassy pasts  
 That trampled them into untouchable castes.

But the pain and frustration brought liberating  
 Insights in morning strip-lights scuttling  
 From flea-circus sheets, hermit crabs  
 Shedding linen shells, dandruff, scabs  
 And blisters, peeling on sweat-stiff rags,  
 Strapping on rock-sacks, crustacean bags,  
 Blearily lining up for their tipping out

Into rock-pools of morning to dismally tout  
Left-over *Big Issues*, or beg scraps from misers...  
...Hell's full of early risers.

\* *CBT = Cognitive Behavioural Therapy*

### At Least Tomorrow's Wednesday

How many chores and battles fought  
 By Boudiccas clapped to ironing boards  
 Clashing blind in hissing mists of steam  
 And reeking damp from smoking clothes?

Could be your mother or lover groping  
 Over lofty seamed Alps and cloth mountains  
 Of shirt and vest, bed-sheet, stiff trouser  
 Thick and rough as elephant hides.

Some light Debussy puts no end to sighing  
 Nor massages away migraine's allegro  
 Galloping up on sensitive lobes;  
 She's stewing like dishes in the sink.

You'd assist her if you weren't so useless  
 But nature predisposes man to watch,  
 Sit and think that thinking is his duty  
 While woman's is to linen-basket thoughts,

Bundle them in neatly, keep them tidy  
 In spotless drawers of sock-paired common sense  
 So they know where to find them when they're needed,  
 Not messing up the house in speculation.

You put your metaphysics to one side;  
 Chivalrously pack the board up for her;  
 Gallantly dispatch it to its lair.  
 Then sit down in time for more departing

Into tall thoughts shrinking your scrotum to  
 A doll's house marble cauliflower, face  
 You think wistful, gormless as a herm.  
 She slices through the menstruating silence

In a tone shrill as a strangled bird,  
‘Oh well, at least tomorrow’s Wednesday’;  
But her wrung-out words just settle on the carpet  
Like dissident dust. Your cloth ears haven’t heard.

## Rats, Cats and Kings

*A Homage to George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia*

1.

A Republic's crisis in striking distance  
 on the map of things, lightning not visible  
 but the purr of the rug-cat thunders the drums  
 of sensitive ears out-listening their nation's  
 deafness to all but cricketing meadows,  
 dull willow thuds and lily-white claps -  
 tub-thumping thunder tumbling near  
 from red earths of Aragón and Huesca.

2.

From Jerusalem's slums and coal-charred yards  
 to draughty halls of the ILP -  
 cheap soap and woodbine, chip shop and Brylcreem,  
 hard-grafted faces lit up with hope's politics,  
 journeymen, poets, dust-jacket dilettantes,  
 honourless prophets, clean-cuffed Quixotes  
 and flat-capped Panzas, united to joust  
 and oust the Fascist windmill giants;  
 leathery hands shake with white spiders  
 pale as the pamphlets of fingered polemic;  
 turpentine mingles with whiffs of fresh paper.

All differences left breathlessly behind  
 tousling chimneys of a frostier home:  
 heat-drowsed idealists enter their dreams  
 on chivalrous trains to mythologized fronts  
 (a tubercular scribbler's Burma's intact  
 on this clattering carriage of Socialist tract);  
 English, German, Italian, French  
 billeted together through exercise of will,  
 not sufferance of jingoistic blackmail:  
 our Captain says **THEIR Country Needs You!**

Man with beret displays deft marksmanship  
 with *porrón*: thread of red resuscitates flagging,  
 parched-mouthed Spaniard, stubble ruby-clagging.

3.

The Diggers, Keir Hardie and George Bernard Shaw  
 would have been in their elements in Barcelona:  
 no classes, differences, privileges here,  
 no profits, no tips for waiters or bootblacks,  
 a city collectivised, transport for all  
 in red and black taxis and trams on the Ramblas;  
 formalities, titles, traditional greetings  
 all levelled: *Senor, Don, usted* transposed  
 into *Comrade* and *thou*, even *buenos días*  
 replaced with *salud!* Now cats look at kings  
 straight in the eyes and square in the face,  
 Socialism in action – so much for the Church  
 of Spain, its capitalist altars: a trace  
 of deep-veined anarchy clots the character  
 of this Roman Catholic, Agnostic race.

4.

Green dreams of dust-jacket crusades  
 to battlefields of excrement and jagged tins,  
 bullet-rattled hills, birdless valleys,  
 villages sprawled like scattered dice,  
 crinkled hillsides like elephant hides  
 looming cold daunting – insect figures  
 shivering round flags, hugging flames  
 of pilfered Church candles they strike their lights by,  
 coughs for confessions in sandbag pews,  
 mortars sacred as plaster Madonnas  
 too precious to touch or use –  
 stagnation on the Aragón front;  
 heated exchanges of smoke-breathed views.

5.

The shabby freedom of a nation defended  
 by ragged children with sticks; greyed youth  
 greasing corroding scrap-iron rifles  
 with olive oil – *keep your powder dry*  
 cried Oliver Cromwell in a greener war,  
 now black and sea-green is black and blood-red  
 knotted in scarves round sticking necks  
 the colour of quail's eggs.  
 Don't tap the butt on the limestone ground!  
 Blunderbusses go off indiscriminately,  
 only guns are non-partisan here  
 along with the shakes and pneumonia –  
 not forgetting 'impartial' bombs that take out  
 the thrower as well as the target,  
 killing two stones with one bird.

A fag for a bomb worth throwing; a flag  
 for a trusty rifle; a cause for a clause  
 worth fighting for in this war against virus,  
 impasse against men; conflict postponed  
 for too distant pitching of camps and dug-outs  
 on honeycombed hillsides; sand-martins' nests.  
 The cracking of bullets on Fascist machine guns:  
 nuts hitting stones. These freezing soldiers  
 ache for battles and cigarettes  
 but night and the Jesuit return empty-handed.

6.

Shouting instead of shooting;  
 verbal bombs bounce from camp to camp;  
 starved cats have fasted for shouting duty  
 so hours of vocal volleys follow fuelled  
 on lack of *tabaco*, gut-rumpus of hunger  
 and spirits that scavenge glimpses of hope

on blue-smudged horizons, sights thrown amok  
 like a scamper of tramps scrimping fag-ends,  
 itching in lousy hair-shirts and goat-skins,  
 fleas hopping ship to and fro.  
 Futile mascots abound: a frozen  
 Moor in No-Man's-Land.  
 What gullible bribe brought him in the service  
 of Christians and Catholics? Should have fought  
 with us: raiders of gold-spoilt Churches;  
 we modern Roundheads; recusant hunters;  
 goosy ganders with highfaluting passwords  
 chiselling off Heavens from the headstones,  
 turning God's bullet-pocked Houses  
 into sanctuaries for smashed furniture and excrement.

7.

Casualties, the inevitable price of clashes;  
 competing with bombs, sirens caterwaul  
 from streams of juddering ambulances  
 that rescue the wounded, jolt them into corpses.  
 Sadly not as regular as faeces that spoors  
 in rank latrines, gifting rafts for rats,  
 is the infrequent trickle of Fascist deserters  
 inspired by catalysts of sparring polemic  
 ricocheting like cartridges through No-Tramp's Land:  
*Viva el POUM – Fascistas maricones!* and so on –  
 arguments, like the spit of bullets, seem never-ending.  
 Damp trenches cause a passion for warm baths and clean sheets.  
 Polemic warms the farm house: heated politics  
 debated in freezing, rat-infested dug-outs  
 sandbags for soap boxes, bullets for ballots,  
 ideology in action on inactive battlefields  
 of barbed-wire -isms, shell-splintered -wings;  
 pens dipped in blood; bayonets dripping ink.

8.

The battle-scene: a war-torn bed chamber  
 exposed to skies for a roof scooped by a bomb:  
 bedsteads for barricades; bed-pan latrines  
 filling with yellow water from urinating rains,  
 rats large as cats splashing in them like otters –  
 hardly the picturesque brocade crocheted by  
 fevered imaginings in rapt English bed-sheets  
 before the pan was spilt; and barely picaresque:  
 the only rogues here are rats and grenade-pins  
 and Catalan cats staring out Spanish kings –  
 who doesn't know the way to a monarch's heart  
 is through explosives? Cue Guido Fawkes,  
 the Catholics' last coup with grit and gunpowder  
 to blow down Parliament's pack of cards,  
 towers of matchsticks and ratified tricks.

Who will oust out this brute Franco?

The folk songs of Lorca? The buzz of de Falla's  
 swarming *El Amor Brujo*?

Not strums of flamenco, stamping fandango,  
 choreographed toreadors' pugilist ballet  
 in blood-coloured dust of the bull rings.

9.

On the Aragón front flares clash with the flash  
 of clean bayonets, white armlets and gritted teeth,  
 or the whites of the eyes of terrified sheep  
 herded by bullets in the still lunar darkness  
 black as liquorish-root cigarettes –  
 thanks to Franco's annexed Canary plantations –  
 on grounds pockmarked with shell holes like  
 the cratered moon. What contrast by day:  
 faces stained by white ferocious suns,  
 windburnt; sunbeaten. Gnarled-faced Andaluces  
 bask in anarchy of classless ranks,  
 prized for their deftness at tucking in ends  
 of cigarettes shovelled with brittle tobacco.

10.

On a chattering train anís-totting  
 leather-faced peasants reflect the drab palette  
 of conscripted cats' coarse brown and khaki  
 who naturally care only for a fresh packet  
 of fags: a day's wage for philanthropy  
 at ten pesetas, price of altruism  
 along with rice-leavened bread, consistency  
 of communion wafers; bread like putty;  
 screaming trams and milkless tea;  
 scourge of olive oil; cigarette famine;  
 pounding stomachs in tortuous streets.

11.

*¡Hola otra vez Barcelona!* The lights of this city  
 of labyrinthine intrigue pinched out like candles  
 in Church-like dark cast by Tibidabo,  
 hill from which el Diablo showed  
 Christ the countries of the Earth - Franco's  
 shadow obscures truth, inspires  
 Communist plots, Valencian papers  
 flaming with Fascism - the Fascist plot:  
*Impeach the POUM - suppress the lot!*  
 Adios Maurín, la Confederación Nacional  
 de Trabajo, *La Batalla's* championing  
 of the Friends of Durruti. Nín disappears  
 like invisible ink while libellous blots  
 of lily-white foreign newspapers stain  
 red permanent slander on hearts and minds  
 of lamb; give the view of the Balaclava hill  
 through safe sights of picnicking opera glasses.

We are called Fascists behind our backs  
 and behind our fronts - *No hay tabaco* -  
 Quiroga, Barrio, Giral - Bilbao.  
 Communist policies of pin-pricks pummels

subtly away at the honour of the POUM,  
 turns freedom fighters into fugitives,  
 slams foreign crusaders into germ-ridden prisons  
 to die from their wounds and ideals –  
 in the meantime Franco's Spanish rats  
 spill in through the chaos and wobbling lines  
 of faction-split fronts: Madrid, Aragón,  
 Málaga, Bilbao, Huesca, Barcelona,  
 Valencia; all fall like dominoes – blood  
 pours into Spain like wine from a porrón...

12.

Rats large as cats nibbling scraps  
 in Republican pannikins: new rule of kings  
 sets in with the twitch of liquorish moustache,  
 stamp of black boots, a yellow/red flag,  
 rumpus of tub-thumping Fascist salutes,  
*ustedes, Dons, Senores* restored  
 with classes and castes, tips, brothels, profits,  
 private monopolies – only the oranges  
 glow the same colour, like paraffin lights  
 in ink-spilt night's genuflected trees.

Oranges are oranges under Republicans,  
 Socialists, Anarchists, Fascists, all –isms;  
 they all taste the same to rats, cats and kings.

First drafted 5th November 2004

Notes:

Stanza 2:           ILP = Independent Labour Party  
                           'a tubercular scribbler...' = refers to George Orwell  
                           porrón = Spanish drinking vessel for wine

Stanza 3:           Ramblas = a mile-long promenade in Barcelona

Usted = formal version of 'you' in Spanish - the Republicans occupying Barcelona altered such formal addressing of citizens to the informal, to emphasize equality; the Fascists preferred formal addresses

Stanza 7: POUM = (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) The Workers Party of Marxist Unification

Fascistas maricones = Fascist poofs

Stanza 11: *¡Hola otra vez Barcelona!* = 'Hello again Barcelona!'  
 Maurín = leader of the POUM  
 Confederación Nacional de Trabajo = (CNT) National Confederation of Workers  
*La Batalla* = pro-Fascist paper in Madrid  
 Friends of Durruti = anarchist militia opposed to militarization and governmentalism in the peoples' militia  
 Nín = co-founder of POUM who was falsely accused by the Communists of conspiring with the Fascists, and subsequently disappeared  
 pannikins = metal containers for warming up food rations in and eating them from

### A Mighty Absence

When she was fussing around him, throwing  
Chocolate foil missiles while he tried to read,  
Nudging his knee so his cradled book slipped  
To his irritable sigh of 'Oh, Helen',  
His word-anchored gaze longed for solitude.

But when she was working an afternoon shift  
His books became milestones of hours,  
Grave-heavy weights that heaped on his mind  
And his cattle-grid brow; he'd stare into space  
And the empty lounge which after a while  
Took on all the gloom of his thoughts in her absence;  
He'd shuffle about like an abandoned schoolboy,  
Biting his nails while the minutes  
Traipsed by like a regiment of plodding doubts;  
His fresh-polished shoes standing neatly to attention  
For inspection by an empty fireplace;  
His whole soul missing her, hanging grey  
And desolate in his face.

## The Well and the Wisher

There father sat, fishing for wishes  
In the plastic tub filled with soapy water,  
Face weighed down by cattle-grid brow,  
Sad and thundery, a bedraggled angler  
With nothing to show for patience and strain,  
No bend on the rod, at best a mere morsel  
At the end of his line.

Scrubbing the Queens' heads till they gleamed  
As if freshly minted; ELIZABETH REG revived  
Into sudded sparkle – regal tender  
To bag and exchange for pentagon-shaped  
Tolls to slot in the electric metre.

He gazed at the coins at the bottom  
Of the shallow plastic well, frothing  
With washing-up liquid bubbles, but silent,  
No more fulfilling wishes, only see-through bubbles  
Swelling and bursting on the limpid surface.

Then looked again through his wobbled reflection  
At layers of coins and saw for moments  
Glistening copper-coloured pebbles  
He'd try to fetch out from the bed of the stream  
Trickling down through the sloping meadow  
At the foot of his father's hill, as a boy;  
In that clouded time he'd stare back to  
The smallholding summit on the crinkly brow  
And think: 'I wonder where I'll be  
Fifty years from now'.

His dank reflection reformed in the pool  
At his feet, now ditchwater green  
For scum and mould shed from the coins  
Like driftwood from a ship wreck.

His fingers fished the pebbles out  
From the unreflecting stream.

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## The Luxury of Despair

How can my satisfaction last  
In what can't last?  
How can I look forward to the future  
When all there is, is past?  
What's the point in thinking infinite  
When our actual lives are cramped within a limit?  
What's the point in immortalising words  
When poets only sing three scores, like birds?  
Thoughts like these must be packed away  
And slung over the shoulder for the working day;  
Vast baggage stuffed into a bag  
A fraction of their size,  
But you have no choice - the lifelong snare -  
You have to work to earn and to survive  
So you can have the luxury of despair.

## Dark, Sun and Thunder

Ask Miss Gayler's obscure nationality  
 A tardy answer would sniff and fuss  
 From her tight-lipped mouth: 'I'm Swiss', as if  
 No consequence, a rumpled quandary  
 Like the lumpy carpet hunchbacked by  
 The gap-foot of the front door;  
 Draught excluder by default  
 Stiffening the loose-hinged door,  
 Clamming visitors in its wedging clamp.

Miss Gayler kept her Jewishness  
 Between herself and Yahweh -  
 Nobody else's business besides -  
 In light of one anti-Semitic tenant,  
 House-troglodyte, who'd a stand-up line:  
 'How many Jews does it take to fit a light-bulb?'  
 None: they contract it out to Gentiles!

My enquiry: innocent curiosity,  
 Following up the near-tangible lead  
 Of her pronunciation; instinctual as  
 Prescribing chicken soup for a cold  
 Or tea as a tonic for nerves.  
 Nothing insidious in asking this question  
 As suggested her harassed black eyes.

'You open the window, I shut off the heating!'  
 Threatened an angry, lipless smile  
 Creasing darkly on tight, blanched skin  
 Like a damp patch on the yellowed hallway ceiling -  
 As Jehovah chucked locusts on Egyptians  
 Miss Gayler would punish us with cold;  
 Dish out Thou Shalt Nots with the rent books,  
 Each commandment engraved one to ten  
 On the cryptic papyri of her face.

This tumbled house, her Old Testament:  
 Faded, contradictory, stark;  
 Its wrath smote in chipped brick, flaking plaster,  
 Creaking banisters – had its own ghost,  
 A Cavalier cadaver politely haunting the landing  
 Centuries in rent arrears, lingering on  
 Like the stubbly, panda-eyed recluse  
 Walled-up in his fictions in a tiny, stuffed room  
 Replete in dusty armchair, wanderlust wardrobe  
 Shuffling about at night on its own.

Miss Gayler, Morgan La Fay of this day,  
 Animist witch, timetabled the sun  
 By rota so's not to saturate the bulbs  
 Or fade the lace curtains irreversibly beige;  
 Apollo at her beck and call, along with light-bulbs  
 Tingling forbiddingly in the musty front hall –  
 One burst and she saw it as God's mysterious  
 Way of saying: 'Don't flick the switch too quick!'

Prestigiously attentive to dust was Miss Gayler;  
 One pictured her dusting stuffed manikins  
 In monolith armchairs, inspecting fugitive  
 Fingertip-specks, gleaming with what  
 'Cleanliness is next to...' – ghosts seemed drawn  
 To her high standards: 'There's a woman in  
 A petticoat who sits in my bay-window smiling;  
 She doesn't scare me – she's quite beguiling.'

Her cobwebbed hair was once jet-black  
 As her liquorish eyebrows; horn-rimmed glasses  
 Magnified the hunted darkness of her eyes  
 When her ready temper rumble-tumbled on short cue  
 If wrong-footed by harmless enquiries:  
 'Which country are you from originally Miss Gayler?'  
 You learnt not to ask such questions of her

Once rebuked with a curt 'I'm Swiss'  
Huffing out on her stale perfumed breath,  
Face thunder-strained like the housekeeper  
In her favourite film, *Rebecca*.

You felt guilt stoned in your throat,  
Not yours to choke on; from a fruit  
Rotting with Lilith in the front patio garden  
Where rubble starved flowerpots of the light-giving brute:  
An occasional sun, occasionally pouring on  
Sad environs, empowered by its burden  
Of solar Diaspora - quantum arsenal;  
A macrocosmic blackmail stamped through the ages  
Now dark sun and thunder in the heart of Miss Gayler.

## Daddy-Long-Thoughts

Day of returns and returning, re-  
 visiting overgrown rails of the mind  
 played as a tangible, metaphoric trip  
 to Bognor Regis, on rickety tracks  
 to difficult pasts, disguised in green-washed  
 terraces, sleepy, ghostly arcades,  
 a cramped museum of only two rooms  
 stuffed with Nineteen Forties' nostalgia,  
 animistic wireless sets, old record players  
 safely remote in chameleon cases,  
 cabinets filled with hiss and song,  
 mahogany mausoleums of ghost voices  
 caught for posterity on vinyl like  
 life-lines on faces; promising returns  
 to muffled yesteryears, *take good care*  
*of yourself, you belong to me* - and other legends:  
*Anything is possible with a cup of tea,*  
 eternally-spiralling memory  
 caught in stylus-rut-tut of thought -  
 Dad taps into service days' airwaves  
 transported back to Signaller duties  
 tapping his name on the Morse-code machine,  
 last ditched attempt, unconsciously,  
 to communicate with his obsessive mouse-wife  
 cowering in a dark hole in the wainscoting.

Billeted at Barnham with baggage of years'  
 tortuous travelling to begin again  
 life's recurring evacuation  
 to flutters of breeze-leafed luggage tags,  
 tell-tale stickies of the soul -  
 the mighty distance lived, giant stones  
 of vast, towering things experienced,  
 time-manipulating milestones of minutes  
 morphing to trees, fields, hedges, clouds

in capitulation with the past,  
 pantomining, re-performing moments  
 lost mostly in hope of non-remembering,  
 forgetfulness, vital blinkers  
 of present-seeking senses of cross-each-bridge-  
 as-you-come-to-it now; off-putter of tomorrow.

In the musty existing room of my parents,  
 crammed full with family mementos, books,  
 photographs, Styx's toll-fare tokens  
 or the hold of a Pharaoh's morbid tomb,  
 crouch Eden's forgotten descendants, once giants  
 now shrivelled into earthly, miniature size  
 like two toy-scale figures in a rented dolls' house  
 sandwiched between a struggling back garden  
 and windowed partition to the outside world -  
 ghosts haunting progress's tumbleweeding suburbs,  
 eyes seamed with crow's-feet, stitched under-shadows  
 stewed-tea grey; old-shoe-brown pupils  
 glistening tiredness, penetrating as nerves  
 jarred between contrapuntal cogs  
 of thought, strung out by crippling  
 preoccupations of the moment,  
 terror's cryptic puzzles, silent shouts  
 skirting-board-shrunk inversely in size  
 to towering effect; nerves' stretched piano wires  
 creaking lost chords, lost notes, lost times;  
 eyes strained as recycled tea-bags, marbled  
 as milk-swirling tea, or egg-whites  
 bubbling in a frying-pan shrapnelled with shell-  
 splinters; ancestral tut-tut of out  
 -of-kilter clock stuck forever at Six -  
 tea-time to starch-scented Edwardians -  
 illustrates to etiquetteless ear  
 what on some other plane struggles to be heard  
 in deafening, daytime, stuffy lounge silence,  
 dins of the taxidermist's inner-ear:  
 cork-creaking minutes, stone-scraping seconds -

Time is fed up, it's fretting, it's biting  
its nails, until the next train comes.

Tea brings lapsed contentment, tings spirits  
presently depleted to muster stimulation,  
stir peculiarly back into being  
like pink-striped Bagguss in his sepia shop,  
caffeine-revivified, resuscitated to  
stammers of nerve-edged conversations,  
verbal grabbling for mental distraction,  
reiterated interests stale with taste-betraying  
syllables, dull, insipid, yellowed eye  
watery weak; drained; stewed; drunk on spurts  
of recaptured happier times flitting  
fuzzy as bulb-clunking moths;  
suicidal daddy-long-thoughts birthed by lullabies  
of a moment's beyond self-soothing rocks  
of tense torsos, time-tripping sighs,  
excruciating tocks.

Depending on mood my Dad's a Mad Hatter  
postulating posterity's teatime scraps -  
as the dirty armchairs draped in sun-blached covers  
darken to monoliths, immovable doubts  
in unexpected thunder-gloom cast by a cloud,  
he turns to Mock Turtle, too life-tired to cry;  
my mother alternates between March Hare  
and Dormouse, depending on the hold  
of sudden grope of hope or insoluble obsession  
in the dimly gas-lit dolls' house of her mind -  
we take our places in listless mummery  
of past thoughts, feelings, imprisoning meanings  
breathing back to life through thawing of sighs,  
interminably frequent tripping of time...  
More dishwater tea? asks Dormouse Mother  
of Mad Hatter father to teapot patter;  
she yaffles affirmations, *yawf - yawf - yawf*;

nearest her mouth comes to forming *yes*  
since aeons of negatives; rings tea-strained eyes;  
lapses back to doubt-muttered sleepy-byes,  
rinsed of all energies; timeless tea-party  
tripping with lethargy, rusting gentility,  
frozen forever at Six-'O'-Clock,  
stirring the stewed tea with my watch.

Angst-ridden glances grappling ungraspables -  
tripped up by a thought's footstool -  
go in circles round the centre table plinth -  
casting story spells like the pacing Bronte sisters -  
a jaundiced tomato plant implores its luminous  
green buds to blush red, red of our tied blood  
binding us together in eternal trinity,  
chains of pulsing rosary beads  
itching to hatch from vinegared shells  
like November conkers; domestic mysteries  
probed, unsolved, self-defining; ruby  
red of veins causing on wilderness-verged  
tracks like spidering varicose trains.

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### Miss Discombobulated

Wearing laundry of years, two holes  
for eyes where blackbirds pecked the linen  
lined with experience's permanent creases,  
she clung to the word 'discombobulated'  
as if a thick, warm, comfortable fur-coat;  
trampled years since contented  
with hyperbole of 'moments' reeking like  
cheap white wine in a lukewarm glass;  
her past, a fug of pub fag-smoke  
perfuming her black Hispanic hair;  
ages since pages she once wrote  
saw shimmer of day; memories'  
invisible walls stalled her everywhere.

## Shell Shock

A huddled, bedraggled sand-bag,  
eyes trembling with special fear  
born from fatigue and lack of fags;  
body crouched west but canny of rear

guns rattling from the unseen east,  
gattling chatter of bucolic bronchitis -  
lungs concertina with grampus wheeze  
of book-dust asthma, pen-hand arthritis -

in No-Fags-Land the casualties  
of dregs-shovelled roll-ups scatter the carpet  
of umber mud; battlefield teas  
spill on the listing parapet

of warping pamphlets' ducking curves  
under bombardments of battered nerves.

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## A Letter from David Kessel

His crabbed handwriting scrawls  
'poetry is a savage war'  
and other pills of pub beer wisdom:  
'in the destructive element immerse!'  
straight from the disinherited Lord Jim  
with a suicidal, sherbet-tasting bite  
like the powder spilt out on the numbing tongue  
from the split capsule of an anti-depressant;  
jagged scrawls crawl on the page  
collaged by spider legs of tobacco.

'I'm still out of touch' the swatted legs  
of insects spell out on the off-white paper,  
'and, I believe, over-medicated!'  
but not too much to date the letter -  
'I'll leave it there' the scribbles say  
'be in touch soon            Yours truly'  
then his squashed spider appears:  
'David' makes arachnophobics flinch  
and all the flies trapped in the spinning years.

O The Windows of the Bookshop Must Be Broken \*

*For David Kessel*

Is that the Cockney poet who sings splintered cities  
 Sat, a damp jackdaw, on a bench-perch there,  
 Succouring a spindly, smoking twig? Licked  
 Rhetoric: I recognised him at first sight;  
 Or myself through the gulled glass of a parallel life -  
 So this was what obscure compassion looked like:

Moony, two-way mirror eyes, fogged with thought,  
 Reflecting ghosted furniture of the room,  
 Wall shadows; the soul of the muttering door;  
 Obscurities crimped in schizophrenic things:  
 Animist glimpses of the chronically nerved -  
 Channelled through sentiment object-projected;  
 Tangible triggers re-shaping blanched traumas.

Face: sallow, sunless, shade of curdled tea,  
 Faintly lit with sincerity's buttercup glow;  
 Flashes of a harassed child - Little Time grown up  
 In hand-down, tight, untranslatable insights -  
 A sheep-eyed Leopold Bloom in itching hair-shirt;  
 The conscientious misanthrope every city needs;  
 The ghostly conscience stalking visceral streets;  
 Dreaming giro stories to capsize pickled lives;  
 Tapping Socialism trapped in bricked-up histories  
 Of peeling terraces - lust corrosive as spit  
 Rusting the tongue that would taste the world  
 But for hampering of pill-slugged speech.

'Do you see yourself as a survivor?' I ask in another voice -  
 'Me? I suppose I am...surviving', he stammers  
 Adding, as an afterthought, often left just that:  
 'I'm chronic!' More emphatic than a big, black, monstrous,  
 Insurmountable full stop: *I am chronic.*

O but Captains cluster in his dampened spirit:  
Saints with cluttered brows: Noonan, Keir Hardie  
Ghosting sunless skin; shivered inspiration;  
Obscurity can't trample down the Muse-struck tramp,  
He tramples on to saddle-stitched skies...  
It's true thoughts' Pillar'd Mansions shrink on paper -  
The gamble's to be published and still stand,  
Better the salvation of the page -  
The printed line forfeit for interpretation -  
Time to reclaim The Means of Publication -  
*O the windows of the bookshop must be broken!*

\* from Glass Is Dynamite, by David Kessel

## Keir Hardie Street

Allan Jackdaw (1891 - 1917)

### i. Dick Whittington's City

Gash of grubby red-brick buildings  
 Under bruise of urban sky -  
 In every doily-curtained windows lives a life -  
 Motionless stout spectators crouch, watch the trains heave in,  
 Black bricks of Battersea do the steam proud,  
 Steeplejack chimneys tousle to attention,  
 Colobus clouds swing from chimney to chimney:  
 A tumbling audience stirring fresh from concrete beds,  
 First fags of the day  
 Chimney from drainpipe-brimmed trilbies.

Tock-o-clock in the morning, too early to tell the time;  
 Through lifting fogs peeling back like greying scabs  
 City pricks up higgledy-piggledy against Calvary skyline:  
 A pencil smudge of gaswork cloud bruising on the paper arm  
 Of the street urchin pale, pearly horizon,  
 Soon brushed away by the charlady sun.

Black-mouthed London, charred chimney sweep  
 Spluttering soot; dark tubercular blood;  
 Guttersnipe city - barely the room  
 For a thought to cough to a word,  
 Funnelled as smoggy zephyrs through  
 Gap-toothed stucco terraces,  
 Plaque-caked like the yellow screeching teeth  
 Of a Jack-stalked slattern, flapping down  
*Daisy, Daisy* airless backstreets  
 With asthmatic, *Lambeth Walk*, music hall effort;  
 A lost, panting tramp in labyrinth pitch  
 Gin-soaked to the skin, barrelling out  
*Roll out the Barrels* as he Rag-And-Bones by.

## ii. Short Shanks the Shopkeeper

On Betterton Street, Old Short Shanks Joe  
 Stirs to the salts of his wife's soapy hands  
 Offering a Rosy Lee libation  
 Steaming sweet, piping brown  
 Like the Ganges in Kiplin's In'ja -  
 Rushed sips, kippers, crockery clanks;  
 Slap of lather for junket-thick shave,  
 Scrape, scrub, scrape, scrub, scrub-a-dub-dub -  
 Punctual as tulips is this old Buff -  
 Time to puff up, peel on his slippers,  
 Flip-flop and trip down the Apples and Pears  
 Lift up the shutters of the shut-eye shop -  
 Hosiery, drapery, haberdasher, collibosher -  
 Time to butter up more bread and honey  
 With a *Knees up Mother Brown* and a bish, bash, bosh!

Polishes his clobber  
 Spanking clean and dapper for Daisy      day,  
 All manner of hats, all shapes and spats,  
 Whistles *My Old Man's a Dustman* as  
 His hoarded goods dust up spick and spam;  
 Old Joe only takes notes, crisp from franking,  
 No credit or slates in his kind of banking -  
 Worked his way up from poor shop apprentice  
 To flush haberdasher with a ledger for saving -  
 Scrimped and scraped for this crust of a chance  
 To pass to his sons his scrimpings and scrapings.

Long ago when Short Shanks was just a wistful titch  
 In shorter hoes, mince pies glitter-bright  
 And life-is-but-a-dream-blue,  
 He filled this dismal city with laughter running through  
 Pigeon-parting streets  
 Taking the wind and laundry with him,

The sombre peals of sad St. Paul's,  
 The striking chimes of glum Big Ben –  
 Blew them up in a paper bag and burst them!

So full of big, brassy band-stand grand ideas,  
 Fishing possibilities in the ditchwater-green,  
 Pummelled lustre of his shimmering Thames,  
 Glinting like a twitching chevalier's armour:  
 The city's next Dick Whittington,  
 Rags-to-riches rise to power  
 And with that power, O what mighty deeds:  
 He'll level this higgledy-piggledy city,  
 So tramps have more attentive tailors;  
 Workhouses, slums fill with life and laughter;  
 Churches used by old rich folk  
 To pay daily penitence in head-down prayers  
 Till their dromedaries shrink needle-size;  
 Shopkeepers, landlords offer alms  
 To the downtrodden left; ill-gotten profits  
 Put back in bellies of hungry customers,  
 No more cap-in-hand – now slate-in-gait...

Something then occurred to him  
 While shinning up his self-assembled ladder:  
 'What if', instead of cutting down this beanstalk,  
 I stops right here and opens up a shop?  
 With a fee fie foe and fiddle-dee-fum  
 He polishes his nest-egg, sells it on,  
 Builds himself a brick-and-mortar castle,  
 All terrace and turret, sets to work  
 To Capitalise on fortune, shore up profits,  
 Still promising himself, unlike Mister Kipps,  
 He'll not forget his promise, why he begun this:  
 To make enough to share with the starved,  
 The dispossessed, the workhouse mice –  
 But before he sets to this transformation  
 Of his slum-sunken, broken-spirit city,  
 Needs-must bake enough dough to leaven it with bread.

But when the day comes he's got enough to spare,  
 Married with three nippers, a fourth'n on the way,  
 Such a busy man, managed to expand  
 So's he pays two boys a pittance wage  
 To run his rag-shop for him while  
 He gains weight and cigars,  
 Comfy cushion days plotting mighty schemes  
 To expand his little empire, swell its bounteous borders,  
 Incorporate more shops, more boys, more trade,  
 But most of all make sure nothing's given  
 Without the promise of more in return -  
 'Trouble with old Robin Hood,' thinks Joe,  
 'He had no business sense - I must  
 Shore up me' capital, lift me' offspring up  
 To a better level than slums I sprouted from!'

The city, his kith, but who'd favour cousins  
 Over closer kin? His empire would pass  
 To his eldest son per primogeniture  
 To build on it in turn for his own children,  
 A dynasty spawned, one with common touch,  
 Nostalgia for downtrodden origins:  
 Its alms embrace Charity, inflate Church funds  
 With copyrighted coffers, orphans parish-sponsored  
 To shadow Steeple Sweepers; workhouse Chars  
 Gifted brand new mops; damned tramps handed  
 Dry pairs of togs; wreaths made of lilies-  
 of-the-gutter, laid on dromedaries of rag-bone carts  
 Trailed by processions of grateful underdogs  
 Lusting piping soup kitchens  
 To be baptised in gin, brimstone and broth -  
 'All this generosity to be ladled out by me:  
 I'll patent it Shanks's Charity!'

What's become of Short Shanks since?  
 He's prospered, passed on through the needle's eye  
 'cross Thames' Styx to Heaven's Pillar'd Halls -

His kith and kin keep building high,  
 Lost touch with the common ground,  
 Legions of ants in a brush's bristles,  
 Lost sight of microscopic battles  
 Of citizens who've lost sight of the sky  
 For marble towers blotting it from view;  
 Draping from scaffoldings like public laundry  
 Banner-legends fly: You Too  
 Can Scale These Heights If You Grit Your Nose  
 To the Grindstone - Profit as You'd Be Profited By!  
 Stash Your Four and Twenty Blackbirds in the Right Pie!

iii. Three True Obscuritans

– *The Hermit of Hercules Buildings*

Once heard tales of an unfashionable recluse  
 Hid like a fiend in Hercules Buildings,  
 Thirty years or more;  
 His curtains never twitched to spy  
 Inspiration in people-bustled streets:  
 His was in-growing; head-clouds parted daily  
 Gifting insights into all things: Visions  
 Of lost Albion, Jerusalem grass-green  
 Growing in the grimy, gin-fumed streets  
 And airless *Daisy*, *Daisy* alleyways;  
 Emerald wisteria climbing dirt-brick walls,  
 Seeking sunlight like a thinker seeks the truth –  
 A resurrecting Eden strangling black chimneys  
 With seething creepers, gloriously blemishing  
 Wren's Capital of marble in forests of mouldering trees –

They say Mister Blake rarely left his digs  
 Except at night when nightingales warbled  
 On the chattering Heath, then to consult  
 With Angels and shoulder-perched fleas

As to details of limitless prophecies,  
 Nothing but tobacco and Eastern teas  
 To stimulate the Hampstead Shaman –  
 Thirty-odd years with the curtains drawn  
 So light from within could burst un-assuaged;  
 No noise but the squeak and creak of his press  
 Printing each word in indelible ink  
 Impressed on our minds ever since –  
 Why should one who strides with Angels care  
 Whether his works see daylight; spine-  
 Crack like brittle leaves in autumn air?

– *The Turpentine Prophet*

I've a dream-fired friend, struggling writer,  
 Pure spit and spirit, distemper, turpentine,  
 Can't sell his novel 'cause publishers won't read it  
 Unless the manuscript is put in type –  
 He's got Socialism thumping in his heart,  
 Rumbling like a thunder in his belly,  
 But for all his revolutionary fervour,  
 Still must bow his knees to earn his crust –  
 As he does for the unleavened on his Sundays –  
 Eighteen hour days painting walls of betters,  
 Plastering and filling up the cracks,  
 While like-ravines ravage his scamped hands  
 Chiselling his physog with fatigue –  
 A messianic journeyman with cultured sensibilities  
 Reduced to scrimping from menial means  
 A second coat of matt Socialist vision –  
 A skidder on a class-transcending mission,  
 His workmates strip him down – they'll not listen:  
 Prefer to scamp their makeshift lives  
 Shoddily coating bricks of a prison,  
 Slaking on stout, plastered as Paris;  
 Place depleting capital on deceptive bets,  
 Slave to keep themselves in bread and cigarettes –

No thoughts on fighting for the right of labour  
 To employ their souls and minds as well as bodies;  
 No burning desire in their turpentine hearts  
 To rent sublime swirls, twirling intricacies  
 Of flora on wallpaper they sloppily paste  
 To peel and blister: the patterns of waste.

– *The Ghost of a Poet*

Another friend, should say the ghost of one,  
 Suffered much, swallowed pride's stale crust,  
 Him and his flint-and-roses missus,  
 Something borrowed bond, and something blue,  
 Doing without for scrimped months at a time  
 So's he could turn his poverty to poetry –  
 Little in the two words after all –  
 Before his calloused hands blueberried up from graft  
 To grip something gentlemanly as a pen;  
 A tool, let's not forget, more suited to  
 Pianist-like spatulas of better furnished men.  
 Was it worth it? Yes, each bitter, bleeding line;  
 But meagre recognition of tepid-inked reviews  
 Scarce enough to save him from his cancer fancies,  
 So he hurled himself from off a Cornish cliff,  
 A poet in his prime of death;  
 Leaving his flinty trouble-and-strife sixty bob in savings,  
 Double what they'd giftedly eke  
 On an average, tummy-grumbling week.

– *Those Intractable Art Martyrs*

Only hope of recognition for their paper labours  
 Posthumous, I'll bet you, it'll come  
 Decades down the Circle line of time,  
 Long past their unmarked paupers' graves  
 Nameless as that unknown Tommy's tomb  
 Who got it in the cork from a Dervish poking fork –

Leave ghosted legacies in inner-city cemeteries,  
 No towering memorials to soldiers of the pen and brush;  
 Only those receptive to clamouring cries  
 Of spiritual picket-lines - Bow Bells of the other side -  
 To witness their mute protests, blank placards,  
 Haunting the Abbey with spectral petitions  
 To be with the Remembered in that Corner -  
 A Purgatory of posthumous spectating  
 How, short of shouting red sedition  
 Like Marx from the pulpit of Speakers' Corner,  
 Could self-respecting hair-shirts scrimp crusts of consolation  
 From dead-ends of idealistic minds?  
 Nagging conviction: *It IS possible!*  
 John Lilburne proselytised so;  
 Winstanley set digging its foundations  
 And might have wrestled up the roots but for blight  
 Of spiked Putney debates dousing his light  
 Shining, a time, in Buckinghamshire;  
 The Chartists and Unions clamoured for its cause;  
 Keir Hardie fused its inspiration to exact  
 Literate leaps and bounds of a dauntless autodidact -  
 Might have made it had our burgeoning numbers  
 Taken up suffrage, not invitations  
 To pontificating parties' teapot politics  
 Where Mr. Quintus Fabius did the pouring;  
 The intricate clatters of crockery on trays:  
 Idle silver singers of cake-stand days.

#### iv. The Sea-Green Line

I commuted along the City and South London;  
 Not retreat, digress, a mental pilgrimage  
 In electric-flickered carriage underground  
 To find new perspectives on the glum city above,  
 Alight at the ghost station of my conscience  
 In shadows of Progress' echoing tomb...  
 Followed the stations on the curved roof carriage:

MOORGATE...OLD STREET...ANGEL....KING'S CROSS...

Hours clattered by, found myself dazed  
 On sepulchral platform whose designated name  
 Had yet been assigned - lost, stumbled blind  
 Through combing catacombs, labyrinthine tunnels  
 Circling tile-scaled walls, till I tripped  
 Onto another nameless platform, un-haunted -  
 Then out the char-black mouth of the howling tunnel,  
 The elephantine roar of an approaching monster  
 Screeching into view on the track trailing tongue  
 From the tunnel's mouth - the metallic Leviathan  
 Heaved slowly to a halt, hissing, sniffing  
 Like a mighty, miffed Trojan bull;  
 I entered with trepidation sealing myself in -  
 Soon as seated the carriage gathered pace,  
 Whisking me into darkness undiscovered.

On the carriage wall the artery of this line  
 Bled from black to a sea-green shade,  
 So it appeared in the light's moth-hovered glow -  
 To my dumbfounded sights I read the names  
 Of ghost stations not heard of before,  
 Not in all my days in this dreary city -  
 Were they building another City, underground?  
 The next stop tantalisingly called  
**LILBURNE COMMON** - then, **WINSTANLEY ROAD**,  
 I scanned along: **ROBERT OWEN JUNCTION**,  
**SMILLIE CIRCUS**, **PANKHURST SQUARE** -  
 I'd discovered another London off the Sea-Green Line  
 Where black City and Metropolitan purple fused  
 Like two honing arteries at the cardio-junction  
 Of the beating heart of another city  
 Only accessed through the tube - alighted  
 To discover what alternative city waited over-ground  
 At the summit-light of the spiralling stairway.

## v. The Secret City

First thing that struck my startled pies  
 Blinking in to sunlit vision,  
 The cleanness of the pavements and streets;  
 Tall stucco terraces towering high immaculate  
 Like mighty marble monuments,  
 Vast statues built to stand the test of time and tribulation,  
 Lived-in by levelled citizens, each  
 Of equal, immutable importance to their city;  
 A splinter of the city-Soul, vital shard  
 In the vibrant sparks of productive industry  
 Catering for all, furnishing lives  
 With mortal comforts plenty, to empower  
 The people on a level ground so they might strive for skies  
 Of spiritual nourishment, develop dormant faculties  
 Neglected long ago in dark Capital times  
 When Mister Bloggs pilfered his neighbour's crust,  
 Cajoled profits, fattened his coffers  
 Not for great works' public benefit  
 But for its own in-growing pleasure -

This new secret City built on compassion's  
 Incorruptible foundations, indomitably shod -  
 On each terrace innumerable names  
 Etched in the stone, beatific tributes  
 To lives breathing within the slabs of brick:  
 Here lives Mr and Mrs Such-n-such  
 Who mortar bricks with happiness and laughter;  
*Here lives the Such-n-suches who share each day*  
*Making cakes rise with optimistic conversations;*  
*Here live some children who photograph their dreams*  
*To inspire their sleeping parents;*  
*Here dwells a family mesmerised*  
*By swirling dreams wallpapering their days;*  
 So bright inscriptions spread throughout singing streets  
 And billboards bore new slogans:  
 "GIVING IS LIVING, LIVING IS GIVING; "

“THE CAMEL STALLS AT THE NEEDLE’S EYE”;  
 “MONEY IS THE ROOT OF ALL ENMITY”;  
 “PROPHETS, NOT PROFITS”; “TRUE WORK EMPLOYS  
 OUR SOULS AND MINDS”; “FILL YOUR HOUSE  
 WITH WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL AND USEFUL’...

I, startled tourist, now panting breathless  
 In delight at stumbling on this lost Utopia –  
 What pleased me most, the absence of shops  
 Or haggling markets, crash of trading tills,  
 No more cons of cash for faulty objects  
 Or food past best, no wheeler-dealing  
 In dodgy goods past kosher quota,  
 No stealing or need for any thieving,  
 No tricks or cons on browsing customers,  
 Trusting or desperate – this city has no desperate –  
 Public services publicly run,  
 Never before had I seen so many trams!

An absence of pubs for people punch-drunk  
 On conversation: *‘course you know why they’ve never  
 Got round to a revolution in the other London, don’t you?  
 It’s tea, that’s what it is. Makes ‘em apathetic,  
 Complacent-like; summing in the brew –  
 It’s their Spiritual Gin ‘see, make no bones about it  
 – This is it...  
 Gin was never so in-si-di-ous as tea is,  
 Makes you feel all warm inside, content in your place  
 – This is it...  
 Without the educative need next day  
 For a hair of the dog – ‘Course havin’ said that  
 I miss it meself, ‘speshly in the mornins,  
 – Oh yes...  
 But getting’ up to a salmon-sky dawn, no false one,  
 Nippers singing in the streets, whole bleedin’ city  
 Greetin’ you as one big happy fam’ly – none of this  
 Flesh ‘n’ blood lark they string out back there,  
 No, here your neighbour’s as like your brother,*

*Nº we all muck in togever, for common good,  
 No nippers squealing with empty bellies, no poverty,  
 – This is it...  
 Nah. I can get by without tea.*

This secret London: Society of intelligence  
 Prised long by pamphlet-thumbing Fabian firesides  
 And planted in coal miners' torch-haloed heads,  
 Now a sharp reality, well-defined as sun,  
 A hovering pit-lamp in the white night sky:  
 By the time on my watch it was well past nine  
 At night, yet daylight poured its yolk on stucco turrets  
 Glistening with magic promise, urban Camelot  
 Captured in blazing daubs as if by Pre-Raphaelite  
 Brush on white-glossed canvas; shimmering  
 Ideality; poetry tangibly manifest  
 In this unlikeliest of cities – a Parousia  
 Of pillar boxes, pigeons and fairground laughter.

vi Keir Hardie Street

Then – well stone the crows! I scarce believed  
 My pies as I beheld the street's bright sign:  
**KEIR HARDIE STREET** in pristine white  
 Ivory lettering on glistening coal black;  
 For minutes the shining white letters dazzled me  
 Till I felt I'd topple from the kerb, tumble off  
 Like Whittington with his tags and baggage  
 Billeted with classless scraps and famished cat  
 Only to rise and prosper – a vision I had  
 Lit up before me in piercing mist on this street,  
 Of its gifted namesake, his pit-face rise  
 From Dark Satanic collieries, Caledonian obscurities,  
 Into light of politics, calloused hand campaigning,  
 Who strove to lift the people with winging words,

Help all prosper, not just his kith and kin  
 And own interests but emphatically the whole –  
 Humanity primo franca , descended  
 From the dust and ribs of Common-held Eden  
 Corrupted by tilted scales of serpentine greed  
 Hissing its syllables: *Capitalism*  
 Spouting from billboards on peeling city walls  
 Whilst Socialism mutters to itself in draughty halls!

In Whittington's city, 'mongst the Pillar'd Mansions  
 Of Wren's grand vistas and esplanades,  
 Another fire catching the wind ignited  
 Not in Pudding Lane, but Lanarkshire,  
 Its touch paper smoking in the undernourished clutch  
 Of a baker's cadaverous delivery boy  
 Waylaid amid errands by sudden lightning flash  
 Striking him down in well-trammelled tracks  
 As that streak did to Paul on his way to Damascus!

Down the line from Communist Christ,  
 'Head Leveller', as coined his cousin Baptist,  
 (Though one might trace right back to Solon's  
 Shaking Off of Burdens, Seisaktheia)  
 A line of Social Soldiers, Outlaws, Prophets  
 Strove to oppose Rule of Profits,  
 Chivalrously crying Redistribution!  
 Thomas Beckett itching with idealisms in  
 His hair-shirt, sandling beggars' feet;  
 Robin Goodfellow in Lincoln-green hood  
 Stilling the bow-hand; Thomas More  
 Dreaming castles in the air where citizens lived  
 According to their needs, not wants, a doctrine  
 Of dock-leaf and ditchwater practised by  
 Roger Crabb, the original Mad Hatter  
 Who gave his hat-profits to the poor;  
 The Black and Sea Greens' proselytising;  
 The Buckinghamshire Diggers striving

To plough cloddish thoughts of Arden anew;  
 Robert Owen's Chartists; Messianic miners;  
 Marx's Synoptic Social Gospels  
 Long-pantomimed in low pews and high-brow bowers  
 Where the Rich man shared his hymns  
 With trembling soap-hands of Fabians;  
 Where ever the Parson went hand in hand  
 With the Mammon alms of the Owner of Land:  
 From this union of penny-pinching piety  
 Sprung the Molloch we term as Charity!

Time again for Commoners' crop-head opposition  
 To titled Abusers of Privilege,  
 Not seen since old Roundhead times:  
*For a sullen and scowling class sitting apart  
 Is preferable to a besotted and unthinking class  
 Dragged hither and thither by unscrupulous guides.\**

Turn the other cheek We may,  
 But after we've over-turned the rustling tables  
 And spilt the stinging metals to the floor,  
 Turned stone to bread, water into wine,  
 Sent camels packing back out through the needle's eye  
 Along with class, property, tyrannies of Kings  
 Until the grind and clamour of industry is mute  
 And we hear Angels singing to the sound of dropping pins.

vii. News from Somewhere

The vision's light faltered into darkness where it shrank,  
 Flickering dimly: now haloed a pit lamp  
 In whose wavering flicker a slave-black hand  
 Scratched Arabesque characters with a pin on coal wall,  
 Thereupon paraded what might be misconstrued  
 As primitive cave etchings, the concentrating hand  
 Breathing life into menageries of shorthand shadow-animals  
 (Was this the etymology for Pitman?) -

Once the pin-scratched scripture was shod  
 His gollywog lips blew the coal-dust away  
 Like a lady to avoid her letter blotting,

This vision soon returned its sparkled focus  
 Glinting, a silver plate catching the sun,  
 Whitening my sight: I saw a gloomy street  
 In place of that bright, brilliant one before,  
 To a slightly built, dowdy young man  
 Hunched before a bookshop window  
 Squinting his dot eyes at picture books  
 Tantalisingly spine-spread before him:  
 James Keir Hardie strained to read printed fictions  
 At the tail-end of autodidactic mission –  
 But he'd also learnt to read between the letters  
 Of untold stories, editors' omissions!

Fired by spark of sensed injustice first hand  
 This street's namesake threw off Calvinism's shirt,  
 Its two tier saved/damned parallels to class  
 And learnt to speak in temperance meetings,  
 Then politics: Member for North-West Ham,  
 Took his seat in Parliament in blue Scotch cap and tweeds;  
*Mrs. Grundy almost fainted when*  
*She scanned the costume of the new-comer\**  
 But for her smelling salts –  
 So offended by this chiselled, bearded pauper  
 Replete in blue serge double-breasted jacket,  
 Fawn-coloured trousers, striped flannel shirt,  
 Scarf tied round collar in a sailor's knot.

There stood shabbily-clad young Keir  
 Gifted this insight into his own future,  
 Oh what a story it promised to be;  
 His brown-dot pies squinted further to read  
 His yet-to-happen histories riveting his eyes  
 On the breathless pages in the bookshop window:  
*Sent down the coal mine when a bit laddie of eight...*

*Unable to sign his name on the membership pledge  
 Of the Good Templers... so ashamed he set to work  
 To learn to write... – what lightning he'd write –  
 The fisherfolk apostles in the New Testament  
 Would find themselves more at home in the company  
 Of Keir Hardie than in any other member of the House...  
 Emphatically a man of the future... of course,  
 For here he was reading his own mapped future  
 As all seers deem their mysterious right to do,  
 And what sententious, storm-filled speeches,  
 Thundering Das Kapital-bashing sermons  
 He'd holler from his pulpit bench in Parliament  
 To the battering of his calloused fists:  
 The still small voice of Jesus the Communist  
 Stole over the earth like a soft refreshing breeze  
 Carrying healing wherever it went... \**

Then in a stroke he tumbled down by the mighty blow  
 Of pugilist opponents' vocal wrecking-ball;  
 A drubbing by the jingoes! A frightened gasp  
 Came from the mouth of the ragamuffin stooped  
 By the bookshop window, loaves in arm,  
 Smudge of breath on the sunless glass  
 That started melting before him, trickling  
 Back to grains of sand till dissolved away  
 Stripping the books of their glass palisade;  
 Long-un-fingered, tantalising pages  
 Wrestling in the warm wind of the streets  
 Struggling with muscles of pugilist gusts  
 Turning swiftly page by page  
 As Keir's hungry eyes read fast  
 Without pause for their enraptured need  
 Of published future, not posthumous,  
 Precognitive – but the ending petered out:  
 In his twilight years, having been first  
 Labour Leader, thence having passed on  
 The baton to another; a harassed old white-haired  
 Lion of politics, Aslan of Socialism

Fatally mauled  
 By the mocking goblins in the Commons,  
 Crawling into retirement's den  
 'Mid mundane thuds of book-packing -  
 Books marked birth, death and the bit in-between  
 For centuries; life is, was, had always been  
 One bookend-ed shelf - but now the books were free  
 Flying into the streets with a flapping of pages  
 For words were always meant as wings  
 To lift humanity, or prolong Its hesitation -  
 What hope without imagination?

Dreams and ideas are still staple diet  
 Of the more thoughtful of those lacking clothes and food,  
 Social prospects and education -  
 Plus opiums past, present and future:  
 Religion's 'moth-eaten brocade' for one,  
 Not forgetting that manipulated, sour-mouthed monster  
 Politics, Behemoth of the Modern,  
 Rung-grasping Grappler of the social climber  
 From Parliamentarians down to Whigs,  
 Fluttered the banners of Social Justice  
 With scamping small print whispering:  
 'Oneupmanship for All; All for Oneupmanship' -

Only manifestoes scratched out through  
 Hard grafted truths of injustice at first hand  
 Ever meant what they said and what they said  
 Was all they meant, no scrimp-print clause;  
 Now one such scribe, before his time,  
 Witnessed the truth too stark lightning-bright  
 To be inked on paper - the books were spilling  
 Out on the street, pages winging  
 Into flocks of paper doves tumbling  
 Throughout the pin-silent Pillar'd Mansions,  
 Tree-lined vistas, levelled esplanades  
 Of this inimitable City; little Keir,

Scruffy, unkempt as a guttersnipe from Dickens,  
 Knelt on the ground to finger pages  
 Of soft-bound books apparently blank,  
 Blissfully free of the weight of inked words -  
 Something like a fresh summer breeze  
 Ruffled out from the fluttering pages;  
 Its only words, a title: *News from Somewhere*,  
 First and last bound product of a Classless State  
 Where the Public controlled the Means of Publication.  
 Up got little Keir, white face no more  
 Knitted with quandaries born from injustice,  
 His eyes seemed shining, edified, free  
 Of resentments of darker times; now he,  
 And I - stood mind-lit on a corner -  
 Could see clearly with illumined pies  
 The point was to do not preach or write  
 Beliefs, but enact like dream-soldiers of old  
 In deed as well as speech; words can't be  
 Ends in themselves; to aim for the dream  
 Is the path to perfection, the dream put in us  
 To inspire us in building Lilburne and Blake's  
 Jerusalem from the rubble of Satanic Mills,  
 Just as our cloud-cousins did with this spirited  
 City turned upside down, shored up  
 The track of time down the Sea-Green Line,  
 Where folk glide off the ground on wings  
 For there's no need for feet  
 On KEIR HARDIE STREET.

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Notes:

\* quotes from Mr. Kier Hardie M.P., W. T. Stead (ed.), *Coming Men on Coming Questions* No: VI, (May, 18, 1905).

'moth-eaten brocade': from 'religion: that vast moth-eaten brocade', *Aubade* by Philip Larkin.

Allan Jackdaw is a fictitious alter-ego of the author, a motif personifying the struggling working-class writer, based loosely on poet John Davidson ('Thirty Bob A Week') and novelist Robert Tressell (*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*).

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The Do Not Press, Don't Think of Tigers, 2001, ed. Peter Guttridge  
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## Previous publications

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Feed a Cold, Starve a Fever, Sixties Press, 2004  
Picaresque – a play for voices, Survivors' Press, 2005

## Giving Light

When women give birth, the Spanish say  
They're *giving light* - and it's said  
The newborn child comes into the day  
Armed with a loaf of bread.