

Selected Shorter Poems

Mel Witherden

Many of my shorter poems found their way into the longer works with thematic links. Here are some which didn't.

POINTS OF INTEREST – poems from the Sixties

To demonstrate my uncontrolled admiration for the modern idiom

I shall render the entire Government
Records Office into utter blank verse
And publish it in hard backs brick by brick

I shall scan the whole of Liverpool's Dockland
and a ferry-load of native poets responding
to it as if it were National Assistance money
In a single reading

I shall compose an ode down
Trinity Street Cambridge
Using paving Stones
As my stanza form

I shall write a concrete poem the length of the M1
Ma king dra ma
tic use of the
four lane struc ture

i shall embody Cleopatra's Needle in
Victoria's embankment in my work
As a universal symbol
And straightly deny any pointed
Reference to sovereign facts of life

I shall take a verbal sounding of the bottom of the Irish Sea
in fathomless six-foot lines

I shall adopt the word as an ultimate
Expression of metaphor
And word through the words of Word
Wording for words that I can word

i shall invest my fancy at oxford
in a cavalier sonnet
for charles lamenting the loss
of the capital

I shall transpose into narrative poetry the initials of all
those holding tickets for the Cup Final at Wembley
in 1968 emphasising regardless of feet the mass
hysteria of never knowing where there should be
a full stop

And when they publish my epic comma
in Penguin Modern Poets Volume Ninety Seven
I shall tell them all without emotion that
I wasn't joking,

1968

Cardboard party

Having nothing better to leave
than the party
I took a look outside and saw you all
enclosed in reflections on the
windows round the room
it seemed I might be crawling round
the inside walls of someone else's
polished cornflake pack
and at that stage I should think
I probably was
but I tried very hard to relax on the floor
pressing nervous fingerprints
onto my sole transparent-consolation
that if you'd been in the least concerned
you could have seen me yourself
stuck out there inside without you;
I'd thought there was something there between us
less brittle than the glass
so we kicked around the formula
for turning cornflakes inside out
till you said how boring it was
to talk all the time;
then I tried kicking you about instead
and stirred the only crackle of feeling
I heard all night
which was for the most part
as smooth as the walls –
if only I'd thought to open the window
you might have disappeared.

One way or another we kept up the thiamine-niacin diet
required to sustain our partial liking
and consumed so many bowlfuls of ourselves
that we finally realised we could take anything
but only when there was nothing left to take;
when I left the box by the dotted line
at 2.35 a.m.
I couldn't help thinking our reflections
might just hang about
where they were until daylight
and I didn't eat breakfast again this morning

1968

Once

where did you hide when I kissed you
slightly that first and last time
wanting you so much to stay?
were you talking to your drawings of people
who saw me through shaded lines of their own?
did you find that they left you alone
as often as I felt with you?
can't you see for once that it's always
almost time for one of us to go?

I watched you wait for the last grains to move
as beach crabs hid from your toes,
and laughed at you bringing home bunches of berries
to keep till the leaves turned brown;
then you played for hours with a kitten
that ran through your fingers like sand
and sat with your pencil
hoping to sketch me burned down
with a slow cigarette by my hand.

once in the imperfect past
when I wanted to change all my lines
for light and be a part of your scene
you drew me so far that we both disappeared,
and once when I'd just touched your fingers
and nearly your tears,
god, how I wanted you then,
but wants were not what you needed to hear
and once was never enough for me.

1968, 2010

Bicycles

tonight I was passed by a man who understood
the mechanism of thought: he rode
a green bike and was telling a girl on hers
what he knew - of responses and factors, things
he hoped might disguise the depth of his love;
then he saw into me as I stepped in his path,
and he swerved and paused, collating the facts;
and he looked at the girl on her bike, and they smiled.
so perhaps she understood mechanics too.

1968

Tintagel

“Why don’t we just get away to the sea for the week?”
It’s the kind of thing you do in a flagellating moment.
“Yes? Right away?” “Yes, right away,” she said.
“Down to Tintagel. There’ll be no one there this time of year.”
We could search for the ghosts of the old kingdom there,
If that is really what we lack so much.
“Where would we stay? Wouldn’t it be difficult right now?”
Guest houses boarded up against the unseasonable minstrel;
The impervious cobbles resigned to a stoic register.
“If we take the tent...” and a sleeping bag. A frying pan and beans,
We could watch as the tide washes its daily wreckage
Over our feet and heads, hang up bits of seaweed
In place of the sun. “I’ve always wanted to go...
Such a beautiful name for a place to live.”
The castle’s blistering ruins of the Ministry of Works;
Shades of the beach poet scratching in the crystal rocks.
“Have you got the money for the train?” “We can hitch just as
well.”
And enormous intercourse with a few of the nation’s
Most interesting bores, all of them disguised with places to go.
“I can’t stay here any more with you. We must get away,
From ourselves, if you like.” “Yes, together.” right away.
The sea shriveling the pebbles, the two of us dancing with spray
Frying chips. She’s right. We should go sometime.
“Please, won’t you come? For the change. The air.”
We could talk. Talk it out. Varying the flagellation.
“Just a few days?” Our love struggles in the grubby paws
Of a painted mythology, jangles inanely in a name.

1970

Match

My god it's hot in down town New York
where crazy swaying concrete slabs scrape the haze
and shoppers are clubbed senseless
between air conditioned stores
there's iced coke on every corner
but no one lives here - do they?

in Times Square round about noon
a man shouts out briefly in protest
and pain, a cry like a darting flame
that sucks in air from the roaring city
other vaster news printed in lights
rolls round endlessly above him
the temperature, rising slightly, hangs on another wall
measured nearby it hits 99 degrees

half a mile away on East River apartment blocks simmer
people live there stained black and mad by the heat
that drums like a jack hammer at their windows
life is running short and night will be the time to kill

the man they scratched from the sidewalk,
whatever colour he was first,
has only finished black.

over at United Nations Plaza
a tourist red with heat and rage and fear
dumps abuse like napalm on a bearded passer-by
"Jesus, Jesus, you're one of those against the war
you Commies hate America," says the prophet with his fist,
mistaking who is red and who is dead this afternoon

the man on the sidewalk in Times Square at noon
has missed the war
but lived with killing
spilled from his TV.
he slips into the city:
hatred packs the subway,
his pulse races like trains;
danger's worn as an armband -
fear hunts the barrelled darkness;
anxiety fingers the trigger.
heat fights his wits
yet this time he fires first.

down at the Canyon, out at the caves

they burn you with the cool sanity of gain
outside the sun holds a gun at your head
should you think of escape.
the San Francisco hippies two years on
bear their breasts and beg,
and bless you with their love;
it costs a quarter and a smile
but you'd better be prepared to give.
the Indian drunk at Fisherman's Wharf
makes a stab at the price of a drink,
rolling like the boats on the quay
with a knife in the hands he can't control,
and somewhere else another stranger grabs your arm
to tell you the crap you live with if you're black -
like the LA Greyhound Station gang
who only want you for everything you've got.

in Times Square
a man takes a can of gas from a plastic bag;
when he spins the cap off vapour pours into the shakey air
when he raises the can at the scalding street
he hardly draws a glance.
when petrol rushes down his face and arms and shirt
he's cooled at last;
he disappears in haze
as the air boils the fuel from his flesh,
but he dies from the modest flame of a single match.

1970/1974

CIRCLES – Poems from decades of neglect

Watford Gap

He set out against a sluice of speed
to travel the veins
that motorways tame,
and carried the can
that a motoring man
might, in straits, be thought to need:
hardshouldering laws
and hunched by his course
he turned his back
on the empty tank
which roadmaps called the North.
near Watford Gap, a place of sorts,

where roadways are outclassed by rail
a figure came out
of a contrary route -
silver his mouth,
the spoon of the South,
and blind as the sleepers that marked his trail.
The hunchback gave way
in thunder and spray,
sapped from the vein
to capillaried lanes
and borne away by a pantograph wind,
as lost and as numb as the land.

1985

M8

After the introspection of Spaghetti Junction
and the A74's spent spiritual sprawl,
there's a comfortable route which knows its purpose;
it spans the country with the reassurance of a hand rail,
leaps international airports with the ease of flight.
Here's no continental epic of personal discovery:
coast to coast means motion on a human scale
that flicks between fields and factories, slips in
among people's lives like a suburban train.
There goes the A720 and there the 801,
brand name numbers with more integrity than perfumes,
cars and jeans; and this is Livingstone, I presume.

I'm surely not the first visitor to Edinburgh
to ask where I can find a drink this time of night.
On the campus living is pared down
to an essence of luxury, lacking nothing
but a kettle, a teaspoon and an engineer.
The machine for auto-pasta
and bangers is outa order;
the one for crisps resists,
and you need 50ps
to release frothy chocolate and teas.
I've made a clean sweep of the place twice tonight.
and every cupboard is empty except
except for a black plastic bag and a broom.

(When young I had a thirst to be
away at university
to find the person who was me;
now decayed and decades later
I have trouble to locate a
single sodding cup of tea.)

Each building is so thin in the dark
it could crush us with its emptiness
(watch out that no one drops
the engineering blocks;
and what are the odds that that is
the actual Department
of Actuarial Mathematics?)
In the loneliness of academia
biologists unwrap
the mystery of human awareness
synapse by synapse,
as oblivious of us as
cells are of them.

Physicists predict
seabed currents
and the weight
and population of the universe:
but what if we *are* the sole
intelligence in space -
isn't this the sparest,
scariest place of all?

Tonight each private footstep's incomplete,
A whole city's disappointments are exposed;
The last one to leave won't need to be discreet,
Making friends with nobody but the roads.

1993

Palindrome
(for Dave, Justine and Sue)

That day we found the roofless house beside
the yawning River Robe as it wound down
slowly back to town, that was not the first.
A guardian crow stumped and flapped about
the crumbling chimney stack, making its signs,
and ivy wrote its lines inside the walls,
brushing flecks of light and shade on flaking stone.
Our voices danced in an ancient courtyard
whose songs again rang on down unseen stairs,
the past clinging to us like an echo.

The writer classifies his Irish dreams:
one is for the wild swans at Coole, whose metre
beats like crashing wings; one is Daedalus
and Dublin days on streets that run in streams;
and two tramps in a barren land, waiting
with a bicycle for any kind of change.

The singer sighs to find a nighttime when
her music is an instrument of change,
when, amid the chink of glasses, drinking stills:
her voice will prize the patrons' cheers and tears;
they'll ache with knowing simply what she sings
and love her always as they love the beer.

The artist draws back from the ones she loves
and blames the light for things she does not see;
if only when the lake mists seap across
the sun, melting mountains into islands,
she too could flare into translucent fire,
cascade in colours that would fill her world.

Later in mountains we encountered
indescribable beauty: plainly, we
may one day bring our dreams back here again.

1994

Forever

In the poetry of common speech
I walked down the street.
It was straight, except at bends and corners
and so wide
that I feared it would go one forever.
Later I thought it was short.

At the back of the tobacconists a dog
wearing a bowler hat was easily
absurd;
but when the Zen
Buddhist asked for a light
I was less sure.
And the giant golden ball
blocking the Boulevard de Concorde
in both directions was real to me at least.
I witnessed a daring assault on the Bristol and West
when two masqued investors
escaped with the promise of free cash tomorrow
and a leaflet about discounts for first time buyers,
I was there for the ram raiders at Curry's
who drove between the car-proof bollards
to batter the door with a shopping trolley
and market forces.
It seemed for a while I was part of it all.

I saw someone I didn't much want to
speak to, and grudgingly said hello;
and then made friends with a woman in her seventies
whose umbrella was jammed half way down,
and we smiled with slight exaggeration
and the genuine joy of helped and helper
in a town which seems not to care much
about that sort of thing.

For a while my route followed the canal,
but, paranoid that I am,
I believed it was following me.
I imagined I'd lived in a small glass house next door
to a stone mason. He never threw so much as a glance
in my direction; and I resented being overlooked.

I fell in love with someone unattainable
every time I passed a florist;
we were always walking in slightly
different directions or at different speeds;

sometimes she was driving a red mini
or sitting near the front of a bus,
so we rarely ran into one another, as it were.
The best bit was remembering later
how long I had yearned for her,
or the motion of her skirt against her legs
as I overtook her in High Street;
somehow this was the nearest
I ever got to the ineffable.

I knew too well I would not meet a woman
I'd loved when she was a skinny virgin
(and I was, well, a skinny virgin too).
She lives in an English university town,
or Russia, and probably never thinks of me at all;
but if she did, she wouldn't find me among
these dull suburban streets,
or on the barren steps to the desolate flats
where she lived for a while.
Regret, like drink, wrecks lives, I thought,
so when I paused at the Rose and Crown
my limit was two wishes with a dash of hope
in a pair of rose tinted glasses.

I wanted to remember the whole journey
as a single continuous story,
but it ran
episodic
in streets
with long missing passages between them,
straight and dull enough to lose attention,
hedges brushing closely on either side.

I called in at the barbers in Gordon Road;
"Are you growing your hair?"
the passers by had demanded;
"no," I replied, "that's God you're thinking of;
I just let him use my head."
This was all so much like life itself
or the passing of seasons:
a passive experience of change,
watching it grow, and holding back
till the last possible moment;
then living with dire consequences
till the next inevitable hair cut.

It was easy to choose the route at intersections
though doubts about their rightness
lasted with me through to the next decision.

Cemetery Junction was a cross roads once,
but a roundabout today.

I expected intuition here, but all exits
were blocked by its symbolism
and a combination of traffic volume
and roadworks; the only way through
was over the railings and down among
the neat rows of respectful headstones.

I looked at my watch and found
it was Judgement Day;
the earth opened up all around
revealing grave after grave
filled with nothing but stones.
A departing group of mourners
were fiercely condemning the vicar
for judging them too harshly.

It never got dark the whole trip,
so it never got light again either;
but clouds of newsprint swept in
from the West, and it rained the kind of rain
that doesn't touch you if you keep on going.
I wasn't aware of arriving, and never got anywhere
except the places and people I'd passed by.
Some of us grew tired towards the end
and caught a bus and the flu the rest of the way;
and, in the poetry of common speech,
I couldn't explain where I had been going
or why the end lacked a twist.

If this was Heaven it wasn't worth the trip;
if this was Hell it wasn't worth the anticipation;
if this was a conclusion it was all too easy to miss.

1996

Shadows

Children playing by the old canal,
so many smiles that Forever's the time
they call the rest of their lives.
They might have been me.

Young lovers laughing in the park
secure as the night, and dark and still,
they know one another so well
That was a place to be.

Couple on a seat casting long shadows
on the lawn; their silence keeps dull secrets
of lives and love left incomplete.
I hardly noticed them before.

1997

PARALLEL LINES – Poems from the turn of the Century

Fields

A field is an open space of closure,
the balance of distance and containment
which frames the first and second things you see.

Effortless first memories explode to fill
attention like the earliest atom:
great horses rode the downs in primeval white
observed from the back of the family Ford;
your whole world was the playtime grass when your legs
were bare and imagination still vast,
though hunched up now, shrunken and spare;
you taunted a boy till his failed future
burst like a boil, though perhaps it was you,
friendless and small, who were scalded by malice,
and blinded by the reign of kicks and shame.

School fields are your first insight into state
sponsored terrorism; they have a sound
like the shrieking blackboard chalk that mark you
for life with trophies of fake confidence,
and honoured rituals of pain. Meanwhile
on grassy scraps on crap estates the council
slaps exclusion orders on children's games;
they hang out there now for contraband smokes
and snatches of how the big kids have sex.

A field is the menace of fence and expanse
which redesigns what it means to be free.

The wind moves the light in the leaves
in some suburban blowup park;
the young artist stalks his fading shadow,
he sees things not there
and can't see those which are.
Or he falls sick and pale from a Greyhound
in Mainstreet, and stands in the unfenced heat
while the patient prairie waits;
it could be Manitoba, it could be Kansas.
No one cares unless they live here - they're all
too weak to seek surprise, too strong for retreat.

There is a place of limitless extent,
a statement of the government's intent
that's on no maps, and steps on your dissent:

when we laughed outside in peace and protest
they captured all of us on photograph
while oblivion stayed hidden under grass.
The sister of our friend left home one day
and vanished in the biggest field of all -
so watch out if you go without consent
in any place where no-one knows you went:

Sometimes in the country for a walk
your only paper is a new cheque book,
so you spend your time composing lines
with ends for which you haven't got the means.

You may discover tiny plots
graphed out for science,
square by square,
with gridlock questions
on the rate of growth of plants,
or the volume of worms in the universe;
or you'll wander lost for hours on the open moors,
once ancient forest, where advancing bracken
folds round in the gentle ebb and flow
of abuse and accommodation.
You search for answers in the curved sloped meadow
which bends to such exquisite forms
of height and depth and light that you long
to be consumed by the shapes of nature,
hold fields in differential equations.

It's not memory or measuring that thrills,
but endless opportunity for scale
and space, and closeness to impossibles.

Then when autumn's done its stingy tinted stint
and the year is on the tern,
a shallow flint field fills with gulls;
it stretches to the edges of the mist
in spindly dwindling mediocrity,
squeezing your life out, despite yourself.
Who trusts the evidence of their eyes
when even photographic film is designed
for images whose brightness exceeds the real?

Weaker and bleaker
day after day and frame by frame
catastrophe folds into folklore;
at Verdun, in another such country,
the corpses served as stepping stones
across the drowning mud.

And still in foreign fields,
the desert, the jungle,
the rice fields, the bush,
the supercharged demons of power
continue to kill with mechanical efficiency.
A blind madman urges his countrymen
to cross the front line;
and a soldier survives because terror
is always more deadly than reason:
his best friend's face is splashed
on his jacket as if the blood was his own.
No space is large enough to contain his rage,
no distance too great to escape his passivity.

From stale back yards to Antarctic wastes,
we all know a field which promises grace;
one selfish hope refuses to resign:
I won't step in your field, keep out of mine.

MJW
1997

The straight and narrow

It's clear the historic sight of badgers
crossing elderly people has diverted
traffic, but in fog the Temporary
lights up, and Space bends for miles. With delays
possible until Nineteen Ninety Nine,
one way is to reduce speed now and stay
in lanes closed by slow loose chippings. We know
to keep clear of the heavy plant and wild
animals which stop children 10%
at any time; we could give way to floods
and lay by like slow police in their free way,
or follow signs to alternative routes.
But we must keep to right and drive straight ahead,
looking left right left for exits and Ends.

1997

Falling trees

Old people prod their dying fires with sticks;
little by little, each winter the chill
slips its knot tighter, and gnarled hands take picks
to the boughs in Bosnia's street, and kill
the source of every future winter's fuel.

I never understood, as a child, why the great
garden sycamore where I played, whose leaves
I collected for bonfires, whose scintillating wings
taught me the secret of flight, had to be felled.
Perhaps the point is no one understands.

In Cannock Forest, a lifetime ahead,
I found stands of ancient oaks lying dead.
When roots unearthed the pavement in our street
the council workmen came with drastic saws
to solve a minor footpath irritation;
we vowed to fight authority – and did
when stray public weed killer cleaned the streets
and wiped out the edges of everything.

Sadness fell on us all when the Great Storm
snapped the matchwood landscape of history,
and tree-dweller martyrs stood up against
the State's scorched earth commitment to progress.

A log floats by listlessly in the canal.
Last night it faced the wind and shared
the integrity of fellow species;
today, in a thousand ways, it meets decay.
Later comes renewal. When species die
it's only the unlikeliest which thrive:
new laws aspire to save a list of plants,
but madness elevates the rats and ants

Rainforest timber burns into ranches:
soil slides into oceans, where it stanches
warming currents and cools far continents.
But what does it mean that a healthy tree falls
at the end of a century which scrawls
death warrants for a hundred million
guiltless, helpless, sensate women and men?
The horror of life that's grown hard to bare
is that it must go on when we're not there.

1999

Changing the flow

When they murdered Thatcher in the white hotel
does a death wish state strafe the IRA
with bitter Peckinpah retaliation?
Does a bloodbath of state-sponsored terror,
endorsed by madmen at the Daily Mail,
see a final end to Men of Violence?
Does widowed Tebbit succeed to Downing Street?
Does he scratch the cricket test and ditch tales
of rats scuttling in the Channel Tunnel
till some more viscous and auspicious day,
only to unleash his white fanged vengeance,
deranged and spitting venom on Irish
treason back beyond the Easter Rising?
Does he, tearing at the throat of history,
endow the RUC with means and men,
feed the Loyalist death squads information,
grant the Prots another Reformation?
Does he end the war on known Republicans
with re-enactments of the Black and Tans?
Will we ever know forgiveness again
once shoot-to-kill has been declared too tame?

Or does revenge forge stronger barricades,
and fan a forest fire of US funds?
Does this undeclared and obscure local
war spew up on every English pavement,
jabbing its fist in frightened puffed up
faces; or does it hasten public pleas
to set tormented Irish people free?

Menace and madness have forever dumped
corpses in the river of history,
but barrages are built by tyrants
and mandarins to hold back time; maybe
it takes the opportunists' bricks and bombs
to break their bloody dams, deluging the land
with uncertainty and changing the flow.

2000

Turd

The island oozed from sphincters deep at sea,
its molten hills and shore congealed into a curd
of basalt, pumice, soot and scarp and scree –
rolled and curled in a steaming liquid turd.
Columbus passed this way to bloat his ship
off La Gomera's cliffs with water, beef
and corn to face his wild Atlantic trip.
He didn't give a crap for Tenerife
shooting fire nearby in spray-glazed skies;
he was just some eager jerk burning for fame
and instant wealth from deals in Eastern spice,
crazy for quick routes that would win the game.
The Guanchos' goats still roamed the flows in peace;
they picked a living here two thousand years,
and could not know their world was soon to cease
as two new continents were born in tears.
The purging Spaniards did not come to tame
these listless island people, but to squeeze
life from them like giants who, to reclaim
the earth, must melt mountains and boil the skies:
it's conquerors who choose to kill or deal.
But wealth distilled from slavery was pissed
away; then sugar, wine and cochineal
were gold, then dust for Spanish alchemists.
Commerce plundered where the magma had played,
but dealers in fire are seldom righteous
so each ash promise fell where the last was laid
as the island rose on its trade's detritous.

Two trucks meet on a mountain bend, one slides
inland, slick-g geared, dripping liquid cement,
the other, grieving green bananas, grinds
downhill to port, wincing past the present.
At each town corner, drawn here by the heat
cockroach timeshare touts twitch with scratchcard schemes:
no one has to wait or pay for self deceit
when there's nothing left to buy but dreams.
Today the thrills of summer fill the plain,
and no one counts as loss Los Christianos,
and yet, to shift this shit and start again
they'd have to waken all the dead volcanoes.

When pigs could fly

If I was a pig I'd know the time to die.
I'd be prepared to ride the final truck,
pressed close as rashers, squealing round bends;
I'd inhale alarmed anticipation
but wait in line, poking beneath surface
things with my swine brain – till I'm dropped
by bolt and knives, the easy preordained
utensils for abbreviating life.

When pigs could fly, their fresh-dead carcasses
were lightly flicked aside on hooks and rails.
But now the stale air thickens with gunfire,
pork flesh and saltpetre stifle the wind,
and bodies rise in piles like pigsty shite.
If I was a pig I'd know it's wrong to die
terror-white in this sad battue, this bath
of blood, this medicated Buchenvald,
this Belsen yard which screams with dread and rends
the steaming air long after breathing ends.

2001

A cubical on the M25

Ghenghis Khan is a hero in Ulam Batar,
a great reformer who made his people one.
In this land of steppes without roads or maps
every truck journey is an arm stretched out
to friends and space connects one home to the next.
Navigation is not some private test
or a battle of wills to prove your sex;
you stop to ask the way at each front door
and each homestead kitchen is a transport caff.
This land has one tarmac track that flicks out
towards the Russian border, across ground
so open there's nowhere to go for a shit;
the rest is listless desert, private choice.
So when you need a route you drive it, right?
You and your rig become a road, laid out
in blind winter snow or squinting dust storms,
hauling diesel in tankers, tractor parts
and tools, industrial miscellany.
While mere railway lines run out to nothing,
sharing their purpose with unravelled string,
these nameless trunkroads touch a whole people –
taut cords pull them and their past together;
every life is on a route to somewhere new.

I stop to rest on the M25;
the service station quivers with intent
and interrupted function, like an ant
hill disturbed. There I lock myself away
in a quiet cubical free of motion,
taking shelter from my destinations
and the blinding loneliness that stalks my steps.

2001

Lists

1:

I wrote a poem
on the back of a shopping list.
It was composed entirely
of short lines which
left wide margins,
and showed no trace
of narrative or drama
or any extraneous detail.
It was raw life
stripped to necessity,
made palatable, just,
by a glimpse of pleasure
down the toy aisle of your imagination.
It was consistent
within itself,
and nothing
was missed.

2:

I wrote a poem
on the back
of a wedding list.
It was also composed
of short lines
with wide margins;
it raised the trivial,
to the level of
life's essentials,
and elevated desire
to a primordial force,
leading readers
to imagine
more perfect worlds.
I asked myself:
could I buy that?
and, if not,
so what?

3:

I wrote a poem about
pleasure, joy, delight,
appetite, craving; desire
longing, inclination:
all we list.

4:

If you want to hear
a very old poem
all you have to do
is list.

5:

I grow listless;
words lean;
I am inclined to write
a list of poems.

2002

THREE D – Poems from the new millennium

The Bungee Jump for Truth

The media collaborate
in stupid futile stunts to fund
the charities our skinflint state
has so emphatically shunned.

Round the clock a sponsored phone-in
seems to save the world from cloning;
wearing different coloured socks is
guaranteed to spare our foxes.

Just walking backwards for the blind
buys guide dogs which are trained to find
rehabilitated vandals;
while landmines are disarmed with candles.

But mine's the most important cause,
and, disregarding lack of youth,
I'll out-hype animals and wars
with a giant Bungee Jump for Truth.

The Clifton Gorge is not enough –
so, attached to some companion,
I'll make my point all taut and tough,
across some Arizona Canyon.

There's no place for sanity or doubt,
there's no scope to make it subtle
I'll contrive in space to bounce about
by jumping from a NASA shuttle

So let's give honesty a break,
and when the San Andreas Fault
next splits the earth and starts to shake,
I'll reach the core by catapult.

In a world so full of lying,
someone has to slay the monster ...
and yet, what is the point in trying
to find a rich and honest sponsor?

2002

The Fall

Trees gave up early. August scorched the air
at first, stretching dead skin across surface things.
New growth cringed. Grass paused unseasonably.
Leaves curled, crisped, kept falling through September,
falling through still air dry as snakeskin slough,
through scarred branches, through the hesitating green,
through deadened dogrose hedge, through the morning,
through the afternoon. Leaves kept falling through
as though there was something bad we had done,
through rosebay roasted by the blitzkrieg sun,
through burdock blurred to grey, losing its grip,
through burned husked bracken and an end of sedge.
Leaves fell across a million miniscule
corollas, shrinking yellow pimpernel
and cinquefoil to deceive a billion seeds.
Leaves fell like lies from politicians' mouths,
like compromises written by the wise,
like news; they fell through thin October air,
as though the earth had winced and they poured through,
condemned to fall on the far side of the year.
But then, we found a tiny hard fern frond:
a green scintilla's proof we'd done no wrong.

2003

Turnaround at Honolulu

The ceiling fan is fumbling with the furled up air:
it heaves around the hotel smells, but hardly shifts a hair,
While it aspires, too lightly and too long, to loosen clothes
and suck the surface heat from dampened glowing skin,
our bodies brake and stall; above us tireless blades still beat.

The waves awake on coral reefs, and reach their wandering end
just short of shrinking shores more than a thousand miles from home.
Now they outrace, overwhelm their core, and wrap their outsides in
with coiled and towering crests erect, poised for collapse;
they'll chase and boil and churn, till water changes back to air.

Progress and pleasure are pouring in, plane after plane;
arid, anonymous, the airport aches at every flight,
as passengers moved to passivity press and pulse and spurt;
the ragged baggage caterpillars clunk and judder
case by case by case, each after and before the other .

Faces here can't fake the past or flatter failed mythologies:
they come from California, China, Africa, Japan,
and plainly Polynesia, since nothing's less parochial
than Man en masse in flight, more mixed, more up more down:
though no one's taught or trained us, we just turned the Earth around.

2004

Room

Loneliness soils the hotel sheets;
you've a headful of shirts; your pen
makes you think your mind's all creased:
you've meetings soon – but who? when?

There's a cockroach where the time should be
the bookcase stamps like a child:
the drawers store mediocrity,
mirrors won't be reconciled.

The phonebook and the Bible bawl
how the headboard's grown unjust.
A sign that's turned to face a wall
claims "In rats and dogs we trust".

The wardrobes secretly converse
on your choice of shirt and tie.
The bathroom beats for you in verse:
"Poetry," it bleeds, "can't lie."

The railway here is overgrown,
stations where you stopped are closed;
the site of this hotel's unknown,
the traveller's name supposed.

2004

Swan

Awake at dawn, I walked
a lake's looped shore and stalked
a white mistaken bird
unseen and hardly heard,
afloat like downy seeds
among the swishing reeds,
aware that here no one
knew me except the swan
that slipped across the brass-
lit lake like oil on glass;
it scratched like scorn, and ached
like porn to be so slaked
in unsound moss and ooze
while this free queen could choose.
So it started: something stark
and sparking, knife and shark-
like arched my back, strained
my neck, wrists, shoulders, feigned
the weightless power of wings
and made my taut legs spring
against the water's purchase;
the air bursts, boils, urges
what's left of me to rise
as truth above Earth's lies.

Surely no one believes
I'm free to fly like leaves
now I've become the swan,
detached, becalmed, and gone;

2005

Town haul

I come from a town where we all live like guests
in streets full of cuckoos and emptied-out nests.
The teachers play truant, the students are vexed,
the youth clubs train teens to forget that they're sexed,
and interns request wealth and fame in texts
to economists whose numbers they've guessed,
while banks bet on slots what their savers invest.

Old people grow lucid, the nurses perplexed,
the hospital's closed due to patient defects –
it's sugar and water that the doctor injects,
though he's not sure how far the cure has progressed.
The church is full since the priest was possessed,
a queue formed to hear what it was he confessed:
they're mainly young women he'd like to molest.

No one wants office, and no one elects:
the MP's a mistake which no one corrects
(says he never inhales and prefers to ingest),
and the Mayoress is picked by the size of her chest
now the Town Hall is run by Special Effects.
The rats are all leaving – they refuse to infest.
This town is the target Al Qaeda rejects.

A journalist earthworm writes blogs and dissects
statistics on dog shit, in which he's obsessed.
The police Chief Inspector grows horribly stressed:
since he solved all the crimes by ending arrest,
he can't quite remember what it is he inspects,
but a leading evangelist says he detects
we can't all be guiltless, and *God* still suspects.

A drunk army colonel wants Brussels annexed
to stop the invasion of EU insects.
When a Frenchman moved in we vowed to protest:
we hear that his furniture's all been distressed
so we need to find out what else he neglects,
and report to the Council the things he erects
(though it may be enough to hint at incest).

Poverty's ended, we thought – joy was expressed –
the day we each won a million from Readers Digest;
even the postman was mildly impressed
but he sent the post back marked "wrongly addressed".
The motor mechanic's been losing his zest;
if it wasn't for drinking he might have regressed
when a series of breakdowns left him depressed.

All our plans are just schemes that have no pretext,
we each live in hope though no one expects,
we're extras on set where no one directs,
we'd be action heroes if we wore dirty vests.
Some townsfolk are damned, none thinks themself blessed,
though everyone's dying, it's too soon for respects.
There's a post office queue and no one is next.

2008

What the Woods Say about Us

Margins

Out on the ragged edges of our towns
and villages are the wasted spaces,
where brambles and scrub scramble
like wild children who won't tie laces,
where floods find rutted tracks
and a padlocked gate takes us nowhere.
we could fence this willful wilderness
to isolate its prodigal spread and pitch.
but its lure and influence lingers:
why not grub out the hedges, level lanes and ditches,
cleans the land, make it geometric?
And there are always endless acres more
beyond our profit makers' studded grasp.
Neglect rots away our global status,
and corrodes the vision that could extend
the magic and margins of our plenty:
we must quarry nature's selfish mess like stone
and, for the common good, make its growth our own.

Out

Every walk we take,
parabola or straight,
has necessarily
had circularity;
departures and returns
define their own terms -
it's a different route
coming home, going out.

So we know each step of the way,
the truth of it won't go away:
we can't take a linear track
so long as we plan to come back.

First

The hill is a clutter
of forests and fields
conglomerate outcrops
castellate rocks
sheer sheepedges
wrecked cottage stones

where rooms are bones
and trees repeat
cliff after cliff
wall on wall,
and streams stream
falls fall.
Though woods at first
lack definition.

Earlier

Here once wide-eyed Red Riding Hood passed by -
she was lost where the wind had snatched the trees
and dashed them together and to the ground;
she trod where floods had scorned the water course
and scored and scummed the brush to mulch and crud.

Wood ants have abandoned their nest; nearby
rooks in riot wolf down the rising worms.
badgers have torn a branch from sleeving bark,
bleeding it of beetle grubs, leaving shards
flushed and pulped and mashed to soil, storm to storm.

Earth resolves to water, water to air,
so nothing's left to be substantial here.
But don't we know better than to be deceived
by the howling wild wood and its shift of leaves?
Aren't we too old and wise to be destroyed
by the hit and myth of seductive choice?
The straying stream runs both ways to find
its level: now it tells both truth and lies.

Now

The earth wears saxifrage like a shirt,
its contours ripple beneath their silk -
a place where orchids race to be like weeds,
and weeds contest to know they're Best In Show:
the only end that they've pursued is now.

Forest brakes

We've searched the woods for an afternoon,
never finding even the odd ten minutes.
We curse fallen branches: the brushwood snaps back.
Nettles break out in more than a rash,

early purple orchids break up for the summer
rosebay and decay take off, leaf litter breaks down.
Some trees are marked for saw or salvation:
even here we are all on someone else's files.
Everything is a reminder of everything else.
A faint grey scrape in matted wood sorrel
is the last trace of some creature.
In the wildest parts we're hunted down by mountain bikes,
snared by zip wires and families enjoying forest breaks.

Canadian Shield

Up on the rocks elsewhere it's dry and clear -
specific as the day the month the year
but ground and rounded a long time past.
Dwarfed elders manage fruit to feed bluejays,
but bunchberries hunch in any buried shade
and bilberries only bronze before they fry.
Unlike themselves, mosses persevere,
thin, crisp, olive, erect; while lichens lie low.
Death-grey peeling larches bleach and break
in the heat, bark and branches braced for Fall
and the pick of ice that prises cell from cell:
all but the stone is poised to leach away.

Sometimes there's a route to lead us in or out,
a choice of retreat or reaching for Nowhere,
but normally not - just rocks that are all the same
in ways they change. In ten mistaken minutes
we might be lost for the rest of our lives.

Below on the oilslick swamp dragonflies
mix and match up genes in their quick two weeks;
it took the ooze of four thousand human years,
for each slimed dragon-nymph to learn to fly;
now there's just time to set the lake alight.
Down there everyone is kin, tree frogs, newts
snakes that listen with their skin, the terrapins
that slog to warm their blood on half-sunk logs,
the flies and bees; everything that swarms or swims
or seeds will never have a need to leave.

Up here on rocks half as old as the earth
each stands his ground, clings to its foundations
lucky just not to be blown away or back.

Next

Summer's done with those rites of spring.
Bluebells yellow; a rump of ramsons morphs
dull and malodorous. So let them rot.
Make room for something new and brute that won't
consume the floor and flora like the short
scheduled trooping of colours before,
only to let it slide away to slime.
Do it next in darkness, eclipsed and dusked
by beech, hung over with holly and yew.
Now's the time bramble and bracken arrive
bruising and belligerent, set to rise
and ready as rain to take back the earth.
Like my leaders they conceive nothing wrong
In acting when they like and when they're strong.

Then

There'll be a time when even familiar forests
defeat us with their mumbling impermeability
and their random architectural rain.
Rock faces crumble away unwilling to see us pass;
paths lead nowhere because there are no paths.
while marshvalley carpets absorbs us
with their soluble distractions, and cloudbursts
spread darkness, chaos, confusion, love.

Beyond

Some landscapes pull you in, drag you down to their level –
the smell of sheep's urine under trees,
the weight and well of cliffs dropping from the sky,
limestone that drivels a thin seven soil.
Plants sieve nourishment, carve a niche.
Their succession is written, fixed and specific,
a rare mix grips the hills where everything fits.
We come in fun or plunder and the difference is nil.

Late afternoon

desperate oaks twist and grasp the falling land
sunset ignites them with the southwest sky
and catches occasional leaves as they drop,
though November's chill stills all other life.

Later

Bare bark stumps and sticks
are spattered, carved and clawed
by craving things with empty maws.

Late

This tree wears death with every fungus going:
it wouldn't want to carry on if it shared our knowing.

Last

It doesn't matter whose reality
we're in, or which dimensions, whether up
is straight or fast or flat or green, we see
what the trees see, and if we had a top
we'd spin it like a moon and still be lost.
Life's this borrowed thing: and what we do last
is give it back to the chemistry of cost.
What's strange is most of us stay sane, or lie,
although we know we have to learn to die –
unless *this* is the madness from which we shy.

2014

Soldier

I've seen Salamis, Antioch, Sicilia,
I've dived at the Hellespont, whored by the Pillars
Dined with Dionysius and played dice with Zeus,
Baited bears in the Lebanon, taken teeth from Jews.
Yet I can't count the throats I slit, bellies disembowelled,
the bridges burned, the temples, battlefields we fouled,
I couldn't name one girl we took, enflamed by her screams,
any city we sacked, any child we wrenched from dreams.
I can't recall the face of any friend who fell
beside me then, or whether I had known them well.
You'll never hear my name, and I can't give you dates.
But war is what I made. And history. And states.

2014