



Ninety Original
Sonnets

Decentred

IVAN CAÑADAS



HALLYM UNIVERSITY PRESS

Deçentrød

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Ivan Cañadas (PhD, Sydney, 2001) is a Professor of English Literature at Hallym University. His scholarly publications include a monograph—*The Public Theaters of Golden Age Spain and Tudor-Stuart England* (Ashgate, 2005)—and other articles, dealing material from early modern drama and poetry to contemporary world literature and film. His non-academic writing includes a recently-published memoir of childhood, *Portrait of an Innocent* (2021).

A long-term, ongoing project to translate and discuss important examples of Spanish Golden Age poetry sparked an interest in the present-day possibilities of the sonnet form, which led to the original print edition of this book, in 2008 (carefully revised and updated for the present edition). The aims of this book, now as then, is to provide an introduction to the history of the sonnets and its formal characteristics, followed by ninety original sonnets, which combine traditional form and a modern voice to articulate personal and contemporary concerns.

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Introduction.

HISTORY OF THE SONNET FORM.

Early Italian sonneteers, such as Guittone d'Arezzo (1235-94)—author of three-hundred sonnets—and the better known Petrarca (anglicized as “Petrarch”), established a standard form, consisting of two parts, in which the first eight lines (two *quatrains*) outline a problem, while the closing *sestet* (the remaining six lines) provides the response or solution. In terms of the rhyme scheme, this *sestet* generally consisted of two *tercets* (sets of three lines, in a particular rhyme particular), which presented either an echo or a variation.

Perhaps best-known for popularizing the conventions of courtly love, but sometimes also known for his devotional poetry, the sonnets of Dante (1265-1321) and Petrarch (1304-74) were translated and imitated throughout Europe during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. In Spain, for example, the masterpieces of two humanist soldier-poets, Juan de

Boscán (c. 1490–1524) and Garcilaso de la Vega (c. 1501–1536), initiated an astonishing literary trend to which were added the works of many of the great writers of Golden Age Spain and beyond, including Fernando de Herrera (1534–97), Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616), Lope de Vega (1562–1635), Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645) and Luis de Góngora (1561–1627), as well as the lauded Mexican poetess, *Sor Juana de la Cruz* (c.1648–95).

In France, too, the leading French writers of the humanist, literary movement known as the *Pléiade*—Pierre de Ronsard (1524–85) and Joachim du Bellay (1496–1560)—responded masterfully to the challenges of the sonnet to produce writing that is concise, meaningful and memorable.

A late-comer, England, in turn, contributed to this international phenomenon, following Sir Thomas Wyatt's translation of Petrarch's by-then already classic poems. Besides those, Wyatt (1503–42) wrote about thirty original ones. The form, thence, flourished in the Elizabethan and Stuart periods; English sonnet collections—in fact, themed, narrative *sequences*—included Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophell and Stella* (1591) and Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595). There were also the religious sonnets of John Donne and George Herbert. But, the best-known examples are, perhaps, those of Shakespeare—154 in number, and circulated in the late 1590s prior to their publication in 1609.

Though only one other great sonnet sequence was produced in early modern England—Lady Mary Wroth’s *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621)—the sonnet was destined never to disappear.

A revival, for instance, occurred in the age of the French Revolution; English Romantic poets, such as William Wordsworth, John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, wrote some highly accomplished sonnets, while, in the Victorian age, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *House of Life*-sequence (ca. 1870–80) bring to mind the best work of the Elizabethan period. Nor would the character and flavour of the poetry of the First World War—or “the Great War”, as it was known at the time—have been the same without the sonnets of Rupert Brooke (1887–1915)—his famous sonnet “The Soldier” embodying a patriotic fervor, in which jingoism and mysticism are one—and anti-war sonnets ranging from the biting satirical work of Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967) to the melancholy, technically innovative work of Wilfred Owen (1893–1918).

Spain’s Generation of 1927—a group of poets, which included Federico García Lorca (1898–1936), and whose name was a reference to the third centenary of the death of Góngora—drove a twentieth-century revival of the sonnet, which also influenced the unrhymed sonnets of the renowned Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda (1904–1973).

In line with the modern preference for free verse, there is considerable support for a loosening, or simple abandonment, of various formal characteristics of the traditional sonnet, which has given rise to poems—often described as examples of “the American sonnet”—which not only dispense with the strictures of rhyme, and retain no particular meter, but often even break with the primary requirement that a sonnet be fourteen lines in length; what is left is limited to brevity, concision in style, and the frequent presence of a climactic turn in the exposition of ideas. Nevertheless, many great modern poets— from Robert Frost (1874–1963) and W.H. Auden (1907–1973) to Seamus Heaney (1939–2013)—continued to write them in traditional form.

FORMAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRADITIONAL SONNET.

A) RHYME SCHEME

Italian sonneteers—and Spanish poets who followed them—employed a particular range of rhyme patterns, so that the first two quatrains rhymed *abba abba*, while the sestet was written in one of the following ways: *cde cde*; *cdc cdc*; or *cdc dcd*.

It was an English innovation to substitute the octave-sestet division (i.e.: two quatrains followed by a sestet) with a rhyme scheme featuring three quatrains capped by a rhyming couplet. However, the precise rhyme pattern differed in the hands of each poet. For example, Shakespeare's own sonnet sequence—first published in 1609, though many of the 154 sonnets in that quarto edition had been composed and circulated in manuscript for during the 1590s—employs a specific rhyme scheme, which is named after him. So, a sonnet can be called “Shakespearean” if it follows the rhyme pattern that he used: *abab cdcd efef gg*. Sonnet 130 is one of the best-known examples:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;	a
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;	b
If snow be white, why then, her breasts are dun;	a
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.	b
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,	c
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;	d

And in some perfumes is there more delight	c
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.	d
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know	e
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;	f
I grant I never saw a goddess go;	e
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.	f
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare	g
As any she belied with false compare.	g

I used the same rhyme scheme as part of my foreword for students taking my *Introduction to Poetry* class:

“Poetry Class (*Semester 2, 2008*).”

Some of the things you’ll learn about this Fall	a
Include rhyme, rhythm, ballads, the lyric...	b
But fear not; you mustn’t worry, at all,	a
Because I am very realistic,	b
And, I don’t assume that you know anything	c
About this <i>yet</i> . Well discuss all this stuff	d
Slow and easy, and I will also bring	c
Some songs to listen to—nothing too tough—	d
So, you’ll be able to <i>hear</i> —and not just read	e
Poetry, or hear <i>about</i> it (spoon-fed	f
Stuff that makes no sense!); you’ll know it, indeed.	e
Just work hard and it will get in your head!	f
Phone me; visit me—if all else should fail,	g
You can always contact me by email.	g

Among Shakespeare's English predecessors, Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542), had been instrumental in importing the Petrarchan style and themes, with such sonnets as "Whoso List to Hunt"—which, moreover, illustrates the characteristic English use of a rhyming couplet as conclusion. The concluding—ee—rhyme also appears in a notable sonnet sequence by one of Shakespeare's Elizabethan seniors, Edmund Spenser, the *Amoretti* (pub. 1595), featuring a rhyme pattern more intricate than Shakespeare's, as the three quatrains in a *Spenserian* sonnet are themselves interlinked by rhyme: abab bcbc cdcd ee. *Amoretti*, Sonnet 16, is a good example of the Spenserian form:

One day as I unwarily did gaze	a
On those fair eyes my loves immortal light:	b
The while my astonished heart stood in amaze,	a
Through sweet illusion of her looks delight.	b
I might perceive how in her glancing sight,	b
Legions of loves with little wings did fly:	c
Darting their deadly arrows, fiery bright,	b
At every rash beholder passing by.	c
One of those archers closely I did spy,	c
Aiming his arrow at my very heart:	d
When suddenly with twinkle of her eye,	c
The Damsel broke his misintended dart.	d
Had she not so done, sure I had been slain,	e
Yet, as it was, I hardly 'scaped with pain.	e

One of the most essential requirements of accomplished sonnet writing has been the need to experiment and innovate *within* the restrictions of a formal, established structure. Thus, the great, second-generation Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, in “To Wordsworth” (1816), used the sonnet form as a vehicle for reproaching the older poet for his growing conservatism; though it is a classic, well-wrought sonnet, it, nevertheless, experiments with the Elizabethan-sonnet form by placing the rhyming couplet between the second and third quatrains—*abab cdcd ee fgfg*:

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know
That things depart which never may return:
Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,
Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.
These common woes I feel. One loss is mine
Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.
Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty, —
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

B) METRE

Traditionally, English poets have employed iambic pentameter: ten-syllable lines, comprised of five iambic feet (X /) – an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one—as in the opening lines of the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*:

Two **house**holds **both** **alike** in **dignity**
In **fair** Verona **where** we **lay** our **scene**

In the romance languages, by comparison, sonneteers often employed hendecasyllabic metre—eleven-syllable verses, in which the last stress is on the tenth syllable. Thus, most Italian, Spanish and Portuguese sonnets were written in hendecasyllables, while English sonnets in that metre are rare. Indeed, typically, English translators—as well as imitators—of Dante or Petrarch, for example, have traditionally turned the original hendecasyllables into iambic pentameter. Even the Dante’s *Divine Comedy*—arguably the most canonical work of Renaissance poetry, Italian, or otherwise—underwent that same transformation in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1867 translation, which renders the famous, hendecasyllabic opening line (“*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*”) into iambic pentameter:

“Midway upon the **journey** of our **Life**”.

ABOUT THIS COLLECTION.

All but two of the sonnets in the present collection employ the decasyllabic meter most common in English sonnets. “The Seaside” (p. 47) and “The Party Line” (p. 51), however, illustrate the use of hendecasyllabic metre. More experimentation can be found in the use of rhyme. “Living Standards” (p. 61) and “The Lovers” (p. 43), to name two, conform to the Elizabethan-sonnet form, exemplified in Shakespeare’s sonnets, whereas “I am a Juggler” (p. 36), “The Evil Seed” (p. 86) and “Territory” (p. 114), by contrast, are examples of the Italian sonnet—and, therefore, feature the rhyme pattern *abba abba cdc dcd*—this being the category into which most of my sonnets fall.

Others yet, like “The Old House” (p. 53), play with that scheme while still linking the quatrains: *abba acca ded ede*, or else cap two Elizabethan-style quatrains (*abab cdcd*) with an Italian/Spanish sestet: *efe fef*.

A variation on Shelley’s “To Wordsworth”—technically speaking—“My Baby Loves Chopin” (p. 56) experiments with the distribution of three Italian-rhymed quatrains and a rhyming couplet: *abba cc deed fggf*.

“Victimomania” (p. 65), in turn, is a variation on the Spenserian rhyme scheme: *abab bcbc cdcd ee*. It retains Spenser’s linked-rhyme quatrains, but echoes the initial rhyme: *abab abab abab cc*, while its

repetition of the initial *abab*-quatrain recalls the work of thirteenth-century creator of the Italian sonnet, Giacomo da Lentini, who used that rhyme pattern in the octave.

FOR FURTHER READING

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I

HEADACHES
&
HEARTACHE



Heart Trouble

No doctor's going to help you with this one,
And there's no aspirin for this kind of pain.
So, though you may feel you're going insane,
You're on your own, and, of course, it's no fun.

Some friends might help if they're good listeners,
Supportive, sincere; people you can trust
Not to laugh at you, later (that's a must!);
Not too cheerful, nor too much like mourners

At a funeral—surely, no-one's ever died,
In all the world, of a broken heart,
And those who've said otherwise only lied.
But, how painful it can be—where would art
Be without that theme? How you want to hide—
Shun your friends—yet, grieve when you're apart?



Remedy

This, here, you could say, is a trouble spot.
But, all that's needed is a good, firm hand.

You just need to focus on it and spend
Some extra time—give it a proper shot;
There are no quick fixes, and it will not
Vanish if you stick your head in the sand;
You need to keep at it if you intend
To stay in this game, in case you forgot.

In the end, a hands-on approach works best,
So, a therapist needs to spend a bit

Of time to select the best therapy.

As for you, make sure you get enough rest,
Keep on with low-impact stuff to stay fit,
And you'll feel like new in no time—you'll see.



Life Choices

For your own sake, answer the question:
Is that what you—not others—want in life?
Because it's a bit like choosing a wife,
And it's a major cause of frustration,

If somebody else makes a decision
That, truthfully, should be your own to make,
Soon, you will find yourself lying awake,
Asking why you weren't in the equation.

How often others want to live through you,
Though it's bound to disappoint both parties,
And especially you, if you only knew.

So, whatever you think your loyalties
Are, don't forget: "*To thine own self be true*";
All of us have our own priorities.



Amour Fou

What ever was the matter with that guy?
You would have thought it was something serious.
Who cares? But, I can't help but be curious,
And when something like that happens—why lie?
It's human nature; it catches your eye.
I mean, the guy seemed completely furious,
And distraught—not saying that this was bogus
On his part, mind you, but would you sigh

Away your life over an illusion?
Life's short—but there's a certain misgiving,
There, too, when we witness burning passion—
Feelings uncurtailed by too much thinking.
Is it we, then, who live a deception?
And their blindness? That we are not seeing.



Love, Be in It

It's something out of the ordinary;
Something that cannot simply be explained
Away; nothing I'd ever entertained,
Yet so natural—so elementary,
In a sense, that it's almost scary
To consider it almost passed me by.
It's so strange to think one can live and die
Without love—to be an honorary

Human being. Can you see it? Half a man—
Or a woman—normal, yet incomplete;
Successful, perhaps, but an also-ran,
In the race of life; too slow on your feet;
A fan of a game, which never began
For those who chose not to go to the meet.



It Has Been Years

It has been years since he saw that woman,
And, yet, it seems like it was yesterday
That they were alone—times when she would stay
With him the whole night through—and, only then,
Through every moment, sweet and forbidden, That
they had, in the space they had, away
From the jealous husband—with sleep at bay—
Could enjoy the sweet time that they'd stolen.

But there was always, hovering above,
A dark angel—a malicious spirit,
Forever present, there, to sour their love—

Which besmirched their vows, as without merit,
And sowed fears and blame they'd never dreamed of
Till discord made each other the culprit.



Primeval

She had one of those smiles could stop my heart
Mid-beat—which brought out the shy man in me—

Yet, I'd go out of my way, just to see
Her—me, gawky; sixteen again—part
Of me wanting to run and hide, to start
Over; be a different man; find the key
To her heart—find out what it was that she
Was seeking; what made her tick; by what art

I could woo her, impress her, stand apart
From other guys, each of them my rival—
All confident and armed with Cupid's dart;

No game, but a struggle for survival;
A game without a lesson to impart,
Save to what extent love is primeval.



Humanity

I didn't give it much thought, at the time;
Important, perhaps, but not my affair.
In any case, not caring is no crime;
But, who'd have thought that it could happen, there?

An error: childish, simple; two such prime
Reasons to be sceptical, to beware
Presumption—to deal with the grit and grime;
Really know something; lose that smile; be fair

To those, who, perhaps, feel as confident
As any of us do in our own lives.
It's not a question of self-abasement,
But of the plain humility to learn what drives

Us all and claim our own our humanity
Some reverence, tolerance, modesty.



Rock Bottom

I never thought I'd see myself like this;
Why am I afraid of my own success?
Why am I doing my best to make a mess
Of my life—choosing hell, giving up bliss?
I know I must change my ways, or else kiss
Happiness goodbye; confront my weakness;
Because it is not enough to confess
That something about me has gone amiss,

And, then, not make a real effort to change;
Constantly uttering my worthless word
Inconstantly; self-deceiving; a strange
Adulterer; my moral vision blurred
By such a banal pleasure—in the range
Of life's experiences, a choice so absurd.



Remorse

I'm ashamed of the way you think of me,
And I would do anything to change that.

But, it doesn't take a genius to see
That it's over between us, that it's sat—

This truth—like an unwanted chaperone.

Yet, it was all our own doing, after all,
Or—yes: my fault. No need to bitch and moan;
It's only I, myself, who had the gall;

Who've thrown away a perfectly good life;
Pissed away a solid relationship.

I have hurt those I love—sowed my own strife—
And, now, cry foul when I'm kicked off the ship,
And I'm told what a bastard I have been
To have played a game that I couldn't win.



Who We Are

Trust me: I would happily sleep all day,
But I need to put food on the table;
No-one else will, and, while I am able,
I will do my bit; whatever they say

About me, I've never been one to betray
Those who count on me, though people assume
They know who you are, based on the costume—
The mask—they've seen you in; we all pay

For our actions—our mistakes. That's the way
It is. Nor can you count on a stable
Life; though it might make you more likeable,
Beneath the mask, there is only that clay,

Formless, from which we mould ourselves anew
With each passing day, each new thing we do.



Payout

If you cannot even manage to be around,
And your own kids don't see you, anymore,
Explain to me what it is you have found
Outside this home that brought you here, before.

If it's someone, I'd like to meet the whore;
I'll assume it's true, and that it was bound
To happen; that I was wrong to ignore
The signs, and complain now we've run aground.

But, just let me ask you, if I still may,
If you did everything you could have done—
Or are you just the kind that likes to stray?

Hard or not, you can't just get up and run;
When you've got kids, it's no longer child's play,
And you must complete the game that you've begun.



Love Forsaken

The bloody record had long since finished,
And it's not as if I wanted to stay
Longer than I had to, hardly a ray
Of sunshine, and I'd rather have vanished

Into thin air than stay there, the tarnished
Tin soldier, sullied hero of the day,
Rusted, rotten, false enough to betray
Somebody like her, whom I had cherished

In my kinder moments—love banished
To the painful past of painful nightmares;
For any love between us, now finished,

Will reopen our wounds, revive our cares,
Now, mercifully, left behind—famished
Offspring of long-lost love, forsaken prayers.



Bad Habit

It's hardly going to make a difference—
Is it? And it's not as if it matters,
Now, that my life's already in tatters;
Why deprive myself? Sure, it makes no sense,
Any longer, to keep up the pretence—
Because that's all it's been, though it flatters
Me to say that I'll shake off my fetters
Yet—then, give in and repeat an offence

That's an inevitable transgression;
Self-deceit is, now, my nature—a habit;
Who I am—with little recollection
Of how it all began—of when I let
Myself make that choice, accept a fiction
In my life—and nothing, now, to save it.



Last Call

Let's see if I can get out of this one.

I figure this really is my last chance;
Marriage over—never mind the romance—
And is it worth it, when all is said and done,

To lose everything for a bit of fun?

It is not as if it helps to enhance
Your mind—forget the liver—much less advance
Your career; and you'll think you're a Don Juan,

When you're just being sleazy, and women shun
You—at best, laugh at you—and look askance
On everything you do; it's a dance
You dance alone—however it began.

It is time to take stock, and to consider;
Will you drive yourself alone, or be with her?



The Cards

She would avoid reading me the cards,
Fearing that I'd ask something she'd rather
Not know—answers about us, as regards
Our marriage and our future together.

I wanted to look inside my own heart,
To find out if I could be firm enough;
Inside my mind, to see if I was smart
Enough for my own good, or if I'd stuff

Up everything we have, and leave nothing
That any woman, patient and sincere
Though she be, could ever place her trust in.
Nostalgia is to blame; that long-lost spring,
When youth was drowned cannot now reappear,
But as the haunting thought of what has been.



Guilty Conscience

Much like the drip-drop of a broken tap,
The tick-and-tock of a grandfather clock,
Waking dreams keep me up, as if to mock
Me—forever awake—sucking the sap

Of life, that soul-ease, which a nap
Could restore (but to snore!), taking no stock
Of time tripping away; that wayward flock
That won't let you count them; won't let you wrap

Yourself in their warmth, the heat of their fleece;
Conscience gnaws at you—a soft whisper
That says: “*Never may you rest, or know peace,*

*While those you've wronged, lied to, betrayed,
hanker For that tranquillity, now their unease;
Learn that those like you never do prosper.”*

II

POETICS



I am a Juggler

I am a juggler, an illusionist,
And I shine best of all in my own space—
My life rehearsed before I ever face
Those I would impress, who see the smallest
Side of the performer's craft, which, at first,
Was but an idea, a dream, or a trace
Of that miracle, that magical grace
(For which I strive) when art is at its best.

But, between the idea and the illusion,
There's a poet's work: toil that I would conceal,
Besotted with that old-world delusion
Of genius; the desire for talent's seal
To bless one's work—for imagination
To breathe upon one's soul—behind my zeal.



Surface-Deep

“What we two know is of no consequence;
It’s what they believe that makes a difference;
Appearances, the mere circumstance
Of what things seem—never their essence;
What’s inside matters nothing—the presence;
The pretence; not the skill, but the licence.”
Talent yields to influence, affluence;
To Father Mammon let’s pledge allegiance.

The skin comes off, like another layer of paint;
Beneath lurks the soulless media-creature.
An artist doesn’t need to be a saint.
But neither need one be a false preacher;
A vivid image of character faint;
Style divorced of content, stripped of feature.



Mercutio and the Puritan Soul

There are two attractions—each one a pole:

First, that precise way with language,
In which surely lurks the puritan soul;
Asceticism, which would encourage

An end to writing; sincere and barren;
Opposed to natural ability;
Genius and its creatures: Edmund, Aaron—
Both by their words and their fertility.

Bless Mercutio, that Marlovian martyr,
Prophesying Byron, Joyce, Eliot's "Prufrock"
(With that, he stopped!); self-engrossed, kick-starter;
Drunk on words, light as air, a raucous cock,

Proclaiming new days; rousing multitudes
To topple towers, shake set attitudes.



Poetic Language

It's difficult enough to read a poem
Without these would-be bards trying to get cute,
(Archaic? Arty?) grammarians to refute;
Words in excess? You can always cut 'em!

Shakespeare himself didn't think to condemn
What his "happy, copious industry" did suit:
Lines, reverse and pervert; loud feet mute;
For importing words, *la crème de la crème*.

The rule in writing was always the same:
To try to please readers, whatever their taste;
Timeless to the one, th'other calls you lame.
And, for all that, no-one's ever replaced
A love of writing, above fame or shame,
Since, besides that, it might all be a waste.



That Old Poe Tree

It'll take new blood to water that Poe
Tree, and those who would like to take a leaf
From the master's book must cultivate his chief
Trait, that lyricism that's ever-so
Tangible, amid tension, gore—the fear no
Reader can ignore, in his “Raven”,
In his “Lenore”; their words graven
In our souls, like the blackbird's “nevermore.”

Horror, fear, and that anticipation—
A desire for all the craven unease,
To feel our own pulse and our own hearts tease;
The nightmare, as object of creation.

And beneath all this, a melancholy
Heart, being bled for its own sake, wistfully.



Ghoul Inn

The traveller entered the roadside inn,
Footsore and dusty, in need of a shower,
A good square meal—glad the day was over;
Just for relief, he couldn't help but grin.

Never suspecting dangers yet unseen,
He stayed up late, drinking; should've had fewer
Cups of that bull's blood that sapped his power;
In the end, he's forgotten where he's been,

Where he was heading, or who awaits him;
What awaits him, here, is another thing;
For this is a house of ghouls to make one scream.
What wraiths are these that to his neck do cling?
(Which drain his lifeblood; bring darkness grim?)
And what new terrors will this dire end bring?



Love Poetry

Love never helped anyone write a poem,
Unless, it was poetry that they loved;
Love made them want to write, no doubt. But
shoved

Into that task, a flower without a stem,
Would have withered quickly; much like a gem,
A poem has no lustre, till it's polished.
But, it will shine—as poems do—well-finished;
Love the muses for poets must love them.

Yet, what can move a man to write of love,
If not she who brings him both joys and sorrows?
Nothing else on earth—in heaven above—
Can replace women and words, twin sparrows
Which fly to a writer from somewhere above
When Cupid, love poet, shoots his arrows.



The Lovers

They could have found happiness anywhere,
No bond being stronger than
that which joined them.

For neither land nor creed will lovers spare
A thought, being each others' flag and anthem.

The lovers' geography, self-contained,
All-encompassing, universal;
Their nation boundless, unrestrained;
Spurning the hard bit of tongue, the spousal

Of world-tainted causes—of no relevance;
Far removed from the four walls where lovers'
Life unfolds—the everyday-world's nonsense
Beyond love's lap and the warm bed covers.

The lovers' arms enfold a universe
To which I'm proud to dedicate this verse.

III

PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE



Autobiography

It was with a certain apprehension
That I set out to write once again;
I avoided things I feared to mention—
Hard to confront, but not stuff I could feign

Or overlook; things about those I love
Most, and whom I, thus, would not want to hurt
With my narrative when push came to shove;
If I was much too frank, or did pervert
The truth as they see it—and yet, our lives
Overlap, do they not? Biography
Is like that, though words are weapons—sharp knives,
In the hands of a fool who cannot see

Beyond the gilded thread of his own life;
Yet, would I cut it loose, and face the strife.



The Seaside

The sun beat down while we kids played in the sea—
Salt-spray in the air, the sound of crashing waves,
The shrieks of gulls, like sailors' souls, seeking graves—
While we, fighting waves, spat out brine, but were free
As fish, or that sea-tossed kelp we couldn't flee;
Dead man's fingers that would drag us to the caves
Of our childish nightmares, the clutch of a knave's
Greedy hand, cold and rubbery—and, agree

Or not, the fathom-deep mermaid sang her charms
Into being, and would weave spells we couldn't break,
As we gave ourselves into her waiting arms,
And, lips turning blue, teeth a-chatter, we'd make
A great effort to remain, whatever harms
Our dreams would bring us, if we didn't awake.



Monkey Bars

I remember hanging off monkey bars,
Head down like a bat, knees firmly folded
Over the metal support, the bright stars
Already shining in the gem-studded

Blue felt that was the feast-night's summer sky,
In the village where Mum's people came from.

I looked up, all around, and did try
With all my might, not wanting to succumb—

To fail; struggled intensely to prevail
Over gravity, dizziness, boredom;
Forgot where I was—hanging off that rail,
Head down—till, rather dazed, I dozed, a hum

In my ear, a drumbeat in the distance;
The village dance; my waning resistance.



Grandfather

It is with a deep sense of tenderness
That I remember our last encounter;
Though old and frail, his mind didn't falter—
A fresh mind facing that final illness.
And yet, he had drunk deep of happiness,
In his long life, and lived through great danger;
He'd had his share of grief, too, but never
Let what remained be poisoned, to obsess

About things that he could never undo;
Forsake new joys for the sake of sorrow;
To bring back grief, only to grieve anew.
His children he taught, ploughing each furrow,
To be strong, to thrive, but to have joy, too;
To live each day and strive for tomorrow.



Good Samaritan

He found the man still kicking, barely alive,
As he passed the olive tree, on his cart;
The man had experienced a change of heart;
Just as well that Grandpa carried a knife,
And cut through the thick rope to save his life;
Though he gasped, retched, and
that welt sure did smart,
He wept, relieved to receive a new start,
While Grandpa delivered him back to his wife.

But, in that strange village, word travelled fast—
What had it been that he'd sought to escape?
His red-faced wife wished that he'd breathed his last,
And her malice left Grandpa's mouth agape:
Called a killer; into jail almost cast;
He was relieved to get out of that scrape.



The Party Line

Travelling light, he had to be selective,
Never certain of the changing circumstances,
Mindful that there would be no second chances,
And of the need to attain his objective;
Though, too human to keep things in perspective
(As *They*'d have seen it), he thought of instances
In which he'd have to make allowances;
Question the party line—make an abortive
Recantation, which would give way, in its turn,
To guilt, repentance, self-excoriation,
For having forsaken them—yet to learn
That he was but a pawn: part of a nation,
So borderless it would deny its own—spurn,
In those burning souls, their bourgeois vocation.



MLC-1

It all started when I was twenty-nine,
And I wasn't quite so young anymore—
Or so I felt, seeing it as the first sign
That my better years had gone out the door,
And left me shipwrecked on a lonely shore;
That face, older; the receding hairline
Did not help, and I'd begun to snore.
I cracked a joke that men don't age like wine,

But the romance was pretty much finished,
After that for both of us. It's shallow;

That's true. But something vital had vanished,
Which had needed no reason, since callow

Youth enjoys itself—loves without reason.
Now, lacking itself, it lacked life's passion.



The Old House

I dream of the old house, humble inside,
Where, two-to-a-bed, a large family
Sheltered round the hearth; though only dimly
Remembered today, exchanged for the wide,

Open spaces, and for cities that hide
Not just one's past, but one's identity.
Progress, *per se*, brings no security,
Nor makes up for all that we had inside.

That old house—its low ceilings, whitewashed walls—
Was a tight-knit family's heritage,
And as special to us as lordly halls
Are to those who're born into privilege;
It's only a matter of how the coin falls;
But, as for happiness, that takes some courage.



Parenthood

Sometime around mid-morning that same day,
I found myself beset with anxieties,
All the worse because I could find no way
To appease them with the usual pieties

Involving fate and a stiff upper lip,
When life, we all know, can sometimes turn wild,
Because, deeper than the bonds of friendship,
They concerned an angel, our new-born child.

My fears were no longer just for myself,
And that's, in fact, what made them all the worse;
To live is to learn, and you'll never delve
Deeper within your soul than when you nurse

Fears within your own heart for another,
Who is, also, you, your heart, your lover.



Tree of Childhood

Her features mirrored in the window pane,
She approaches the face that gazes back,
On tiny hands and knees, leaving her snack:
A baby, seeking her own smile, in vain.

The reflection is gone that she would fain
Get in her grasp—nothing but to smack
Her little hand against the glass—that lack
Of substance too much for an infant's brain.

But, as the tree of time grows, she must learn
Of new wonders while others are dispelled,
Till, one day, passing from childhood, in turn,

She'll reach teen omniscience, and feel impelled
To discard wonder—for which we all yearn;
Please, keep a bough when your tree of youth's felled.



My Baby Loves Chopin

My baby loves Chopin—so, it seems
No joke that music tames the savage breast;
Our shoes are chewed less, and we are less pressed
To retrieve our princess from where she deems

It proper to explore—the garbage bin;
The power-point Man made to poke—no sin

In a child's curiosity—dreams
Unalloyed with any painful knowledge,
And a wondrous thing to watch a child bridge
That gap, much as growing up redeems

Human from brute by killing the angel
In an infant's breast—that sense of wonder.
Long may she keep it; for there are no fonder
Memories than those—long live childhood's spell!



Morning Coffee

In the morning, we sit and we drink coffee;
It's the most peaceful time we'll have all day,
And we chat as we sip, or we just say
Nothing, which is alright, too, just to be
Able to enjoy the peace of being free—
Perhaps, the last bit of freedom today;
No problems, or worries about what “*They*”
Will expect of us, throw at us, or see

As our duty, in the working world
To which we devote the bulk of our hours—
Our *lives*. Why mince words, since we've all curled
Around our souls and raised magic towers
Out of beach sand, and living flags unfurled,
In honour of things we'd like to keep ours?

IV

PROSPECTS



Transnational

In two hours, I will be safe again, home,
Away from this soulless, sprawling city;
Sure it's exciting enough to roam
For a day, but who'd live in some shitty
Cauldron of postmodernity, well-stocked
With the displaced, the lost, the desperate—
(Beginners seeking ends so disparate—
Where sheep, till this day, had never flocked?

I met a nice, decade-long illegal;
Punjabi; “wife maybe here , now, you know?”
That wife, the two-month-old—may they not fall
In police hands, yet unknown—and Dad sow
Those fields he works for a lone, old farmer,
Whose own sons flew from for places warmer.



Living Standards

They stood up, at once, when those two came
in To shine bright on their illicit earnings;
Not to be sneezed at—those wages of sin;
However one feel, money pulls the strings.

True, you may ignore this altogether,
And reject what passes for modern life,
Where life has little value whatever,
And money rules, though discontent is rife;

Dignity, here, comes a distant second,
Behind sums one can take off the mortgage—
Do people feel they've got what they'd reckoned?
Amass but to consume, in plain language.

But, though most feel that nothing is amiss,
Surely, life was meant to be more than this.



Quality of Life

I can see that stubborn frown on her brow;
The planned outing will be ruined by rain,
And, after all that endless work, the strain
 Is showing; if only time would allow
 Us a little peace—but, even then, how
Can we keep this up? Can we not refrain
From this daily rat-race, that some inane
 Quirk of fate defines as success, now

When quality time and social events

Jostle to take our time, soul, heart and mind?
We're slaves—worse still for accepting our chains.

Love, the joy of life, not dollars and cents;
The masterpiece, not the deadline, the bottom line;
Where is home, when we're always catching trains?



History's End?

The new paradigm, as some will argue,
Leaves behind tired old divisions of Class
Race, Gender and/or Creed, none of which has
Any relevance, except to a few

Die-hard radicals, who reject the new
Dispensation, like their Right-wing cousins.
Though these, lacking principles, new lessons
Pose them no problem; rewards will ensue.

Thus, old despots thrive and soon reach the heights;
And tyrants claim they run democracies,
Defend freedom and uphold civil rights.

But, while there is one person left, who sees
And disapproves—who, remembering, fights
For the decency of it—it's not gone, but still is.



Creed

He is not one for original thought:
Great-eyed, unimaginative and dull;
Sincere, but missing a spark in that skull;
Head high; fundamentally overwrought.

His universe is rather straightforward,
God-ordained and just; certainly not fraught
With dangers or traps in which he could be
caught; Or so he thinks; for his creed's a byword

For non-thought—orderly minds devoted
To leaving inquiry to the Serpent
While indoctrination the besotted
Ones call Truth, though only ignorance, sent
Them as both crutch and hurdle, as they're acted
Upon, their minds and spirits all spent.



Victimomania

Don't question what you've always understood;
Would we be having this conversation
If you had pulled through, as you knew you should?
It's almost trendy, I know—this notion

That weakness and victimhood make you good;
The victim culture: a slave religion
For banal times—quite beneath derision.
But, forgive me; I don't mean to be rude.

But, who would have thought that being tabloid food
Would ever be sought-after—a fashion
That snatches from real victims what they'd stood
To receive—their hope of recognition.

If we are to move along and progress,
It is time to pull the plug on this mess.



Fresh Blood

They're always looking around for fresh blood
To revitalize the old stock—to flow
Through their veins, so long clogged with the foul
mud
Of their despondency; someone who'll blow

New breath into the old moribund beast,
Or, slaying it, pile its high grave and sow
The seeds of renewal—that they may feast
Upon what's come before, and, thence, may grow

All the stronger—and prevail; live longer,
And learn what lessons may be drawn from this:
The difference between will and anger;
Between being owned by things, and simple bliss.

To be self-possessed; believe what you know is true;
Strike out on your own and care not what others do.



Being of Use

It doesn't get really better than this;
That fresh feeling after a day of work
When you've showered and come out with a smirk,
Knowing it's over—an evening of bliss

After a hellish day. Much as you'd miss
The action, the challenges (truth be told),
If, one day, you were free of need—struck gold;
Received some mad loot. Then, you'd reminisce—

Though, right now, the idea may seem absurd—
About the old days when you were needed.
Perhaps, it's not the first time that you've heard
Such a thing—of people who've stampeded
From the lottery office, as if spurred
On to destroy themselves unimpeded.



Company Man

Quite frankly, it is unbelievable,
And I am not sure about how the rest of you
 Feel about a situation so new
And unexpected, but it's terrible,
If you ask me—downright deplorable—
To be asked, after all we've been through,
To accept that backstabber, who will screw
 Everything up—an unacceptable

Move, sure to wreck years of pushing uphill—
 Because, who can trust or respect a spy?
Someone who'd do that of his own free will?
 To be a stooge; leave others high and dry;
Friendship and honesty, but grist to the mill;
 Who'd sell his soul for a piece of the pie?



The Waiting Game

How great to be free—if you only knew!
Free of the angst of waiting—at long last—
By the phone; life on hold; tied to the mast;
Ears pricked for a siren song not for you.

Can you imagine—just to start anew?
A life—no life—but the denial of your past;
Not living in the present; living but to fast;
Dying to live the life that you are due.

To see today again; accept before;
Forget the not-yet come-don't-really-care;
Please don't plan forever—whatever for?

How dull's a fixed game, though you get your share;
For, if you succeed, Fortune is no more,
And the game of life is for those who dare.



Equality of Opportunity

They let us get as far as the front door,
Like kids peering through the pet shop window,
Whose gazes mingle desire and sorrow;
Souls that reach the threshold that they strove for,
But no further; who know they're worth more,
And cross their fingers that it might be so.
Thus, the fruit out of reach, they stand below
Bowing branches so high they seem to soar.

It's just like that to have no connections
In a world built on inequality,
Class, graft—improper considerations.

The ideal, a lie; the perversity.
If it were true, I'd have no objections:
Equality of opportunity.



Our Thirty Pieces

I wonder what's considered a good price
For selling out? What is thirty pieces
In today's money? For, nothing pierces
Someone's side worse than not having a nice
Set of wheels, a big bonus; paradise
Is a designer store, and all traces
Of sincerity gauche—prejudices
Much better left behind; it's the new vice—

Indeed, a sin to the consumer mind.
So, you'll reconsider—you will think twice—
Before you turn your back on your own slice
Of the pie—that gold card; that lucky find
No-one will believe. But, let this suffice:

If they have us all, who'd be left behind?

V

CHARACTERS
&
PERSONALITIES



Normalcy

Can you see how they're all making signals?
Deluded bastards—to think that they could fool
Me, with their tight little smiles, and that cruel
Smugness; the cool, conceited animals!

But, I'll prevail—dance at their funerals—
While they, too cowardly to break a rule,
Claim to feel pity, while they ridicule
Me, inside minds benumbed with chemicals.

For normalcy comes at a price these days,
As always, and the soul's very essence
Is synthesized, now—we've reached a new phase.

But, if sanity means you're never tense,
Leave nothing to chance—your spirit always
The same—I think my madness makes more sense.



The Quiet Drinker

He'd toy with his drink, taking long, slow sips;
Pensive—abstracted—he'd put down his glass
And become absorbed by the bag of chips,
Its metallic crackling, blind to that ass,
Swaying behind of the cute, sassy waitress;
Wasted on him, if she was after tips;
Not the kind of man who'd suffer from stress,
Unless you took away that bag of crisps.

He'd nod to her cough—one more drink, I guess,
When he'd emptied the last—pressed tight his lips.
Pathologically shy? I must confess
That he seemed the kind that basically skips
The niceties—a trend I'd blame on progress,
As some label our cultural eclipse.



Celebrity Sin

“Please, before you ask, just let me tell you
That I won’t answer any more questions
About my children; my ex-boyfriend Hugh;
Plastic surgery; any suggestions

He allegedly made to the nanny;
Whether I have an eating disorder;
Or if being dumped has made me feel older.
You just put yourself in my shoes, honey....

But, if you ask me, it’s kinda funny—
Don’t you think?—what men will do for some ass;
Never mind that the kids should walk in as
You get a piece of that British fanny.

Just, let me tell you, though, off the record:

Great he’s gone—I was starting to get bored.”



The Monologist

“I am tired of talking about myself,”
He said. But, while she sat there patiently,
He spoke, at great length and breathlessly,
About his favourite subject: himself.

But, her tender smile, and her thoughtful gaze,
Like a mask, too, concealed things on her mind:
Plans for tomorrow; the best place to find
A new handbag; a different man; best ways

To give men like this gasbag the thumbs down
Without all the usual unpleasantness;
“I’m *not* an Ice Queen,” she thought, with a frown,
Which he, noticing, mirrored back, distress
Visible on his face—the poor sad clown!—
Thinking that, perhaps, he should have talked less.



Out of Touch

“Isn’t anyone going to say a thing?”

Loose lower lip an apt imitation
Of a monkey’s tremulous chattering;
His face flushed beet-red with indignation,
He brought his fist down hard on the table;
Yelled: *“I won’t stand for it, any longer!*

*If only I were young again, able
To take on these degenerates—stronger*

*Than I am, now. But I’m not the same
Man I once was,”* he added wistfully.

“If only these kids still cared for one’s name.”

But, what can you say—or do—truthfully,
Save to play the cards you’re dealt in the game
Of life, and learn to behave decently?



Lancelot

Let's see if we might just help each other.
At long last—shall we bury the hatchet?
I know it was all because of Heather,
And that I was to blame—I admit it.

But, it happened such a long time ago.
It could have only happened then, of course,
When we were young and wild—ready to throw
Our all into every venture, ride that horse

To death—hot-headed and doomed to remorse;
Sad, because we were friends; I did have scruples—
Believe me; it was love; we were pupils
Of the same school of hard knocks, but not coarse

Enough to do such a thing to a mate.
Then, comes what you cannot anticipate.



Brotherly Love

Without our help, he'll languish there a year.

Of course, he really deserves no better,

But, like it or not, he is our brother,

And we have to do what we can to cheer

Mother, who won't be happy till he's near

Her again—though, all he does is treat her

Like shit, and cause her no end of bother;

He'll drive her insane, and then disappear,

Again; another scam (the stupid bugger!)

And leave a mess to hush up—for Mother

To take care of—a trail of debts to cover.

What he needs is a good kick in the rear.

But, what are we to do? I'm being silly;

Whatever happens, we are a family.



Headmaster

“Perhaps, we should start at the beginning,
Wouldn’t you say? Unless, you have something
To hide. Is that it, young man? I’m starting
To realize that you have just been wasting

My time. And time—my boy—is valuable
When you’re getting long in the tooth, like me.
So, I hope that this won’t turn out to be
One of those—frankly—unpardonable

Shenanigans, where the teacher is fed
Half-truths and big porkies, and, then, must spend
His day working out what *really* happened—

Raking through all that ‘*he-said-then-I-said*’—

Because, let me tell you, right now, my boy:
I don’t trust you, though you try to play coy.”



Teacher's Pet

“That’ll teach the little cunt to run to Miss,
All the time, ’stead-a puttin’ up his pins;
Only last week, I got it, ’cause of ’is
Weepin’ an’ moanin’ to teacher. Day he wins

A fight, I bet, you won’t see ’im thinkin’
He’s got to get the principal involved—
Willya? A kick in the arse, problem solved,
I reckon. And good riddance to fuckin’,

Brown-nosin’, teacher’s pets, like that dickhead,
’Cause, if you ask me, you can never trust
A guy like that—never a speck of dust
On his school tie that you won’t catch me dead

Wearin’—and, another thing: always sits
In the front row, starin’ at Miss’s tits.”



Sour Grapes

“What a shame,” she said. “What a bloody waste,
To squander all those years on that snot-rag!”

“Well,” I said: “It’s not as if I like to brag,
But it sure will show that men will *‘love in
haste But repent at leisure’*; he’s gonna taste
What it’s all about when that low-down scrag
Runs through all the money. Just for a shag...
What men will do! But let him baste

In it—then he’ll come running home, like a dog—
Tail between his legs—and beg for mercy.
It will be worth it, just to see his face!
All the chances I’ve given the greasy hog!
All I’ve done for him, and can you see?
All it means to him? Some skank, wearing lace!”



Punctilio

She takes her time to prepare for the night:
Her hair done; a subtle perfume; that dress,
Well picked to make her look a damn sight
Better than yours truly—but I digress.

We drive fast because—I must confess—
I hate being late—not about being polite,
But to do with pride, shame—honour, no less.
It earns me no friends; hosts hate, as the blight

Of any party, that officious guest,
Who arrives on the dot—even early—
To catch *them* not ready, as if to test

Them, expose them as acting poorly:
Display of duty, or unfriendly zest—
The mark of the perennially lonely.



Cavemen

Jenny left the taxi out of her mind,
Still trying to comprehend—to digest—
What she'd seen, her heart beating in her chest.
Afterwards, she wished she had remained blind—
Ignorant of that side of humankind;
A brutality she'd never guessed
Existed, so casual, she felt depressed.
But, especially, afraid that she would find

The experience hard to shake off, confined
To the past; for, now, a modern pattern
To be followed: mankind no longer blessed
With reason, which would no longer govern
The actions of Man, once again possessed
By the primeval—bound for the cavern.



The Evil Seed

They both agreed and urged him to proceed,
But, not quite understanding what he'd do
When he was done, his nice friends sure did brew
Hell in that home, planting the evil seed
Of fear and shame, their suspicions to feed,
Biting and stinging when they seemed to coo;
But their own petty spite steadily grew,
Sprouting new branches like a noxious weed.

For love conquers all, and those who love not
Find themselves wanting a part of their soul,
Their ill-will stifling them with their own knot;
While loving parents, hearts solid and whole,
Even if they've argued, slammed doors, and fought,
Will soon understand—though lies take their toll.



Requiescat in Pace

“He must have had some reason for saying that.”

That’s the take everyone seems to have on it;

No bastard now he’s paid his final debt;

Empty reverence, divorced of merit.

So what, if he could never tell the truth

To save his own life, never mind his soul?

But fear of what awaits us, too, will soothe

That sting within us—perhaps, make us whole,

Where we lost a piece of ourselves to wrath,

Where the soap-box proved irresistible,

And, losing our way, we couldn’t find that path

Again, to make our own lives bearable.

So, we shall forgive those whom we did loathe,

Though, frankly, it is just for our own growth.

VI

(IN)

**SURMOUNTABLE
DIFFERENCES**



Open Heart

Alright, then, you can have a little glass
From time to time, but keep it at that
Because new livers don't just cost a lot;
Drink too much and they may well take a pass

On you altogether—much as it does
Seem a little arbitrary, since fat
People don't expect to be denied that
Heart they wouldn't need if they'd eaten less.

There's still a bit of the Puritan, there,
Inside most of us that makes us ready
To believe that it must be their own fault

At heart—a belief that the system's fair,
But also a smug denial of empathy;
Hearts not open, lest, like horses, they bolt.



Self-Defence

I know I'm butting in, but think of her;
Just put yourself in her shoes—if you dare—
And tell me—unless you just don't care:
What you would have had her do—just suffer?

The girl in her grave—that's what you'd prefer?
So, then, you could weep: "Oh, she was a saint!"
And you could feel sensitive; acquaint
Yourself with the finer feelings; offer

Yourself the pleasure of virtuous grief;
Decorously display your gentle heart—Be
a well-rounded human being, in brief;
While, now, you—the same man—stand apart,
Pour scorn, condemn, demand cruel relief
Because she has dared to play the man's part.



Shaping Dęstiny

Don't let me stop you, if that's what you want;
Just remember your old dreams, your ideals,
And, tell me—if you still dare—that this feels
Right and you have no misgivings to haunt

You, in your great, new life (sell-out), as you flaunt
And preen yourself, forgetting those old ills,
When, like us, you used to work for your meals,
Little more than a slave, living in want.

Loyalty's slippery, these days, we know;
Honour itself is a commodity,
And, like many others, now high, now low.

The truth we are living is not pretty;
Yet, we'll follow our path, though it be slow,
And make our way through this monstrosity.



Fulfillment

Ever get the feeling that it's all over
For you—that you just don't care, anymore;
That getting heated up is a fever
You can simply do without? Yet, before

You waste another thought—before you pour
Out your soul, catering to whatever
Suits other's tastes, other's goals—do explore
(Understand?) your own needs, and endeavour

To fulfil them because, though a clever
Person avoids conflict—knows when to pour
Oil on troubled waters—to discover
The key to one's happiness—how to soar

Above mere compromise—it's always wise
Not to be deceived, nor tell others lies.



Intolerance

It takes all sorts to make the world go round?
Sometimes, I come across the type that makes
Me consider that the shallow Earth's bound
To keep turning—and that a couple of shakes

Would be well worth it, if that's all it took;
Then, next thing I know, there is a rising mound,
Where the blind, old mole dug its humble nook,
And that it was I who dug up the ground;

My intolerance is out of control—
And I rage and I rant, never content,
In a dark world, like that mole in its hole;
Lost, because, though it's me that I resent,

Since the world's filled with so many others,
Surely, they cannot all be my brothers.



The Limits of Empathy

I tried to understand the way they thought,
But found that it really was beyond me;
Evidently, all of us were not wrought
From the same stuff, nor sat on the same knee,

In those tender years when our minds were moulded.
So, some of us can't break bread together;
Nor do we remain kids—to be scolded
By the teacher if we fight whenever

We aren't friendly; and what a nightmare
That would be! I'd much rather disagree,
Than agree that everything is good and fair,
And worthy; how could it ever be?

Though I accept your right to think me wrong,
That right's mine, too; we needn't get along.



The Patriot

A fine enterprise, says the warmonger,
But less than half the story is being told;
And the ember of truth, too hot to hold,
Who is bold enough, when it's all over,
With no illusions of nation, sober,
To denounce the things that do there unfold:
The ploys and ruses by which freedom's sold,
Which, once gone, we may never recover?

Unholy quests, sprung of the purest hearts,
Dreams, faith, hope, simple fear, lead us astray;
While trust, acceptance—of guilt, too—those parts
Of ourselves that it's most brave to betray,
May, in fact, show what a true patriot's heart's
Made of: knowing when it's right to say nay.



Our Friends

They claim to be our friends—to come in peace.
But friends don't steal your land, take all you have;
What good are friends who kill
those they should save;
Who'll change who they are; who'd never release

Those they liberate; take away the ease
They once knew of their true independence?
A culture of arrogance; ignorance
Replaces understanding—a decrease

Of dignity; liberty; difference;
Monoculture/no culture; a promise
Of progress—all for a dream of affluence.
Take Freedom, or else! An absurd premise;
The Freakin' Fries, too—show your allegiance!
Inexplicable, as are most dogmas.



The Client

As usual, I'm in need of an expert
To deal with a most delicate matter;
You know that it's not my style to flatter,
But we seriously need to avert
A disaster—nothing some extrovert
From law school can fix with idle chatter;
The stakes are high; an empire may totter;
I need an old hand, still sharp and alert;

Wily and smooth with a voice you can trust
To win the day with the warmth of his smile;
Rattle a witness, yet cause no disgust.
I'll get acquitted, and you'll make your pile;
Worth every cent, while the law bites the dust;
On you I depend, no matter how vile.



Inconformity

Good morning, everyone—*you* most of all—
Please, don't feel as if you've been neglected;
We're all busy people, subjected
To a daily regimen to appall

A Spartan; the trap into which we all fall,
Lured, lulled and dulled—and hardly resisted—
As if freedom had never existed,
And, enslaved once more, no longer stood tall.

Therefore, as our hope rests on defiance,
It is disobedience that I would teach
Before conformity—compliance—
Rout independence and stifle free speech.

For, though some should question freedom's merit,
They must not defeat the human spirit.



Axe to Grind

Would anyone like to hazard a guess?
I didn't think so. That's the usual way
These things tend to turn out—that is, unless
Someone's got an axe to grind; let's just say

That this guy's done something to piss you off—
Personally: he takes your parking spot;
He used your flowerbed as a piss-trough.
Though it's not as if you actually caught

Him in the act, you just know who it was!
So, when this day comes, you help the police;
And, though, truthfully, the chances are slim
That he's the one, and you have no real cause

To suspect him of such a heinous act,
You already think of it as a fact.

VII

NARRATIVES & OBSERVATIONS



The Accident of Existence

The huge wheels swallowed him up like wheatgrass,
And he was gone—simply gone, just like that;
A frog which leapt wildly after it sat
Immobile as a stone, as one did pass,
Could never have been half as startling as
The sight of a fellow human being, at
That moment, thrown aside like a bat,
Cast down, the soul dashing away, to pass

Into the great fields of eternity;
The issue of life and untimely death
Not a question of the humanity
Of this victim; for the common breath
Shared by us but highlights the unity
Of life, from highest peak to lowest depth.



Ars Memoriae

In fact, whatever lies at the bottom
Of this questionable story—this tale—
Probably makes what we have just heard pale
Into insignificance—a symptom

Left behind, a reminder, a phantom
Limb, and, try as you might, you'll surely fail
To piece things together—find the lost trail;
For what are life's journeys if not random?

The things we leave behind on our journey
Define us as much as our memories,
Those puzzling treasures, picked from so many,

But that, like morbid anniversaries,
Come haphazardly; bring joy, agony;
Bind and blind—they that know no boundaries.



Fugitive

When they came close, my heart was in my mouth;

I held my breath, but could not stop the shakes.

They were tired, too, though, for them, the stakes

Were different—their families down south,

Waiting for them—nor would any mistakes

Cost them life or freedom; a hot shower,

Coffee, a warm bed for them; for me, the Tower,

And a jury more fearsome than the snakes

Which would coil around my limbs and devour

Me whole if I fell asleep—though it makes

No sense, of course, and I slept for an hour

Or two, in the end—awaking with a start,

And knowing they were near, and that they'd scour

The woods. Yet, even now, I must not lose heart.



Bushfirę

The flames rage through the brittle undergrowth,
Tower above the tallest trees, flickering
Infernally in the fire's twilight, scorching
Through all life—carbonize all—as if loath

To spare a bough, a twig, this hellfire both
Chaotic and cunning, intercepting
Aid, fought on many fronts—twisting, turning;
Intense, as if it burned what it did loathe.

Only near dawn on the following day,
The winds die down—becalm the firestorm—
And volunteers keep that chaos at bay;

Some cry, now, to see how people perform
At such times in a brave and selfless way;
The fire gone, they drink coffee to get warm.



The Mountain

On the mountainside, though the light is dim,
And the tide of heat's rising already—
Wet, tepid air you can feel—a heady
Emotion surges within: a slim

Sliver of joy and anticipation,
Which I would not give up for all the world;
A place where I need not plant a flag unfurled;
A place of my mind alone, its mansion.

There, and everywhere that I should take it
If only I can follow nature's examples,
With its cicada songs, squirrel, cricket;
A paradise found between one's temples,

Left behind, yet forever in my heart;
I'll return, body or mind, after I part.



Memories

Some kind of instinct woke me at the sound
Of that name, taking me back to a past
When time moved slowly and years seemed to last,
Memories spilling, like pages unbound;
Long-lost possessions that one day are found,
To bring back from childhood, distant and vast,
What into a dark well I might have cast;
For to go there, I must delve in old ground.

I must then be prepared to uncover
What, in childhood, I may have left behind:
Innocence long-lost, kittens that were drowned;
Yet, to be myself, I must recover,
And also accept the things that I find:
The truth that's my own—however unsound.



The Plunge

We were traveling fast, amid the downpour,
Dodging tree-stumps, pot-holes, various creatures,
Great and small—speed distorting their features—
Not realizing what we were in for.

Ahead of us, the jeep skidded, its four
Passengers borne past that edge, just inches
From where we watched, quite aghast, quite helpless,
Upon firm ground; saw how they seemed to soar,

Then, plunged—nothing but the engine's dying
roar—

The hillside rising as a cloud of dust
And flying sparks while the vehicle vaulted—

The sheer screech of scrap metal—long before
The death-truck reached the bottom, at long last;
Their sleep is dreamless, now; ours is haunted.



The Climb

Life's there before us in all its grandeur;
Spread out, surging up, to tower above.
Footsore, upon our city legs, a rough
Day's trek for the inexperienced roamer;
Nothing like an obstacle to conquer;
Break you down (you who thought you were so tough)
To push on when you think you've had enough.
Thus, by bowing down, you become better.
Straight from soft beds, waking-sleep over,
We discover, in this place, a new love;
A love of place—yes—but also of stuff
We never dreamed we'd like—something greater

Than our everyday—pain besting comfort;
Opening our eyes; making us alert.



The Descent

The journey back was by a downward slope,
A winding path; the rustle of brown leaves
A carpet underfoot, where each step grieves
For summer's passing, though it looks with hope

Upon the fallen season—those fragrant
Life-ripened days of early October
Like our descent: no longer arrogant;
Our old steps—willful, careless—now sober.

But, left behind, besides our innocence,
And the flaws and errors that we couldn't see—
To which youth and confidence often lead—
There was something good—noble in a sense—
Betrayed, without much thought, by you or me:
A spark, a living voice, we didn't heed.



Tainted

The rain fell all day, as if it would cleanse
The tainted site of the casual violence
That had taken place, since an acquaintance
With evil—in itself—soils even friends.

Yes, innocence is of no consequence,
When you are to blame for having survived;
The clear, guilty knowledge of having contrived
To stay behind—a weary existence

That feels somewhat less than the gallant life
You once aspired to—is as much as most
Can count on. This you tell yourself, the knife-
Edge kept keen by that whetstone, where you host

Pageants to the old ghosts of yesteryear;
Your mind, overheated; your sorrows, dear.



Charred

We found it in ruins, all gone up in smoke,
The old farmhouse—just a shack to strangers—
 Reduced to ashes, to beam-embers;
Heads hanging, arms limp, it was hard to choke

Back the anguish, to see, gone in one stroke,
Our home—our hearth. The memory lingers
 There, in a place no-one else remembers,
One which nature will reclaim and time cloak.

So that, one day, by chance, some other folk
 Will notice the overgrown foundations:
 Proof of our lives, but not our illusions;
Our dreams unknowable to those who'll poke

Idly around, wondering what they might find—
 Nothing but the ashes we leave behind.



Letting Go

You dig your toes in and reach for the next limb,
Hoping all the while that your grip will hold;
That you won't be clawing air for a slim
Chance that the drop through those ages untold,

Which resides in the canopied forest,
Multilayered creature of endless green,
Won't be your end; that, as you come to rest
In the cool, damp world that you've never seen,

It will be you who feels life's sharp pains;
The birdsong, the buzz and call of the insect;
That you, unmoving, blood still in your veins,
Will be conscious still—you still—and expect,

At any moment, to rise again, whole,
While nature reclaims you—time takes its toll.



Territory

Stealing across the roof in the moonlight,
A graceful silhouette, sleek, long-bodied;
Its owner stalks a foe, a patient “*deed*
Of darkness”, for every measured step might
Rouse that rival, and lead to a desperate fight
Beneath the weathercock—the moon bloodied;
Silence broken, the night itself sullied;
A struggle—a primal trial—not of right

And wrong, but of strength; for the right to life;
For the means to endure; quite unearthly
Are the screams that fill the night—rage, fear, strife;
But the yelps, growls and hisses end brusquely;
A fleeing form slashes night’s cloak like a knife,
While the triumphant cat prances proudly.



The Year's Passing

The sun glares from behind the upstart clouds,
The orange glow of unnatural storms
In the autumn sky—the colours, all norms
Broken this day; air, itself stifling, shrouds

The ominous scene, and somehow performs
A transformation upon familiar
Sights while Sunday trippers—most peculiar—
Have dispersed, as have nature's flocks; swarms,

In nooks and hives, now; nothing hums nor sings,
In this deserted field, both foul and fair,
Where nothing appears, but a lack of things.

But, should you breathe deeply and smell the air,
You'll make out the source from which all life springs,
A spirit present, even now: winter's heir.



Plain of Mortality

The sun's descent left a frozen terrain;
Uninhabited, bare and forbidding.
The land spoke of hardship and of the vain
Struggles of doomed settlers. Their skulls staring

Out—those sockets dire, deep and dark—retain
The fearsome sentiments that their starving
Hosts had for their last: there, plain
For all to see. Nothing so frightening

As to recognize despair: the insane
Seed in our souls; mortal-bread's leavening,
Which we dream (don't *think!*) dormant will remain,
As we deny what's always approaching.

Thus, we expose what we'd rather not see
Within ourselves: that we must *cease to be*.