

My London Suburb

Northern Line

Mrs Someone, 57 Richmond Road,
fierce protector of the neighborhood,
chairlady of the Stop Developers Committee,
champion of the Green, placer of logs
to stop the lorries parking on the grass,
lifelong member of the British Naturalists
organizer of plant fairs, Victim Support,
defender of the faith, regular church goer
writer of letters to the local Council
keen gardener, cat lover, letter writer,
my mother

your grip on life is as no-nonsense
as on a gardening fork: turn the earth,
out come the weeds, in go the bulbs.
Death to slugs, loving care to seedlings,
your kitchen window nursery to plants
and outside on a disused coal bunker
a tray of bonsai trees keep tally
of your declining years. A cat (or two)
per decade: Pat, Julie, Moogie, now
strange classicists: Homer and Hercules
who adore you

on your knee or bed, run to meet you
when you come in through the back garden
and bring in presents of half eaten mice
or just the gizzard, occasionally a rat,
like vassals paying tribute to their lady,
and purr and arch their backs heraldically
when you stroke their rich ginger fur.
You say you don't fear death, no, really
not. More likely, I should think, Death
himself might

hesitate to knock at your front door before
his colleague, Age, has done the hard work
stiffening joints, clogging the arteries,
in a war of attrition like rust or rot
which in time finishes everything off.
We've taken to visiting parks together,
Capel Manor, Avenue House, Golders Hill
a slow round past shivering flowerbeds

stopping at the kiosk or café for tea
in a plastic cup

before driving home on the North London
labyrinth of roads the wheels of your cars
have driven on for sixty years. Hard
to believe they won't notice your passing.
That when your breathing stops there'll still
be a traffic jam in East Barnet Road,
cars still rushing up and down York Road,
buses climbing Barnet Hill and tube trains
on the Northern line sparking on the tracks
to their last stop.

(2008)

Hitchcock

We're in a room of tens of thousands,
housing as many wives and husbands,
with a couch, a colour TV, a plant,
and an antique heirloom from an aunt.
The day was calm, the evening calmer:
the scene is set for mellow drama.

He sips at whisky. She knits a scarf.
These old films are a bit of a laugh.
Only their hands are on the move,
back and forth in their accustomed groove.
Peace like this may only be obtained
by living saints or certified insane.

And when the film is finally over
they swing their legs down off the sofa
with pins and needles in body and soul.
"Well, I suppose that was rather droll,"
he yawns. She stretches. He downs the dregs.
She rubs the muscles in her legs.

It's a full moon tonight in the suburbs.
Her peaceful breathing grates on his nerves.
Cats wage love outside. The bedroom clock
goes: hitch-cock, hitch-cock, hitch-cock.
He imagines driving out by some back route,
with her still warm body in the boot.

(1988)

Friends

My friends in the park
live in a parallel world
to the people out walking
their dogs, pushing
their prams, kicking a ball.

Mine are equally busy
spear-heading for worms
wing-milling in the stream
circling in the air
in coordinated rings,

they are always with me
taking notice of me only
to avoid me – what kind
of friend is this? Well,
I like *them*: pigeons

with iridescent necks,
an army of crows disputing
everything, the seagulls
telling nostalgically
of beaches and cliffs

and the long-legged stalkers,
heron and egret, plodding
along this suburban stream
in Greater London, strangers
flown in for the pickings

and on what wings! When
they unfold them, it is as if
geological eras unrolled
and we were the intruders,
wondering at the primeval.

But somehow my favourite
is the opposite. I like him
in proportion to his shyness
of me, his way of darting
along the low river bank

hiding behind willow roots
emitting tiny morse chirps,
his mahogany brown colour,
his perky upstart tail:
wren, miniscule fugitive,

recipient of my one-way love,
diminutive hunter, nimble
as a thought, darting this way
and that, halting a minute,
racing on to inspiration.

(2018)

Early Germany

Fishing

Asked why he went on fishing
where there are no fish,
he answered, "Because I go on wishing
my one single wish.
I wish not to miss the moment
when the wind dies,
when clouds move on unpropelled
and the bittern cries,
when water takes on exactly
the pattern of overhead clouds,
and I understand more
than is allowed."

(1978)

Cold War in Rohrbach

Pedro and Luigi, two waiters
in white shirts and tight black trousers
eye the pizzeria with distaste.
Unless more custom shows up later
the places laid and plastic flowers
will have been a waste.

The only others in the place
are two GIs from the nearby base.
I overhear them comparing merits
of German and American beer, cars,
girls. Time off from defending us
against the Soviets.

It is six o'clock. Tuesday.
Snow is having difficulty deciding
whether it's rain. The bicycles hum past,
their lights like glow-worms gliding
feebly between steel-fendered cars.
Don't go. Please stay.

November. Germany
is still suspended in its history
like a spider repairing a broken web
The banks are new, gleaming multi-storeys,
and the cars: too fast and too many.
Only I'm at a low ebb.

I'm reminded of the bodies
become plaster casts when Mt Vesuvius
erupted. Down the road, at NATO Headquarters,
they're planning for the worst case scenario.
How might we look if the bomb caught us
eating our pizzas in Da Mario's?

(1980, revised 2022)

Political Poems

Prayer for a Revolution (December '89)

Like switching a light on
or off, societies go marching
down leafy shopping arcades
with affluence in their handbags,
or lie stark naked decomposing
in shallow trenches dug by
dull-bladed ideologies.

See this balcony above a street
whose wrought-iron balustrade
raises complicated questions:
seductively leaning over it
while she was being courted,
slumped full length along it
when her heart intercepted

the trajectory of a bullet.
Or over there, on the corner:
that stand which sold propaganda
and children's windmills on sticks
now houses a slouching soldier
with half an eye on passers-by.

Human life is as easily duplicated
and destroyed as documentation:
Guard, flipping through the pages
of History's passport at the border,
beneath hoardings with their vast
inhuman faces peeling: wave us on.

(1989)

Jermini

They called their fifth son Jermini
and hung a sparkplug round his neck
—an old Mercedes sparkplug as a charm
against snake-bite, Aids and cholera.

For they knew that Germany was a country
where everybody had Mercedes, big white
Mercedes, like the headman of their country,
houses with more rooms than people

and rainfall when you wanted, all year.
As a baby Jermini sucked his sparkplug
and his mother dangled it to help him sleep.
It came from the wreck of a safari jeep

abandoned in a gully near their village
and discovered like a bolt from heaven.
All the villagers had taken pieces:

the chief had got the star, of course,

and made them dance round it on holidays.
Jermini's father had received a hubcap
—which they ate from—a piece of the exhaust
which made a noise when blown like buffalo

and the sparkplug with its smell of fire.
Then when the car was stripped to barebones
a big rain had come and filled the gully
and next day the car had gone completely

—which proved their point. When Jermini
grew up and went to school he studied
a map of the world with Africa in brown
just like it was, and Germany in green.

He conceived a plan of how he'd walk
from here to Germany—it would take
five hundred days not counting the water
—he had worked it out—and return

in a white Mercedes, sounding the horn
and waving from the open roof rolled down:
they'd undoubtedly give him one in Germany
when they heard where he came from, and how.

(1997)

April Uprising

That this millimetre-thin, feather-fragile
tongue of green could part tons of earth
to appear in air and shiver in its currents
is not a miracle, just routine sorcery:

life's sleight of hand against the odds,
a ridiculously brave statement scrawled
on an unfeeling wall proclaiming: I am
the mind that moved the hand that wrote me.

Impossibly tender shoots, flesh-soft buds,
nervy tendrils, all snake out of sheaths
in the slow silent beat of day-on-night
to break pavements, clothe walls, force

an entry and greenwash totalitarian brown
in an April uprising. Victory of the humble,
born of crumbling humus, accustomed to dark,
long-planned insurgency in patient cells,

the velvet army of leaves, flowers, moss
battalions of grass, nettles, dandelions,
platoons of thistle, undercover ivy,
and the air-power of sky-covering trees.

Whose body is buried under the earth's skin
which stirs in spring, remembering an embrace
and reaching with light-sensitive fingertips
for the smile in the sky on the radiant face?

(1999)

Playful Poems



Peanuts on the Philosophenweg

Eating peanuts on the Philosophenweg
with a panorama of Heidelberg beneath me
and plants responding to the sun with blossom,
I glance down at the packet of peanuts
and am struck by the price: one ninety-nine.

Is that how many peanuts it contains?
A penny a peanut, carefully counted out?
Or three-a-penny, perhaps, or five?
What kind of machine could count out
nine hundred and ninety-five peanuts?

I pull the handbrake on my train of thought
embarrassed by its triviality. Hölderlin,
Goethe, walked these paths before me,
I doubt their thoughts were of peanuts.
I try to elevate my thoughts accordingly...

and see the valley spreading out below me
with its glinting beads of metal on the roads,
barges on the river reduced to dinky scale
and Transport comes involuntarily to mind,
Commerce, Trade, and suddenly I understand

why peanuts cost one mark ninety-nine:
I see a chain of men and women stretching
from my hand to an arid patch of Kenya:
planter, picker, merchant, driver,
docker, seaman, customs, wholesale, retail...

one hundred and ninety-nine people
queuing for their stake in my investment,
a Marxian algorithm of labour and reward
production, capital, encompassing continents...
I bet Goethe & Co. never thought of *that*.

(1994)

Small Successes

He manages to reverse out of the garage
in one go, without needing to rock back and forth
to avoid the garden gate-post and the neighbour's car.

He says good-morning to the secretary of the firm
in just the right voice: positive but not aggressive,
friendly but not ingratiating, and she smiles back.

At the meeting he tables a motion which the chairman
says 'might be just the job' and the other members
look his way for a second, while he writes a note.

He finds a place in the lunch-time restaurant
not too close to the door, and away from smokers
but still with a good view out of the window

and manages to eat his food—a tuna salad –
without pieces of lettuce trailing from his mouth
and without the feeling everyone is watching.

He reads through a report and corrects several errors
and re-formulates a concluding paragraph to make it,
in his opinion, much clearer and more persuasive;

he discovers a function of the word-processing pro-
gramme
which allows him to turn words automatically to capitals
and proceeds to do this with all the proper names;

he makes a difficult phone-call to the auditing department,
gets only the secretary but leaves a very competent
message with her and instructions to pass it on.

On the way home he finds a short cut to avoid a traffic jam
and the radio plays a song he'd liked when he was younger
and he turns the volume up and moves his head in rhythm

and over supper tells of his successes, sounding modest,
making sure he doesn't talk too much, and remembering
to praise her cooking and show interest in what she says

and manages in bed to steer between the Scylla and
Charybdis
of haste and over-long preliminaries, so that her sigh
and his grunt come as near as damn-it to coinciding

and even reads a few pages afterwards of *Our Planet*
(a report on possible signs of life in a fallen meteorite)
before they turn off the light and say 'good-night'.

(1997)

Poems with Classical Themes

Hesiod

We carved new fields
from virgin land
like god dividing the world
shortly after Creation.
Unlike god we sweated
behind the backside of oxen
dragging a ploughshare
through the crust of earth.
Into the furrows we laid
each precious seed
with the care of a bride
embroidering her trousseau
with reverent stitches.

I bought a slave girl
for work etcetera.
Fourteen years old.
Eyes like a snared bird.
Habit softened her
the way you soften clay
by banging it on wood.
After a year I freed her.
That was a mistake.
Now I'm her slave
working round the house
and in the stony fields.

I saved up for papyrus
from a trader in town.
I am making a poem
of farming and the land;
my pen scratches lines
across the yellow page
the way I plough: back
and forth exhaustingly.
The feet of the lines
trudge wearily as mine.

(What I forgot to say
was that I met the Muses
one day when I was high
on a mountain, grazing.
They danced up the hill,
barely veiled, to music
only they could hear.
Seeing me, they laughed
and said: "We are Poetry.
Write down what we say.
Watch the way we step.
Hear the words we sing.
They're not exactly true,
but a fair approximation.")

I swear I saw them.
I still hear their words.
At home she scoffed:
"The sun went to your head."
She may well be jealous.

(1992)

Lyssa

Hera sent Lyssa down to earth
to take revenge on Herakles
by driving him insane...

She found him living in a poky flat,
his bell the thirtieth of forty-seven,
a grim concrete building with a garage
underground, reeking of car exhaust.

Being a god, she didn't need to ring
or use the elevator, but spirited herself
up to his floor and slid past the lock
more easily than a credit-card.

Herakles was arguing with his wife
ferociously after drinking six beers
(the bottles stood like spent shells
on the square formica kitchen table)

his wife was getting at him for drinking,
for not earning more money and blowing
what he did on booze. The words
flew round the room like shrapnel

and the children cowered in the bedroom
(Jamie in the top bunk, Nick below)
holding their pillows over their ears
and crying when they felt an impact.

Nobody noticed Madness arrive.
She was invisible, but more potent
than alcohol, or the social deprivation
politicians blame for violent crime.

He pushed her and she pirouetted
more daintily than he thought possible.
Her head erupted in a lava-flow of red
as it met a corner of the metal stove.

And when he went to find the children,
comfort them, their screams of terror
at the sight of his blood-stained hands
were like denunciations by witnesses

at his rigged trial. He silenced them
one-two, then sat on the floor hearing
silence settle round him and the drum-beat
in his head slow down and subside.

Her work accomplished, Lyssa left
and no-one saw her leave, or plummet
down the lift-shaft, hesitate a moment
outside, wondering who next to visit.

(1994)

Penelope

“You can keep your floating island,
your palaces of marble and gold,
your laced cocktails on the verandah,
and food from all round the world;

You can keep your king-size bed
filled with down from young swans,
your charms which turn admirers
into mindless automatons ...

And you, you can keep your cave
with maiden-hair the name of fern
in clefts of cave-walls dripping
with the waters of no-return,

your relatives on Mt Olympus,
your blandishments and promises
to make me immortal on condition
I forget my name is Ulysses.

And you, teenage bathing beauty
playing beachball on the sand
how can you look at me, a naked
castaway, as a potential husband?

Marry one your father will approve,
a local prince of noble lineage,
don't tempt me into thinking
you could wind back my middle age,”

He said, tying the ropes of a raft
not fit for the thousand miles
of rough ocean between this place
and a half-remembered rocky isle.

“Give me that woman whose name
means seabird skimming the waves
whose face lights up my memory
like a lantern in a dark cave,

who may or may not be waiting
for me after twenty long years

surrounded by a pack of suitors
like wolves around an injured deer,

who, by report, spends her nights
unpicking the tapestry she sewed
by day, outwitting time, refusing
to believe she may by now be widowed,

sleeping on the oak bed I made,
making the maid repeat, not prayers,
but the exact same words I'd used
when I freed my hands from hers.”

(2022)

Light at the End

Lilac

A bush leans over the fence
I walked past in winter,
its twigs brown and lifeless
casting a bony shadow

until in spring their tips
obeyed a silent order
and all began to swell
like upside down raindrops

ready to drop into leaf,
an up-pouring of emerald
each shapely as a tiny dress,
with a head of blossom inside

which, as the days passed
and the temperatures rose,
grew into full-bodied flower
and broadcast its scent:

lilac, that colour, that smell,
reminding me of when we sat
under the lilac in the gardens
of the Museum of Fine Arts

talking of things in general
and feeling the lilac inside
obeying a silent command
and growing over the fence.

(2017)

Unexpected Visitor

In the underworld the grass is black
and smells of soot, trees sweat blood
from holes in their bark, fish gasp
where they lie cast up on the mud.

In the underworld only bad memories
persist, separated off like silt
filtered from the river of life:
pain, fear, hate, and guilt.

Every body is a scarecrow of itself
dressed in the clothes it once wore,
standing like a cross above a grave,
face replaced by a bag of straw.

In the underworld there is no good,
you can look for it for eternity.
You will forget what good ever meant
or love or honesty or beauty.

No god, apart from the grim dictator
with his thin-lipped queen: they rule
in silence, their thoughts are enough
to impose their life-denying pull.

Why then did they listen to a woman
who came as a messenger from above
looking as if she was still alive,
with a light in her eyes of love?

Their answer was silence, not denial.
She walked the rows of scarecrows
searching the bags of stuffed straw
and stopped by one she seemed to know

and took its hand and led it out
as its legs remembered how to walk,
and eyes to see, and how its face
used to look and tongue to talk.

In the air above the grass is green
and smells so good. Trees ooze sap
from buds overflowing with desire
for the light drawing them up, up.

Hope is in the air, filling lungs
with feelings of possibilities,
and blood with oxygen which fires
the engines at work in our bodies.

An open flower is a lens looking
in on the smallest particles in motion,
and out to the limits of the universe
and the almighty ongoing explosion.

(March '22)

Eden

True, Adam's getting on a bit and Eve's
figure leaves something to be desired,
Eden itself beginning to look overgrown
like a suburban garden once well tended
now left to its own devices by an elderly
owner who can't really manage on his own:
the fig tree suffering in the English winters,
brambles scaling all the perimeter fences
and bindweed throttling the climbing rose

but every now and then they find an apple
either on the tree or lying on the ground,
a windfall, ripened to perfection,
with rosy cheeks like a Botticelli beauty,
its flesh sweet and juicy and they bite
into it in turn, sharing the enjoyment,
and remember how they had planted the tree,
watched its growth, celebrated the first flower,
then fruit, like the ultimate sensual pleasure.

(15.05.2021)