

Autumn Tiger



Vikings are standing
on the beach. They have
run through the water from
their boat. 5 yrs 11 JULY 1965

AUTUMN TIGER

poems by

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For Mim,
my wife since 1957.
Without her, nothing

*

‘The weight of this sad time we must obey;
say what we mean, not what we ought to say.’
King Lear. W.Shakespeare.

Some of these poems have appeared In the following:

Agenda (UK), The Australian, Descant (Canada),
Fiddlehead (Canada), London Magazine, Metre (Ireland),
The North (UK), Partisan Review, (US), Planet (Wales), Poetry
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Translations of Li-Bo (701-62CE) with Zhan Qiao of the
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Jinan University, Guangzhou, People's Republic of China.

Previous publications:

Homage to Colonel Rainborough (1983), Omanawa Press, NZ;
Being Determined (1990), Cornford Press, Tasmania;
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Übermenschen

'I never knew one who was not a beast in comparison.'

- Byron on Shelley.

How romantic of Byron to snatch Shelley's heart
from the pyre. The bones were black and cracked,
his fats had fried and flamed,
but there was his heart, a blackened lump.
No doubt he tugged hard on its strings
before it came free, half-cooked.
He passed it to Leigh-Hunt, but Mary claimed
her widow's part and bore it off to be
buried at Bournemouth years after her death.

Meanwhile Byron swam where Shelley sank,
a match for any man in water, for any woman
in bed, and the sun flayed him. When his Contessa
died a hag, they found fragments of the poet's hide
preserved in a velveteen bag.

It's fifty years since the Rector of Hucknall
assuaged clerical ennui by lifting a slab
to discover the heroic lord lying 'handsome',
except that to explain his genius the grateful Greeks
had taken his brain and the noble brow
was laced like a football, or that of Mary's Übermensch.

Ab Initio

Even so, things began very well.
After eight months battened down apart
The women and men were inseparable,
Making the beast-with-two-backs
As if a new order of existence was imminent.

But then the rum and their luck ran out
And after four days they were clapped back
In their categories: pongoes and tars,
Loblolly boys, forgers and footpads:
The political scum of the Irish bogs,
Dregs of the English slums, their sweethearts
Once more reduced to 'tarts'...

1788 turned 1789,
Bats and birds fell dead in the heat,
But the avant-garde of the Criminal Class,
Dragging their chains and groaning
Like didgeridoos, got Circular Quay
Ready for new chums.

While in linen, twill, baratheia, gold braid
And a cocked hat, Governor Phillip,
Hero of the English Propertied Class,
Strolled and fancied a monument
To his First Fleet in full sail,
Fantastic upon the promontory.

Advance-to-contact, March 2003

“I was in Baghdad when you were in your dad’s bag.”

- Soldierly remark.

Yesterday the desert dusted our sweat
And I woke to the moon hanging
Like a flare, the windows rattling.
Thunder detonated, lightning flashed.
I dragged the duvet over your bas-relief,
Lay down but could not sleep.

You sprawled like the dead,
Like the twenty Lincolnshire lads
Buried in line as they fell,
Their stubborn grins holding up
a new *BMW* plant at Arras.

My brothers and my Dad
Survived last century’s wars.
I was an infantry lieutenant fifty years ago,
Slogging along in the Guyanese heat
And Berlin snow, watching ahead,
Listening for orders, keeping my troops spread
Until we could lie down, sentries set,
And sleep like the dead...

Oh-four hundred ... Five ...”Sparrow fart.”
From the sea the barrage creeps.
Soon we will have the morning news:
Our leaders in their buttoned-up suits
Lying in their teeth. Their lies turn our reality.
Our blood and bone fertilise their world.

**Failing to Find the Daoist Priest
in the Daitian Mountains**

Water babbles, dogs bark and dew
drenches the dark peach blossoms.

In deep woods glimpses of deer,
but no noon temple bell rings.

Where streams spurt from cliffs, in green
haze bamboos arc. Nobody

knows where he is, I loiter
ruefully among the pines.

Remorse

Stokesay Castle was it,
Where you stamped in puddles
And I gave you a smack?

Oh my boy, my son, if only
You could give it me back.

Game Over

At High Tea in the Rehab. Hospital,
Miss Paragreen, stone deaf, lets forth
a body noise like a starter's gun,

does not pause in spooning yellow jelly,
nor do the other three, but Mrs Clausing
and myself, dash into sentences loudly...

Saturday evening. Behind the counter,
above the chatter and clatter of crockery,
beyond the hearing of most silvery heads,

a radio pops and crackles. Kindly nurses
shout; outside sun shadows the tee-tree fence
and clouds whiz inland, shapeless as these days.
Then through it all there is a tune, a 'golden oldie'
which echoed down those Devon summer days
when I was obsessed, possessed by a postgrad girl:

bangled, long-skirted, she wore patouli oil,
her long hair an auburn tent, her deep voice
playing plangent as a cello in my chest.

My bald-headed gallahadery made her smile ...
Fifty now, if she's alive, and I'm among the wrinklies,
glad only that I am not next to Miss Paragreen.

Endless Brevity

For a month you have lain between us
and I have been a boy against your back,
searchlights slicing our blackout
above the factory where dad made munitions

and now and then you would turn and hug
so I heard your heart detonating and you
saying that we were polar bears and
was your cub under the snowy sheets...

I make tea against your absence, night
ebbing, its tide resolving as trees sway,
a bird quick as fish across the shallow lawn,
no trace of you in all this endless brevity.

Christmas in Macau

Japanese Jesuits carved
granite into sixteenth century
baroque: 'The Apocalyptic
woman smashes the seven-
headed hydra'; 'The beautified
Luis Gonzaga' grips his heart,
stares down at the harbour.

In her superior niche
Mater Dei cries verdigris
that so many basilicas
were consumed by candles
they left it one stone thick.

In the cobbled cathedral yard
above the town, jaws a-flap
and eyes on springs, pink, red
and gilt, the jolly dragon swirls,
bells twitch and cymbals clash,
fire crackers make us hop and clap
under that tottering, crazy facade,
the empty windows full of Chinese sky.

Old Codger

I've got your war medals framed
and this battered plane you made
first day apprenticed, 1912.

Your other tools were thieved,
but not this lump of 'four-be-four',
dark with your elbow-grease.

In the bast on your handlebars
it had you wide-kneed, whistling
gutters for fifty years, hating it.

At seven your mum was dead,
a teacher and church organist,
you had her slender hands, they said.

So soon as you could fend her clout
At twelve your step-ma had you at work
At sixteen, you got to hell out

to Flanders. At last I grasp
your pride that my hands
are white and soft upon this page.

View from Flinders

Leaning over the shore in mist
Under the eponymous hero's obelisk
Nearly two centuries after he boated in
And out leaving this litter of names
White silence is complete
Except for musk lorikeet beaking about
Speaking in tongues
They are so tame I'm ashamed
They hang like green fruit among red blooms
Have no sense of net profits
Squawk at some funnier joke

Where the pier smacks soft-focus gleams.
Down below muffled boots thump
I flinch at the sudden roar...
Twin diesel abalone boats
Million-dollar rigs must take risks...
They'll come banging back slide
On their tractored floats rumble away
Flesh ready to freeze and fly to Tokyo
Shells' iridescence paving the bay

In the macrocarpa under the cliff
A heron unwraps its grey cloak
Flops into its future and past
Trails long legs over Chinese graves
under the car park's seal
The forgotten barefoot tracks ...

Soon there will be the bland blue
Poster view of the Dividing Range
The mirror sky and mimic sea

Retrospective in Guangzhou

From banked chrysanthemums glared
a portrait bust: the artist in his pomp,
chin-up tough. Inside we found him
bent into seeming deference, the jacket
of his grey, double-breasted suit hung
on his knee, so he must smile up through
dusty specs and bushy brows white
as his long goatee, hands knotted on
a cane, weight on the silver ferrule between
new, white suede shoes.

People drifted,
got in each other's light: his students from
half-a-century; noisy teachers with their
quiet flocks; friends, enemies, party hacks ...
TV and the Press selected groups, found him
a pretty girl, a huge bouquet: smiles frozen
in a flash.

The work was badly hung
on gloomy walls, ill-sorted, out-of-plumb,
some canvases slipped, frames grimy, cracked;
surfaces too. Pigments had turned fugitive,
highlights dim: the exhibition hardly honoured him.

Artists in old age can be impatient,
gestural, as if formalities waste time
and might be vanity enough to bury them
in history's dust with nothing answered,
even asked. The nudes, who turned their
heads away for more than modesty
in some fraught place, seemed deformed
more by default than by design, and such
landscapes had lacked conviction for a century -
deader than Dada or still-lives of apple and grape
banality which he had pursued with such tenacity.

Agathé Sorel told me she knew she'd be
an artist when, aged nine, crushed
in a gutted synagogue, she just drew and drew
with the charcoal on the sacred walls
when the line to Dachau was bombed ...
He'd also survived, for some too well.
Back in his studios after ten years' hard,
he was made boilerman, so he must scratch
round Academy hedges for sticks. Some laughed.

Eventually he was promoted porter
At the gates, saluting official cars in and out
Until one day he was given an hour
to catch the Beijing train and tickets
for a show of French Impressionists.

All this explained I walked about again
and saw how the pictures changed
to something other than the cultural cringe
I'd seen with Western arrogance.
I bowed when we shook his hand again.

I can't pronounce his name.

A Lament for William Scammell

'So you are one of Eagleton's *Essentialists*, are you?'

'You daft bugger
Sucking down smoke' –
That's what I thought
That's what you saw
Squatting by the Pillings' door
At the New Year's Eve
Before Blair took over the shop

We went boozily back
To your cold cottage
On the frozen Carlisle road
And when we got there
Fell out about the way
You also swallowed
The BBC's version
Of Tiananmen Square

Next day near noon
You came down like death
And I hugged you in horror
You shook your head
Lit up ...
I caught the empty
Glasgow-Penzance Express
Snow bevelling fells and kerbs
Red-faced rugged-up characters
Breugheled about near Wigan
Where Orwell discovered water
Biscuits were really cream crackers
The train broke down at Crewe

Back in Oz I forgot until
I heard you were dead
And I'm really pissed off
That we had that row –
But who the hell am I
Talking to now at the start
Of a sod of a century -
Most of the world mad
about gods ... Most of
The rest in reason's penitentiary?

Epithalamion

for Katie and David

That's how things are for most women and men:
there's lego-love, children, the mortgage then
the decades of talk, privily on the pillow in the dark,
over coffee in the kitchen Sunday mornings,
sotto voce among friends ... and the wordless way
the glance, the mouth, an eyebrow twitch
tells us everything ...

And there is the kindness of love, which sees past
the upset and rage, beyond the wrinkle and grey hair,
to what there was before, more, to what is always there:
the person who in some unfathomable way
became you, you realise, from that first day.

An Authentic Life:

To William Roache , Esquire, M.B.E.

‘If you want to know a man, you must know what
the world was like when he was twenty.’ Napoleon

Is the colonial moon upside down?

The sun arcs round the northern sky;
Hastings looks across the bay at Rhyl and Cowes;
October leaves burst on the deciduous bough
(How Spring welcomes the old!)
but both our days are dwindling now.

Do you still drive to the studios or does

a chauffeur swish you down the motorway
under that black Victorian viaduct?
A steam train de-railed up there made such a din
that Bert Antrobus, my grandfather, legs broken,
lay unheard for hours. It was the end of him.
My mother’s family have been in Wilmslow
since a couple of centuries after the eponymous
Hugh de had lands of the Conqueror twenty miles West:
‘Plumber and glazier of this parish, 1740’ says
a stone in the churchyard’s long grass.
The business went a while ago with Cousin John.

I used to go to Wilmslow every Friday afternoon
with Mum to see her mum. We would have gone
to Stockport market in the morning to meet Aunty Mill
and I would be left to wander while they talked,
eyeing dripping pheasants and rabbits, sniffing
the far moors and woods they came from
and hoping we would buy oatcakes to fit the frying pan.

I remember at the beginning of the war, every pane
in the glass roofed market was suddenly black
and glued with net against bomb blast ...

Did the cobbled gutters always shine with rain?
It's what I most remember of that Cheshire town,
clemmed to the bone in shorts, the puddles pitted,
the sense that the sun may never shine again.

No, it's elsewhere I recall when hireath strikes:
the winter frieze of Snowdon from Harlech
and moonset in the Celtic sea; a sudden field
of scarlet poppies beyond our Vale of Belvoir wall;
the school train's undulate shadow in the hills;
Orkney and moonlit seals singing, the eiders' call ...

*

That Handforth bypass runs above a stream
down a wide clay vale pocked by meres
and ponds, hedged by hawthorn, witch oaks
where I used to play. It's gone now, the brook
a culvert, and avenues, drives and crescents
of red brick semis, like our own, all yell
at each other across the tidy roads verged
with cherry trees. It was a shock, going south
on the London, Midland and Scottish line
(182 miles to London) to see the replication
of identical places on either hand. That was
my England, it *was* England! Such humiliation
I suffered to find myself among officer cadets
who despised that world, left me distraught
with shame as I copied the accent of their caste,
found that parallel bourgeois universe
of my 'betters' where I was barely tolerated;
hated myself in that microcosm; worse,
despised my family. A temporary gent., a spy
desperate to speak the patois behind enemy lines.
(You won't recall your laugh when 'bush' came out 'bash'.)
How odd you have spent forty years getting rich, acting it,
that northern accent - being someone else, like me.

I was the actor then, dressed up as orderly dog
with sword and Sam Browne in my khaki kit,
off before dawn to meet you at the Palisadoes,
that coral arm around Kingston harbour.

Sun through the green peaks lit the York balancing down
from Bermuda like a bright star – an aircraft
had failed to cross direct to Gander, vanished
in the North Atlantic with the previous draft,
so we flew to Iceland first, then Newfoundland,
Bermuda, Jamaica...

Well, there you were and I
was no longer the junior wart. We were allies
in adversity, you were a pink-kneed callow lad
and I was barely brown - not among, but *facing*
stone-eyed fusiliers in whose ranks my Welsh dad
had stood - he was so proud of me. (*Tel mauvais foi!*)
You overheard them call us 'them two chikoes'.
How scared we were of our O.C., a sadistic sod.

Dad had enlisted at sixteen, gone to France,
endured that bone-head butchery or cull
of the best and fittest, ending the chance
of revolutionary change *and* the Empire -
which I note you have recently joined.
Fifty years ago we were defending its remnants.
Now it's the empire of global corporations
and their consciousness industry making the world
safe for US capital and careless of depredation
of mankind and the planet Earth.
It's as tectonic a shift as yoking of the peasantry to steam:
old beliefs and values die. (Did we truly believe
'An Englishman's word was his bond'?). All things are
dumbed down: your show I recall at first rehearsed
realism and went to air twice a week; now five times
to gloss the lives of millions in those mean streets.

*

Recall our sexual adventures? I think not.
Jamaica, Bermuda, British Guiana ...
We grew up. Seduced, we signed on the dot.

The Royal Welch Fusiliers were posted to Dortmund,
you cleared off to the Trucial Oman Scouts.

I soldiered on, full of self myth ... Berlin,
Then out.

You had escaped becoming a G. P.,
your family profession; I had no idea of who
I was (nor had my mum and dad) nor what I could be.
I had left school at sixteen but the army revealed
I was not stupid. I wanted to paint and write.
You wanted to act. Our five years done we met
at Buxton, which was about half way
between Rutland House under
the Ilkeston Alps, and my Cheshire clay.

After that, you progressed from seaside shows
to rep. and we both got married: reality began.
It took three years to become a student teacher
and for you to get the part you have adorned
more than forty years. I taught, then got myself
to Oxford, took good honours, was not suborned
although much oppressed by that bastion.

I had one-man shows but never had the urge
to *sell* to succeed as a painter. I gave my work away...

What's art got to do with money? It is pleasure.
(As a poet I won't entertain.) I taught philosophy,
had a Jaguar, house in the country, leisure
to write and paint...

We gave it away, tried to salve
the anguish of the death of our son, find ourselves
by moving to Orkney, New Zealand, Australia -
away from Blesséd Thatcher, your icon, be free
of social rancour and bourgeois cant. In exile, at last
I found that I could write authentic poetry:
I don't belong here (Who does?) but try to come clean.

Your life as someone else, and working class,
makes you as famous as anyone has ever been,
and while we are gone seventy, near our ends,
you're as Tory as I'm Marxist, as sure of immortality
as I'm an atheist. We remain distant, but still old friends.

Infant Ontology

for Anna, our granddaughter

you wake inconsolable at four
rejecting the breast to yell
in terror at some dream

O

how we cuddle and rock you then
and *talk talk talk* to convince you
things are/are not as they seem.

The Performance

for Dimitris Tsaloumas, poet,
on his Eightieth birthday.

Head cocked fierce-eyed
he straddles his shadow
light bright on his avian skull
hoarse voice holding us
words hanging
soaring above this century
to tell of the agony
of lovely Antigone
and pierce to the heart
of love's ruthless truth.

He'll not stoop
to the lure of applause
stiff-legged walks off

A cough now would be like a rifle shot.

**Rome at the Last Epiphany
of the Second Christian Millennium**

Bells' clangour ends,
ambulances yodel down Viale Trastevere,
then quiet evening descends ...

'Listen, love, can you hear vespers
twisting up with these starling flocks
shape-shifting into dusk?'

Over the cross and satellite dish,
through aerial thickets we stare
at snow still lit on the Alban Hills.

An old moon climbs the crimson lattice
of intercontinental souls to lie a dull candle
on the icy lake beneath the sacred grove.

'Is it tonight, or Christmas, or both, horned beasts
are supposed to kneel in adoration of the virgin
suckling the fêted boy that the bull-swan-

golden shower or holy ghost has sired?
And that Magus Melchior and fellow magicians
with gifts of gold and frankincense, myrrh

and death for all the new-born sons of Bethlehem:
for chrissakes, what was all that about?' Below us
windows flicker, synchronised by the stations

of the global cargo-cult strutting their stuff ...
After midnight on Roman TV electrons
cohere as naked girls, sex-workers who

(Mama mia!) lie like Remus and Romulus
in the Cave of Lupercal, taking turns to suck
and smile, smile and suck, whilst the Vatican's

pert dome's albescent in Diana's ancient light,
which also gilds the interstellar dark,
as do these myths, these megalithic dreams.

Recollection in Tranquillity

'Let a hundred flowers bloom.' Mao

Party time was Thursday afternoon
but I could usually run a postgrad class.
That day I played 'The Solitary Reaper,'
and while they followed the text, watched
the Faculty raking leaves and smelt
the fragrance from their fires down below.

It made me smile to see professors and the rest
deft with skills learned in the dynasty of Mao.
I turned up Wordsworth, leaned out, urged them on.
Some faces shone, most did not, but all talk stopped.

In the Late World

For Tim Thorne

'Freedom!' we chalked on our missiles,

'Democracy!' on cluster bombs
Cocacolonising the world for its own good

Our liberty required harsh surveillance,
But the Darwinian market would fix
The fittest price while vox populi vox dei

Sovereign voters ruled by rational choice -
Such fantasies the media massaged
On behalf of plutocrats and military

Pumping verisimilitude into every home
'Entertainment' in which violence
solved all problems - except the virus

We knew it was mad, but supposing
We were safe we wagged the flag

**Thoughts of Her Husband
on the Frontier**

When did we part just last year?
South garden green ... Butterflies...

This year, when do I miss you?
Snow on Western hills, black cloud ...

Jade Pass is so far away,
Can letters find where you stay?

On Marcus Mounted

Rome, 1999

‘Shall mere fame distract you? Look at the speed
of total oblivion of all and the void of endless time
on either side of us and the hollowness of applause.’

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

I winced when I saw you at last: no saddle, big feet
stirrupless, knees splayed apart, bronze arm signalling.

Did such agony preserve you from iconoclasts?

Alone in your pomp

on a triumphal arch, philosopher-king, clerical error

saved you, from that rubble of self-made gods

and dusty administrators. Ten centuries

seemed a divine guarantee that you

were Constantine, who sanctified Christ.

You have played your part in our myths,
setting the sun’s birthday on December 25th,
finding yourself stuck on the Capitoline steps buffed up
for Holy Year when god was, or was not born,
making a big HI!

at the folks like an ex-world boxing champ,
commissionaire at the Ozymandius World Theme Park.

On this tump, the highest of the seven hills,
on the seventeenth of October, 1764,
Gibbon reflected on the trajectory of empires,
while in the Temple of Jupiter barefoot friars sang.
Now two buttocky girls squat on scaffolding,
re-gilding letters cut two thousand years ago.

The Forum is trim and rectangular, marble pillars uphold nothing; hopeless as
chimney stacks
left standing after Ash Wednesday’s fires.

*

Gibbon thought your death ended a Golden Age.
All your stern and self-addressed aphorisms
among dumb promotions for lovers of your wife,
and for *all* your victories, you were a loser ... The only man
from Syria to Spain, Egypt to Scotland, innocent of how
she shagged round Rome ... We understand
plague's decimation of the legions
and your tax base was beyond remedy.
But like the Australians fishing near the shore,
Who preferred not to see the Endeavour,
we ignore Imperial hypocrisy
and the 'world' is dying in its filth.
One day Manhattan will be flattened and
the multitudinous meek shall inherit the Earth.

*

The city's ochres transmute, late afternoon turns cold.
A souvenir salesman stamps his feet, sings snatches
of opera as we walk back beneath your arm.

My wife silvers your mask, catching me returning
your salute: "MARCUS AURELIUS, IMPERATOR."
"Vale," I say from our age of irony and lust,

Go down into the glittering streets,
step round dog shit, cars, abandoned
more than parked, pedestals, plinths and walls

tangled in neon yankee-doodling, antiquity
sinking below the streets,
pluvial amnesia smoothing vanity away ...

The Almond Tree at our Back Door

A tick after winter's midnight
Far cross the tropics
High above Hong Kong
The sun hesitates...

Eight hours flying to the south
At ten miles every minute
From dead bark against
Purple noon's vacancy
White buds burst
In a Zen salute

**On Seeing Distinguished Professor Li and his Wife
Return from Market on a Saturday Morning**

Your bicycle bell does not compete
with the croak and bleat of a cello
from the student flats,
nor the Cantonese gardener's yell.

I was amused, god help me,
to see you go pedalling past,
your wife side-saddled dainty
on the back with shopping bags.

She did not smile. You called
that you had a cold, did not stop,
raised an old trilby hat while we
were coming to the point where

the randy priest, eyes on my wife,
tells her yet again about his student
who changed his name from 'Kok'
to 'Fuk' and laughs and laughs.

Meanwhile you get yourself,
bags and bicycle, up the steps into
your garden's bamboo sanctuary,
next to which, in a palm grove

by the lake, they mean to build
a seven storey block so rich alumni
can return to stare down at you,
your cats, turtles, tadpoles in a bath,

chuck rubbish anarchistically, spit...
Retired, there's nothing to be done.
"Well", says the priest, "I know your man.
There's a woman weighs a ton

if she's a stone, in Hong Kong, who
briefs us, and what *she* doesn't know..."
What *I* know, Professor, is our friendship
has withered and now will never grow.

Herrick Country

At green first light, when armies stand-to,
I rose, drank coffee, wrote a page or two

and then walked the sunlit bosky way
loud with birdsong down to Torbay

and before six was on cliff paths worn deep
in red earth, rabbits stamping, gulls' sweep

along updraughts above the cliff's edge, sea
sibilant far below ... I was warden of three

hostels for girls at the college, kept an eye
on their well-being and security ...

The situation was reciprocal - Anita and Jane
joined me. There was no use to try to explain

to them that I enjoyed my solitary walk.

Then Carol, Anne appeared to laugh and talk,

compete with blackbirds in the bramble,
and soon there seemed to be a rostered ramble

to Budleigh Salterton for breakfast, which I bought,
when the weather was good. Afterwards we caught

the bus back in time for lectures at nine

After thirty years it's still a memory of mine.

**Visiting the Ancient Site
of the Wu King's Terraces at Tui**

Willows green on terrace ruins.
Spring bursting with girls' singing.

Only the moon which gilded
King Wu's concubines still shines.

King Wu, C5th CE

Cheshire Plain

Even in thick mist I know this land:
hawthorn hedges and stunted oaks,
green baize grass turning to slutch

under the hoofs of Tessa and Ben,
straight-backed, pert in black riding hats,
slit-eyed with competition, aged about ten.

Head-scarfed as HM, trilbied like the Duke,
sales managers, shop keepers and their wives
call jovially as lively animals prance and pace.

Howling through the mist beyond the fence,
a Boeing lifts its nose up for the clarity of space.

Aunty Clarice's Secret Life

Eyes bright with dullness, a Welsh hen,
a skivvy from the age of ten, her life
was clucking about, looking after men.

After her mother died she cared
for dad and Grandpa, three kids
of his second marriage, was not spared

for schooling, never argued, wept
when they were harsh or teasing...

Before the war at Worthing they kept

singing 'Why did she fall for the leader of the band?'
and I can still see her in the front row on the pier.
I was little then and it took me years to understand.

At the end of the war she was on her own:
Grandpa had died, the others married,
and so she was left without a home.

She got a live-in hospital job, secretly wed
a man who worked for the gas company
in Huddersfield, or so my mother said.

Years passed. He died. She had the flat
and a pension, watched television all day,
the neighbours, talked to the cat.

One Christmas Dad went. Down the street
she took him to a big department store
where he bought her a turkey lunch for a treat.
She ate like a dog, could hardly wait
for him to finish, was up and off in the crush
to the music department as if she were late.

“Here she is!” Before he knew what to do
she had climbed up on an electric organ,
people began clapping and she blew

a fanfare, then it was ‘That Midnight Clear’
‘God Rest Ye’, ‘Wenceslas’...her felt hat
beating out ‘Rudolph’ for a final cheer.

He had sidled to the back at the start:
she couldn’t read a word, let alone a note,
but their mum had been a music teacher
and as they cheered he broke his heart.

Recessional

A plain shore, a calm noon.
Three black hawks twittering off
across Easter's absurd full moon
fading in the Autumn sky
sliding the ebb's sheen from under
the baulks where our footfalls echo
and boats knock. We watch last tourists
a black-haired family lined above
a boat where heaped fish flick
in skips - orange roughy gummy shark
one-eyed flatfish fixed on the sky's
blue depths as blades slice and gulls
acclaim splayed guts. The father bows
to pay the blunt crew nod and turn away

Invigilation

Winter Saturday, Canton, 8 a.m.,
the sun a sore blister between blocks,
postgraduates bent to the Bard,
that brave sceptic, sad misanthrope,
that suave genius surfing past
on the last metaphoric wave of hope ...
Up on the rostrum under my straw hat
I've a handkerchief knotted on my bald crown,
in warped windows the wind's morose,
there's no public heating this far South,
so I stand, step down and walk the rows,
feet echoing in the sniffs and coughs.
Behind me someone hawks and spits
Not winter nor the 'flu can stop their pens after
three thousand years of meritocracy.
I stare out hoping for a gleam of the Pearl
where ships groan in mist and sad as whales,
freight trains croon across the concrete suburbs.
Below a swaddled gaggle like geese pluck lawns
smooth and green as the lakes, grab bamboo hats
and back their stools into a stiff Mongolian blast
that crashes palm fronds down, bowls litter past
and cracks the red flag on the white mast
A sudden shiver spins me ...
Biru's eyes after a flying thought,
stare through me ... She smiles.
Some last endocrine dreg
Stirs my heart as I walk back,
almost distraught, ascend,
sit on my cold seat, shiver,
rub my palms between my thighs,
hunch and watch the long strings
from ceiling fans swing and sway ...
*...Thelma's blue cotton school skirt
as she climbs the milk churn slide*

*at Adlington ... Summer Term,
and steam hissing from the school train
bluebells dog daisies dandelions
rockery stones still white-washed
army-style and plovers tumbling
over the clover fields.*

For the first time

I see that brave vibration each way free:

O glandular epiphany!

ThelmaThelmaThelma Stead

for fifty years you've swayed

your lovely rhythm in my head

Thelma,Thelma! Are you alive or dead?

Did you ever know how I

scruff of Saint Onan's Lower Fourth

scuffling obscenely with my friends

could suddenly only gawk collapse

and clutch myself distraught?

It took a year before at the ticket-barrier

I let the back of my hand touch the silk slither

under your dress, felt that tender mobile cleft.

A current jumped. My heart stopped. The blood left my head.

I walked amongst my schoolmates

As if I was almost dead.

In that furtive guilty flogging culture

we only loved our fists, women were obscene,

I found the vicarious joys of literature,

*thumbed *Fanny Hill* instead of Mons Veneris ...*

In China age and learning are not a joke.

I have indemnified the university against funeral costs

until an American accent is preferred I'll teach the Bard.

Stiffly again I walk, Biru does not look up,

three helicopters come clattering by

and seem to shake down rain ...

There's still an hour to go

À La Lune

Glitsy mannequin
On night's catwalk
You perturb Venus
Black the sun's eye
Outstare us all since Adam

Without you between us
And the dark
matter of the cosmos
We'd be lost
But like a mother you
Can't look away

My Mum told me
When you are new
One should turn money
Over in one's pocket
Plant out ... and

O

Such plenitude of solace
In your golden harvest!

Ab Initio

Even so, things began very well.
After eight months battened down apart
The women and men were inseparable,
Making the beast-with-two-backs
As if a new order of existence was imminent.

But then the rum and their luck ran out
And after four days they were clapped back
In their categories: pongoes and tars,
Loblolly boys, forgers and footpads:
The political scum of the Irish bogs,
Dregs of the English slums, their sweethearts
Once more reduced to 'tarts'...

1788 turned 1789,
Bats and birds fell dead in the heat,
But the avant-garde of the Criminal Class,
Dragging their chains and groaning
Like didgeridoos, got Circular Quay
Ready for new chums.

While in linen, twill, baratheia, gold braid
And a cocked hat, Governor Phillip,
Hero of the English Propertied Class,
Strolled and fancied a monument
To his First Fleet in full sail,
Fantastic upon the promontory.

In The Torrid Days of the Autumn Tiger

Arms windmill in sweating squads
on the basketball courts.

Year One's first month Drill

the boys stride out too long

so girls are out of step,

What randy fun

for British sergeants:

the P.L.A. call sober commands.

A corporal muscles up on bars,

points camouflaged toes in

a pieta above the girls.

We walk through crowds in shade,

meet Wu Man-li, paediatrist wife

of Huang Jun ('Womanly, Don Juan')

She's back from a conference

in Kunming on the improved diet

which makes her shorter than

her ten year-old daughter,

Xing-Xing hugged a white rabbit

when we first met. Jun told us

"When she found out that she

had eaten her pet she wept and wept."

Here's a yellow duck swung by its wings

leaving a trail of puzzled quacks as

it banks into an apartment block.

We buy bread and wine, go sweating up

eight flights up in the Foreign Expert Block.

Next door the priest intones: "This is my body."

Christmas Message

Letters collected, swatting flies away,
we open Christmas Cards in the noon sun,
find in one a note you wrote, aged nine,

telling your cousin you had scored
in a soccer cup and that you had written
to NASA for information about Apollo Ten.

My Welsh heart spills to see your words,
the hand which makes you real again
twenty-five long years after you have gone.

Your mum walks on containing grief
with all her English reticence,
but I must answer ... *It is in words we live!*

Suck-/ing'

'All I have is a voice,
to undo the folded lie'
- Auden

Today maybe a breeze will stir our rooms,
Swelling white curtains with cool energy
As high over the delta
Shines the monsoon's threat
And our reality is a torrid swelter
Which turns coffee
Into instant sweat.

Here's Zhan Yin's Auden essay
And here's my wet wrist smudging
The poet's bare-faced cheek
And her misapprehension
That English surf bursting at its peak
Needs such hyphenated emphasis
Before the long, withdrawing roar from tension.

Ah that hollow schoolmaster with his urge
Among schoolboys to put the world right,
Who ducked away
From grown-up games,
Like world war, preferring to say
He had turned religious,
And praised American capital's aims.

The New Dialectic: Demand and Supply

Jinan University, Guangzhou, 1997

Is it time to give up teaching
when the happy expectations
of those about to graduate
pierce your heart with beauty and grief?

Oh look, everything you hope
is pre-ordained, but chance does let some
dance down long lives to painless graves;
others are blindly maimed or crushed.

And if I tell you, you will smile,
indulge my white beard, and that is right.
The beauty is your courage and belief
that now you are free. That is grief to me

Poetic Conceits

You are shouting in the gloom,
eyes staring, nostrils wide.
So much I can see against the light
sprawling in a rosewood chair
in your book-filled garden room.

*'Respect for the classics! Each word
is precious ... More valuable than friendship!
You are too flippant... You want fame!
"Old tree" is "old tree" ... Withered vine"
is that and no more ... "Stark pine?" Absurd!'*

For too long our eyes don't shift.
I cross out "Autumn Thoughts,"
say, *'In English it's a clutter of cliches.'*
So began our rift ...

The Drunken Lord

Outside the door the dog barks –
I know that my lover's here.
Shoeless down scented steps I dance
But the naughty man's dead drunk.

I help the rascal into bed,
He won't remove his silken robe.
If he is drunk, let him be -
Better than sleeping on my own.

Anon. CviiiCE

Home

How good to be back
in our bed under
the iron roof and
amazement of stars,
the wind continuing
where the sea left off.

Where is the Chinese train
which hoots disdain for sleep?
Where are the rats' squeals
outside our door,
beyond the net the compulsive
mosquitoes' bloody lusts?

I cannot sleep without them yet,
I cannot sleep without them yet.

Release from the Alfred

After fifty days inside I'm pressed down
In my wheelchair by the sun's weight
And veiled glare of the galaxies

Amazed by trees' twisting extrusions
Cracking the seal where sleek cars flow
And blossoms gulp down u/v

From behind one-way glass I see
A rescue chopper whirling up -
The energy and beauty of the world!

I've been dreaming of low green hills
of misty spring the cuckoo coming to call
but here above the cerulean sea
bailed in shade beasts swish

This now is home to me

The Life Class,

Or Umpteen ways of Looking at a Lady

Into the night the moon leaps largely
dimming duplicitous stars in their courses:
they are not at all where they seem to be,
but caught up still in the join-the-dots web
of Greek mythology. In the orchard munching
peaches a possum imitates Tyburn gargles,
while inside the studio, nude and grumpy,
twenty-two and unemployed, Di is lying
on her tum - one arm forward, the other back,
a stranded swimmer, fingers catching
the spotlight above the foreshortening
problem of her bum. In the circle she lies
mooning, fundamental privacy laid bare,
soft and fuzzy, her tender penitralium's
the seat of Delphic mystery, source of fictions,
of value in Jane Austen's economy ...

*(The system's perpetual, in the planet's night
soft machines engage, egg-tubes agitate
in oviducts, seeds outnumber time,
genes cohere and contain the flux.)*

At the window in charcoal's scratch
the motherly moon enquires, not at all shy,
having outstared everyone since Eve
in the eye, she can't turn from us, content
in her menstrual courses...except for
perturbations of Venus and when she exactly
denies the sun's blinding reason with her dark eye.

Ha! Look, she's no goddess of the lovelorn,
no white jade rabbit ...Nah, it's elipsoidal,
littered with the junk culture of the USA,
which cannot rust nor blow away, except,
when random impacts bite that ovum's dust.

Silence grows sacred. We bow sacerdotal.
My fingers trace the scaphoid fossa, concha,
intertragic notch ... Suddenly Di stands!
On invisible high-heels swirls on her gown
and orbits our chatter, coolly considering
our votive offerings.

**Moonset in April
at Flinders**

Over and over
Magpies ask
The same question
Of the bright moon
As it silently falls
Among their cypress trees

If stars shout out the answer
The ocean drowns them
Warm In our deep bed
We think dawn
Still some time away

Émigrés' Song

Slow as continents
Over a land parceled
in dumb addresses
Dazzling clouds drift

Their dead
Watch our sporting life
From the trees
Our houses face the sea's
Troublesome horizons

Back in the Old Dart
In rank churchyards
Acid rain erodes us

We are neither here
Nor there ...

Chuck my dust
At the esurient sea

Night Work at Katalyn, 1940

He liked a poem, paused, but 'Like a dream
Like a vision, like a bubble, like a shadow ...'
Was as far as that one got. The rest, half-
Dressed as delivered in the starlit wood,
Stamped, eager to get in the soundproofed hut.

He emptied his glass of tea – half way,
Took up clean gauntlets and the German
Gun blood didn't clog, waded in
Stiffening black oilskins back to his post.

The guard slid the hatch.
In winter hoses froze,
It was all shit and blood.
The next pink nape.
One did what one could.

Tableau Vivant

For Emrys

Cold and clear of the sea comes
The pale ghost of the moon

A rufous eagle flies low
And leisurely into the bluster

Which makes cormorants crouch on poles
Our bearded son and us hunch

Shoring up moments
Against the creeping tide

To My Wife in Tokyo

There seemed always to be a surplus of springs
but now in September I stand at our door
valuing the marginal sun's balm for my bones
the washing I forgot last night damp with dew
your garden's fragrance filling my chest
the cats charming me but no e-mail from you ...

And in the distractions of the footy finals and
the Commonwealth Games the election bores on
the Government trying a re-run of the old tax rort -
rich Lions telling poor Lambs that they are 'free'
as useful scapegoats arrive by sea
Business as usual the cards stacked
but wobbling ...
Yet the sun's coming South and soon so will you.

In The Sleep of Reason

Like an owl in the ruins of truth I lament

Not the embarrassments of youth

Nor agonies of middle age

But that in my dotage I should see

The triumph of demagoguery

Pitiless aggression and the future

Repeating the past

Let my voice trouble

The gluttoned sleep

Of the righteous.

Wrinklies' Weekend

Eating together in the twilight garden

We are startled by the crash

Of pears falling

In the sunlit morning our bed

Is full of grandchildren

Singing

By the afternoon the garden

Is empty

Only birds calling...

Penultimate

I made myself walk
Because I'm slack
Turned at the crossroads

Towards the cliff's edge
\Under the dark trees
On the red dirt track

Before I glimpsed
The sea I came to a stop
Something was wrong

I felt like
A hot water bottle
Being filled to the top

A dull evening
The wind still
No one was near

As I breathed in deep
Only waves collapsing
Over the hill

Was this it?
I waited ...
Turned for home

The blade in my chest turned
Sharp under my breast bone -
Lay waiting

On my bed
Looking at familiar things
Which would not mind

If I were dead ...

You see

I survived again

And it's true:

When the future's in doubt

It's smaller things –

Doves' condolences

The sea's rich blue

The photo of my grandson

Smiling on the fridge

Shadows of flowers

My wife has arranged

Her kindness and grace

That delight me

Like Mozart when I wake

Coronary Ward

The moon on her rounds
Bends over my bed
Asks after my heart
In her old way
But I long for nothing
Am content

Above my head
The screen chases
My pulse
My breath and blood
As the dying moon
Sinks over the sleeping town