

TONY JOHNSON POEMS 164

(from son Dave 5/5/23)

BLUE Hard to open Earlier poems?

GREEN Box (?Parish Mag?)

RED ?Teaching? Other people's poems

HOW TO READ POEMS

Select from the contents diagram on the box.
Pop it in your mouth. Suck it. Suck it...Suck slowly.
On no account crunch it. Do not crunch it.
It is refined, honed. It must melt in the mouth.
Tongue-lift it to your palate. Hold it there.
Let it ooze flavour, aroma, pleasure,
dark bitter sweet or hard and soft centred.
Do not think. DO NOT THINK. Not yet. Not yet.
Let it melt. Then swallow the liquid bliss.
Feel the beat. Feel the beat. And then engage
heart and mind. Seek and you shall surely find
what you will, how you will and when you will.
Select one more from the box or dip in blindly.
No matter what, one more: then scoff the lot.

Tony Johnson

THE DEADLINE

The deadline is certainly elusive.
As it approaches – some jitters now.
Time management is crucial.
Insignificant details divert the focus.
You've done it along the road to this point:
Avoidance of the inevitable; frivolous frittering.
Cut out killing time: it's killing you.
So stick to the absolute essentials.
You've not worked them out yet?
But you're four score years and more.
Go get a grip of this last bit.
Do something useful, meaningful,
Blissful, beautiful, hair-raising, amazing.
Go start a blaze before the last flicker.

Tony Johnson

1 A CHILD'S WISDOM 10/5/2012 WISDOM

The pet banished to the hall.
And the child puzzling
At his painful whining
Wall and door intervening
And the child listening
And the dog constantly keening
And the child silently feeling
And the dog not ceasing
And the child empathising.
And the dog, like a baby, crying
And the child quietly paining
With wisdom beyond her ten-month birthing.

Tony Johnson

2 A GUEST'S REQUEST 3/1/206

"My father's staying. May I bring him too?"
I knew he was a poet and a Jew.

I did not know then he'd been in prison,
Nor of his forced logging in the mountains,
Nor of the thin gruel of near starvation,
Nor of his solitary in short chains,

His ankles tied to his wrists all night long,
Body shutting down in the bitter cell,
Mind composing yet another new song,
Noting slyly his happy days in hell.

I did know he had smuggled out his son
And fled again as Russian tanks rolled in
In fifty-six to snuff the revolution.
This time prison would kill. No one could win.

"May I have another sausage?" he said,
Sat in my garden as charcoal glowed red.

Tony Johnson
(George Faludy, one of Hungary's great twentieth
Century poets, wrote "My Happy Days in Hell",
first published in 1962 and by Corgi Books in 1987).

3 A LAST SLICE OF TOAST 9/2/2016

A LAST SLICE OF TOAST

Within its bounds of stainless steel
A last slice lay tidy in its slot.
Cold leather now, with lost appeal,
Alas, it was no longer hot.

At breakfast round the toast there sat:
Severe and short the housemaster;
His broad and po-faced wife, quite fat;
And just sixteen his perky daughter.

Observing them a new young teacher,
Lustful, headstrong, given to fun,
Keen for sport, a cunning creature,
Playing games he often won.

Over the wife's brow a shadow passed.
She battled hard against temptation.
Soon her hand would snake out fast
To grab the toast for mastication.

Now and then he would pre-empt her.
But that was not so good a win.
Wicked though it was to tempt her,
He loved to watch her war within.

Tony Johnson

4 A LONG TIME IN THE JOB 15/10/2016

Tied to the task
We flail through the days
But the nights fail us.
Cold winds keen through chinks
And rattle faulty the catch.
We played the game
But the rules tight as tick
Fail us and find us out.

Tony Johnson

5 A RECIPE FOR CONFLAGRATION 8/12/2015

A recipe for conflagration

Or Ring a Bell for Christmas?

INGREDIENTS:

Take one in-house family of average size with two or three children or more (sex optional).

Add assorted related family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles.

METHOD:

Place ingredients in an overheated and stuffy room.

Marinate for several hours in unaccustomed quantities of drink such as, wine, lager, beer, liqueurs, whiskey, British sherry and Fizzy drinks.

Mix.

Squeeze the ingredients into a rough oblong around a table, packed as tightly as possible.

Stuff.

Stuffing should consist of overgenerous portions of turkey, gammon, brussel sprouts, parsnips, roast potatoes, brandy-soaked Christmas pudding (old sixpences optional), brandy butter, double cream, mince pies and Christmas cake.

Decorate with cheap crackers, silly hats and sillier jokes.

Churn.

Break open the constituent parts from around the table.

Play games, if possible.

Allow physical and mental torpor to set in either by turning on the television or by lighting a log fire (preferably both) to add to the heat from central heating and from stuffed bodies.

Turn off television and light touch paper: conversation.

Cooking time:

Variable. A little impatience will help.

In any event conflagration will ensue sooner or later.

SERVES:

You right and as many as you like.

Tony Johnson

(The title was a thought for the day on Radio 4 near Christmas some years ago)

6 A TRIO OF TRIOLETS 9/11/2018

THE SHED

I'm trying to find some space to write,
And it's trying me. I'll try the shed.
But it's full of junk. A terrible sight!
I'm trying to find some space to write.
To put it right will take all night:
Time that's wasted is Time that's dead.
I'm trying to find some space to write,
And it's trying me. I'll try the shed.

SCRIBBLE

I'm trying to find some Time to write,
But Time's writing me: I'm wrinkled.
The scribble of Time is black as night.
I'm trying to find some Time to write.
When retirement comes then I might.
What was that bell I heard tinkled?
I'm trying to find some time to write,
But Time's writing me: I'm wrinkled.

PAPERY WORDS

I'm trying to make my writing deep.
Papery words are flat and thin.
I need pickled words that will keep;
Orchestral words that make you weep:
Ball grabbing words that make you leap.
I'm trying to make my writing deep.
But the deep well has just caved in.
I'm trying to make my writing deep.
Papery words are flat and thin.

Tony Johnson

7 ABSENCE SEIZURE 11/10/2005

So that was an absence seizure.
It's good to be back from the black.
We didn't make it back home that day,
But doubly cheated death instead.
First the driver, pushing seventy,
Blacked out.
Then pinged the central crash barrier.
The co-driver seized the wheel;
Applied the handbrake; steered a safe stop;
And called the driver back
From wherever he had been seized
For seven long seconds.
.
No angel could have better sung his name
It's good to be back from the black.

Tony Johnson

ABSENCE SEIZURE 2

We thought you might like to know that Tony spent an unscheduled 8 day stopover in Derriford Hospital, Plymouth on our way back from Cornwall to see Ann's sister and from taking mine back after our younger son's wedding on 12th August. I'm the proud owner of a Vitatron T70 (Dutch model) pacemaker, following a brief, first and very sudden blackout on the A30 near Launceston, whilst driving our new Ford Focus at a tad over 60 mph. I'd just said, "I think I need to pull over," when I went out like a light for only a few seconds. Ann steered us to a stop from the passenger seat and we have not a scratch on us, except for the operation scar. We feel very lucky to be alive. Trouble is Ann has cancelled a short Rambling holiday and feels a bit gloomy at having to drive me everywhere, but more at the limitations of advancing age! She's just had her 65th birthday and the replacement of the replacement hip is not as strong as the original one. She claims I have a smile, worthy of Malvolio in Twelfth Night. As I went into the operating theatre the Dutch technician said it says here, "The luckiest man alive!" Thanks to Ann's cool. And a female surgeon of Nigerian origin, I guess, did the necessary. The United Nations is alive in the NHS.

Tony

8 OFFICE HOURS 1/12/2015

Jill is finding John a bore
So John finds love elsewhere
Jill would like a spell as a whore
But finds she doesn't dare

Jackie's been divorced some time:
She's ready willing and randy,
Stealing for her is not a crime
Your husband is so handy.

Janice is simply wedded to work.
Money is not the reason.
She never has been known to shirk
But cannot come in season.

Karen is keen on her career,
But Jim is out of a job
Roles reversed are so utterly queer
That Jim is tempted to rob.

Harriet's cool and hard to please,
But has enormous wits,
She prefers a man down on his knees
And then she's thrilled to bits.

Wives and husbands seldom thrive
In the busy world today.
It's just as well that work's a skive,
And sex is there to play.

9 AFTER HE HAGGIS 16/1/2014

(Last January there was only half a Scot present
So I think I got away with this in a cod accent.
Please, use and adapt it if you want to.)

So... We've eaten it and that's that.
Go on. Give your tums a pat,
For in your hearts you know it's right
To have tucked that haggis out of sight,
Where gastric juices will defuse
What might have been a cunning ruse
Cooked up by some accursed Scot,
Some dastardly cartoon bomb plot.
Though tasting good and warm and smelly,
It may yet blow up your belly.

It surely will not make us sick
Unless followed by spotted dick.
None here would want to upset
This groaning table so nicely set.
Rather let us thank our loving hosts
And summon up those lively ghosts
Who bide within every heart.
But now alas are far apart.

Yet we are still pleased they're not here
To share our supper and drink our beer.

Pray you forgive this silly rhyme
Concocted just to pass the time
To let your inner haggis settle
So that you are in finest fettle
For what's to come in just a tick.
Just pray it's not a spotted dick.

Tony Johnson

19 4 AFTER THE OIL RAN OUT: 7/1/2007

SOON

After the oil ran out and the wars ceased,
The pony traps sprinted into morning.
The pace was slower than before that end.
Roads stayed good for years and soon we learned
That life was much better lived more slowly.
We wondered how we'd let it get so bad.
We travelled less and marvelled just how much
There was to do at heart of hearth, village
And town. We became stars in our own right,
Bored with others' silly fame and fortune.
The useless cars became our children's dens,
Or were melted down for the shire horses'
Hooves and tackle and metal parts of carts;
Or made great sculptures along the cycle ways.
We learned to walk and late in the evening
Polished the brasses of our brilliant horses.

Tony Johnson

20 All children love (another copy) SAND AND WATER 12/8/2009

All children love sand and water.
All children love sand and water.
Whether you have son or daughter,
All children love sand and water.

All children love water and sand.
All children love water and sand.
Whether they are planned or unplanned,
All children love water and sand.

Hand in sand and feet in water:
Hand in water and feet in sand
Whether you have son or daughter
Whether they are planned or unplanned
All children love sand and water
All children love water and sand

Should you not love sand and water,
Try not to have son or daughter.
When children come planned, unplanned
Plant them just as soon as you can
Plant them gently in water and sand,
Then watch them grow as they oughtta.

All children love sand and water
All children love sand and
All children love,
If you give them sand and water.

Tony Johnson

21 ALUM BAY 14/3/2008

The people streamed to Alum Bay
To fetch the pretty sands away.
They did not stop to think that if
They scraped and scraped there'd be no cliff.

Tony Johnson

22 AN INSPECTOR CALLS IN SEARCH 7/9/2008 OF AN ACTOR

Beyond paged words the real inspector lives,
A fictional enigma who must wait
To find some actor pretending to be real.
Once the real man's on stage he cannot leave.
In fact he should know better at his age.
The actor's words rest precar-i-ous-ly
Invisible inside his head. Treading
These boards is a high wire over Niagara.
If a line breaks as he walks a trapdoor
Opens up and it's down in the cellar
With Old Nick's faulty props from dead dramas!
But the real inspector may grab his throat,
Do what he has to do and then unleash
The power of his prophetic thunder.

Tony Johnson

(In 2007 I played the part of Inspector Goole in
"An Inspector Calls" by J.B.Priestley. In 2008 I saw
"Six Characters in Search of an Author" by Pirandello)

23 ANGELS 23/10/2015

Unafraid, the five year old punched her arm
Across her dazzled eyes to shield herself
From a light too bright, too close for comfort:

Its blade pierced her skin, bone, eyeball, soul.
Then it faded to reveal through chinked fingers
Her face, ebony, still as stone, an angel,
Smiling from the bottom of the bed. No wings!

Years later, on a small tropical island,
A tall Caribbean Ella Fitzgerald
Spoke to her in the mellow tones Ella sang,
"If a child falls asleep in your lesson
Don't scold. Wake her up and send her to me.
She might have had nothing to eat that day.
That old tennis court was beyond repair:
We dug it up and planted vegetables.
Now we have soup on the go all day long."
Eyes locked smiles ad infinitum.

Tony Johnson

24 ANNIVERSARY (40th Anniversary) 8/6/2006 18/9/2009

I don't know how we made it this far?
Neither do I.
My goodness you were difficult.
The same goes for you
For a start I put up with your cricket for 30 years.
But you never did the teas.
I've suffered your sailing for 17 years
And I do my duty in the galley and bar.
I got the grass stains out of your cricket trousers.
I got us out of a few near misses in the boat.
And into some others.
So we're roughly quits.
I wouldn't say that.
What was I thinking of forty years ago?
Freedom?
Still do.
I know.
What was I thinking of forty years ago?
Sex?
Still do.
I know.

What would I do if I had my time again?
The same?

Maybe.
Maybe.

5 ANNIVERSARY [diff ending]

(40th)Anniversary

- I don't know how we made it this far?
 - Neither do I.
 - My goodness you were difficult.
 - The same goes for you
 - For a start I put up with your cricket for 30 years
 - But you never did the teas
 - I've suffered your sailing for 17 years and I do my duty in the galley and bar.
 - I got the grass stains out of your cricket trousers
 - I got us out of a few near misses in the boat.
 - And into some others.
 - So we're roughly quits.
 - I wouldn't say that
 - What was I thinking of forty years ago?
 - Freedom?
 - Still do.
 - I know.
 - What was I thinking of forty years ago?
 - Sex?
 - Still do.
 - I know
 - We don't want to pull out now do we?
 - PAUSE No.
 - What were the best things?
-
- DAVID and DEREK without a doubt
 - Let's drink a toast then. Love and friendship and children.

What would I do if I had my time again? The same. Maybe. Maybe.

ARCHY IN HOSPITAL [See THE LEECH] 29/11/2006

25 ARE THERE ANY SOLDIERS? 14/2/20014

"Are there any soldiers?" the four year old asked,
His hair wild as a double-crowned child's should be,

Anxious, cannily alert to his own safety.
"There are no soldiers here now," we assured him.

So he agreed to enter the ruins,
Climbing to the battlements
And watched the tide invade,
Rolling into runnels,
Dulling shining mud.

Short sword Romans, axing Saxons,
Vicious Vikings, ruthless Normans,
Now mere sprites on the swan's road,
Were safely imprisoned in history books.

Soldiers kill and he knew it.

Tony Johnson

26 ART LESSON 23/9/2010

A sculpture stark against the sky,
A shaped couple. Male and female?
At each bronze head, inset, a hole,
Circular, through which you see sky.
Lower down, scooped shapes, each a bowl
On its side. One figure shorter.
Set on a stone plinth.

What is it for? What does it mean?

Then a child skips across the grass,
Climbs up, hollers into a scooped hollow.
Her shout frolics and rolls around,
A bagatelle ball bouncing back.
She hears her own voice distorted,
An odd echo of self, singing,
Laughing with the sculpture's pure form.

Tony Johnson

(The sculpture is "Two figures" by Barbara Hepworth
on the campus of Southampton University.)

Article and poem Ceramic review

**27 AT THE BASILICA OF THE HOLY BLOOD,
BRUGES 19/5/2010**

There was a snake inside this church.
His head was wavy white
And people slid along his length.
Some bowed their heads. Polite.

Before the handsome swaying hood
As if entranced, asleep,
They paid to kiss the Holy Blood.
Some curtsied full and deep.

Blood, locked up in cool glass and gold,
Christ's blood in perfume phial.
A swift hand wiped the tainted kiss
In dead mechanic style.

In disbelief we left, appalled,
To see believers fall
For cruel crusader's clever ploy:
A story steeping tall.

Descending stairs we saw in red,
"Pickpockets work this place."
We noticed then a purse was gone
And quickened up our pace.

Tony Johnson

**28 AT THE GENERAL POST OFFICE, DUBLIN 9/5/1009
(Remembering Easter 1916)**

Ninety years on. Bullet holes dent still stone.
High above the counters where we'd bought stamps,
The blazing murals honoured still defeat,
Memorial to Britain's brutal might
And Ireland's desperate hopes and will to fight.
We'd scanned the pictures start to fiery finish.

Then, her zimmer frame shining, an old crone,
Fire in her eyes, aims straight at us English.
Gesticulating, she clanks across the floor.
Her skinny hand clamps mine. "Start over there!"
"We just did, thanks. We've seen them all." She knew.
She had us cornered. "In nineteen twenty two

"My father was fighting the Black and Tans...
"When we get the North back, then it'll be over..."

Tony Johnson

29 BEST BOY 11/1/2012

Often she would tell him, "You are the best
Boy in all the world." Yet he'd won no contest.
She just knew. Every time her words sank deep
To that secret place where what's needed you keep.
Her words were yeast from where self worth arose,
Daily breadfuel against life's coming blows.

Long after she had gone forever, still
Her words lay sleeping in his head until
One day, now old, he caught up from the floor
A small grandson; rummaged in his secret store;
Held fast the crying child against his chest;
And sang, "You're the best boy in the world – the best."

Tony Johnson

30 BLIND NEED 31/7/2008

If he could sing he'd be a bass,
A Robeson dark chocolate;
But cannot so stands boldly crass
And quivers silent, inchoate.
He hears no music: just blind need
Craves connection with desperate speed
Of head, too wise, with messy heart,
While one blind eyes stares at the dark.

Tony Johnson

31 BODY POLITIC 7/3/2018

A red light. A beeped alert. Air bubbles!
Light off. An expert fingernail flicks them safe.
Through the cannula, inlet to your punctured vein,
The hatstand's plastic veins drip their poison
Aiming a military strike at a tumour,
Unable to take out the manufacturing plant,
The root cause, in the marrow of the bones,

Hiding, thriving in plain sight in the light
Of the microbiologist's keen eye.

You compare with a friend of over fifty years
The timing of pill cocktails, hair loss,
Chatting away to put the world to rights,
Knowing full well old idiocies persist:
Corporate greed; corruption, the poor poorer;
The poisoned atmosphere; plastic fouling
Of seas and oceans, mutual assured
Destruction. We have lived a day longer,
No matter what. Buoyed up by tea and cake
We watch and wait, watch and wait, watch and wait,
As late glowing embers slow fade in the grate.
Tony Johnson

32 THE BOOT HOLE

In the mucky dark of the well of the stairs,
where fags cleaned their prefects 'boots
and shoes, and where prefects tanned your hide
to teach servility, sadism ruled O.K.
You'd grasp the rear rung of the chair,
presenting your rear to the advancing cane
in its short run up and final leap,
as in cricket, to generate extra force.
Six deliveries and it was over.
Grip hard, raise your head, stare at the print
On the wall: Stanley Spencer's "Cookham Rye",
Tranquil, vibrant, quintessential England.
The cane's sharp bite couldn't touch you.
Long ago you'd not cried for much worse.
You'd learned to hide in the deep well within.

Your best friend Squibs lived in Cookham.
He'd seen Spencer trundling easel, canvas and palette
in his old pram through his painful paradise,
the village, where Christ lived among buxom matrons
and angels came from glory to live in paint.
By constant looking during frequent beatings
you'd learned your lesson: in life as in art
pain and pleasure are about a torso's length apart.

Tony Johnson

33 BRANCH LINE 1952 21/3/2014

Because my mother made them late, the trains
Were late. Setting out, the salesman hooked her
With cheap lino, and sob story, neatly rolled.
The purchase done, through the alley entry,
Across the square, past the snuff factory
And corn exchange, down the hill and the train
Was in! Then the high-pitched, Halloo oo oo oo!
Wait for me! I'm coming!" The guard's green flag
Poised, always waited, because my mother,
Just because my mother made him wait, the trains

Were late. And we were just on time.

Tony Johnson

34 CANE 13/8/2014

In the corner the cane,
nonchalant, thinly
vicious, sadistic,
cruelly aristocratic,
by its superior voice
commanding use,
inhibiting contradiction.

"Use me or
lose authority.
Use me and
keep control.
I am your best ally
and their bane.
An anarchic mob
responds only to fear.
Use me and
gain respect.
The choice is yours.
Do not fear
to inflict pain.
You are not afraid
Are you?"

"I am not afraid.
Authority is mine.

Not yours."

The cane was silent.
Then vanished.

35 CAR LOVE 22/11/2014

WHAT A GREEN FAMILY WE ARE WE ARE
WE DRIVE ONLY ONE VERY LITTLE CAR
EACH. THE PETROL BLOCKADE WE HAD TO BEAT
OR ELSE WE WOULD HAVE HAD TO USE OUR FEET;
WORSE BE FORCED TO PAY FOR A BUS OR TRAIN;
OR EVEN PUSH Pedals IN THE CYCLE LANE.
SO WE QUEUED FOR AGES TO FILL UP OUR TANKS
AND WITH THUMBS ERECT SIGNALLED HEARTFELT THANKS
THAT NOW WE CAN TRAVEL SO FAR SO FAR
AND NO-ONE CAN NOW SAY WE'RE ANTI-CAR.

36 CAROL SERVICE 10/7/2009

We had left our fires well fuelled
For our return, never fear. Cosy cars purred,
The sky was clear. Stars lit our way. Frost crisped.
We were a nice well-heeled congregation,
Resenting the church so cold for the carolling.

At the pure core of the carols
And in the exquisite cadences of the poems
Something was missing.

At the end we gave our pieces of silver
To charity, reserving notes for ourselves.
What else could we do? Our children now expect
More than an apple, orange and a piece of coal.
And our parents expected us to get on.

So the poor peasant by the forest fence
Beggared by affluent meanness can sod off.

Tony Johnson

37 CLASSROOM EXAMINATION 18/9/2009 **2a Price's School 1966**

These ageing men were boys I used to teach.
Now, rôle reversed, I listen and I learn,
For one boy's now the canon come to preach

To attentive silence more than I could earn.

They were the cunning masters of mayhem,
Of artful doodle and of daring daydream.
Such fine bubbling brains! No one could stop them
From acting like a loose anarchic team.

Memory draws a classroom castle in the air,
Where appear thirty brilliant pairs of eyes,
Which stalk the ether and begin to stare.
To scrutinise, assess, and analyse.

Are you weak? Are you strong? You cannot bluff.
We can shave off a beard or rip off a mask.
Who are you? Do you care? D'ya know your stuff?
Answer! Before you set us any task!

Tony Johnson

(Canon Martin Seeley greeted me and then just said, "2a."
He gave the address at St Peter and St Paul on 8th June
2008, in a ceremony to mark one hundred years after
the move of Price's School from West Street to Park Lane.
He was in 2a and was one of several in that class who later
Went to Cambridge, the best class I ever taught. What fun!)

38 CLAY 15/3/2016

The kiln's not been fired a lot lately
And that's a pity because people need a pot.
I fancied it could once more see action
And double as a makeshift crematorium.
The first customer would fire away
To ash, leaving a beautifully baked pot.
The potter then slips on the inscription
Round the rim for future generations:
 "Your clay will rot.
 My clay will not."
The pot could even double as urn for ash.

Imagine far into the future, being found
As precious artefact, a thing of wonder
For scholars to decipher and ponder.
Surely a kind of immortality
In a showcase. The best on offer, perhaps?

Tony Johnson

39 COCK PHEASANT 11/11/2008

Keep still! Quick! Look! Cock pheasant.
Just the other side of the glass doors.
On the terrace. Look at him. Gorgeous.
No. Gaudy more like. Such gaudy vestments
Make him the priest of the bird world.
Look at that absurd red wattle
On his green head and the grey skullcap.
Then there's that broadband clerical collar.
And that slow, deliberate, silent, delicate walk,
Studios even, but he does look dim with it.
There's just a hint of self-importance,
But he's not arrogant like a magpie or a crow.
He's the priest among the birds all right.
That reddish-brown chasuble over the purple alb
Is looking a trifle tatty though.
And those tail feathers are absurdly long.

Does he want to come in?
Or is he just looking at his reflection?
Does he see through the glass darkly?
Did the Reverend see just now that greenfinch
Gingerly putting weight on that foot and leg
With the cancerous growth, still eating heartily,
Dying to breed? What comical ears! Look!
His Showiness is quietly walking away.
Keep still! Or he'll only become hysterical.
Tony Johnson

40 CONFESSION AND LAMENT FOR THE THE SELKIRK GRACE 1/7/2010

Some hae meat and canna eat
And some wad eat that want it
But we hae meat and we can eat
And sae the Lord be thankit.

41 CONFESSION TO AND LAMENT FOR THE HAGGIS

Afore we sit ourselves down here
I've this to say: I'm full of fear.
I'm not a Scot. I'm not. I'm not
And others here are definitely not Scot.
And this haggis here so lovely and brun
Is far from haem. Come right down to Wickham toun.
Maybe there's someone here a wee bit Scot.
Nae matter. Let's eat yon haggis while it's hot
And steaming and just a wee bit smelly.
May it lay light on each English belly.

Consider the ant 42 CONSIDER THE ANT 12/6/2016

Their sky was a slab of grey concrete.
Then the tectonic plate lifted
to reveal a new sky infinitely blue,
exposing their Lilliputian queendom,
trashed in an instant catastrophe,
watched by a dispassionate eye.

Such organised anarchy!
Such chaotic purposefulness!
No panic. Silent communication.
Graft for the survival of oval eggs,
heaved in unison across boulders
and secreted into dark tunnels.

Soon the landscape is bald of activity.
Somewhere out of sight is a new order.
A city, safe as chance allows, thrives.

Consider the ant and be wise.

(See Proverbs Chapter 6 v. 6-8)
Tony Johnson

43 COUNTING 7/1/2012

Worst subject at school, his maths was a joke
He never quite got. Now white cells proliferate,
Incurably, with compound interest,
Someone else better at sums counts for him.

Works out the answer he's no need to hear.
Quod est demonstrandum. Days are numbered.

Now knees are shot he has need of benches,
Planted on the front for commemoration,
Inviting narcissistic calculation.
The year, month, day of births and deaths of folks
Gone on ahead. He does the sums. Just years.
To keep it simple. His maths was never very strong,
But, with his new obsession, is so improved
He'll soon catch up with those gone on ahead.

Tony Johnson

44 DAD 28/12/2009

DAD'S BEEN GONE YEARS NOW BUT HIS TEN YEARS OLD HEAD SURVIVES IN
THE PINHOLE PHOTO. A DIRTY WHITE SURROUND AND THE STILL WHITE
COLLAR GLEAMS AND THE BOY'S NEAT HEAD SPOILT BY THE JAGGED FRINGE
AND THE FAINT SMILE ON THE STRAIGHT LIPS BENEATH THE FINE NOSE
CURVING EYEBROWS ABOVE THE CAGEY NARROW EYESLITS AND THE
ILLUSION, SURELY, THAT THE LEFT EAR IS LOWER THAN THE RIGHT. HE IS
STILL THEN. THE BRIGHT CHILD OF THE GENERAL LABOURER WHO DID NOT
TAKE THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL PLACE HE WON. HE NEVER HAD A CHANCE
SAID HIS SISTER BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT SHE MEANT. I'VE SEEN ANOTHER
PHOTO OF HIS FATHER SPICK AND SPAN YOU'D NEVER BELIEVE HE WAS A LABOURER. NO SIGN
THAT THE CHILD IS FATHER OF THE MAN NO
CHANCE. THE WARY EYES LOOK AT ME THE SON BUT THEN LOOKED AT THE
FATHER. 'WILL HE BEAT ME? AM I GOOD ENOUGH? HE WAS BUT COULD NOT
ESCAPE THE BELT THE STICK THE HAND WHEN LEAST EXPECTED. NO
CHANCE. A MYSTERY THAT HE WAS BRUISED IN JUST THAT WAY WHEN HIS
BODY SMARTED AND HIS HURT BURROWED DEEP AND UNDERMINED HIS
MIND. YET HE NEVER BEAT ME THAT I CAN REMEMBER. AND NEVER ONCE
WAS JEALOUS THAT I HAD CHANCES THAT HE NEVER HAD. NOR CAN MY SONS REMEMBER THAT I
BEAT THEM. SO THE CIRCLE OF THAT VIOLENCE WAS
BROKEN. THERE'S A PHOTO OF HIS FATHER, MY GRANDFATHER, A THIN
DAPPER MAN IN HIS BEST SUNDAY SUIT AND HIGHLY POLISHED SHOES. HE
JUST LOVED HAVING HIS PHOTO TAKEN, SO HIS DAUGHTER, MY AUNT ALICE,
SAID

45 DAD AND DAUGHTER 12/6/2012

"You're wasting away." Behind the curtain
The doctor spoke with loud authority
The blinding obvious we all could see.
The old man had done his best for certain

To down the mashed mush they'd set before him.
Some deeper need had hawked painful nothing up.
His loving daughter caught in his sputum cup,
After such heroic coughing, on its rim,

An ill white blob of something. Brief relief
For dad and daughter. Then her tears, unlocked,
Admit, at last, the truth till now she'd blocked.
They wash away her blinding, willed belief

He'd yet be strong. She holds his hand, skin, bone.
Eyes lock. Tears stop. She smiles for him alone.

Tony Johnson

(A new knee meant recently three nights in hospital. A middle-aged
woman opposite visited her dad. Her loving care transformed her).

46 FOR DAN 26/3/2015

(Constance "Dan" Innis was descended
from slaves and won the Barbados scholarship
to read Botany at Cambridge University.
She was the first black headmistress of St
Michael's
Girls' School, Bridgetown, Barbados.

This was written for Dan
Rusting

The humid air rusts the metal casements,
Brown-spots the fittings of electric lights,
Metal doorjambs scab, fridge door white paint lift.
All is rusting out. So it make fine sense
To hear the mettle in the wise headmistress
Human voice assert, "I not rusting out!
I not rusting out!" As she wade quietly
Into the salting Caribbean Sea.

Johnson Tony

47 THE DEADLINE

The deadline is certainly elusive.
As it approaches – some jitters now.
Time management is crucial.
Insignificant details divert the focus.
You've done it along the road to this point:
Avoidance of the inevitable; frivolous frittering.
Cut out killing time: it's killing you.
So stick to the absolute essentials.
You've not worked them out yet?
But you're four score years and more.
Go get a grip of this last bit.
Do something useful, meaningful,
Blissful, beautiful, hair-raising, amazing.
Go start a blaze before the last flicker.

Tony Johnson

48 DOG OF WAR 8/10/2018

I was a young dog of war, ready to die,
And that's God's truth, no word of a lie.
I survived. Bill didn't. The luck of the draw
In the life and death stakes of that bloody war.

I was trained like a dog for the racing track,
Hard, sharp, fit and fast with pack on mi back,
To fight and run up the Normandy shore,
A dog, slipped the leash, in the just cause of war,

I set foot on land with mi chest in the water,
Wading, weapon held high, open for slaughter.
I tell you, I wasn't ready to die.
And that's God's truth, no word of a lie.

It was slaughter, chaos, and sheer flaming hell.
The rest I'll never be ready to tell.
I survived. Bill didn't. The luck of the draw
In the lottery stakes of that bloody war.

Who were war's winners all those years ago?
We lost the peace. That's all I bloody know.
I'm an old dog of war, not ready to die,

And that's God's truth, no word of a lie.

Tony Johnson

49 EARLY MORNING TRAINING 30/1/2009

I grab his foot,
Shake him awake,
My athletic son,
For early morning training.

The engine whirrs, whines,
Coughs in the dank.
In the still darkness
We turn into our empty lane.

Tensed and spring-loaded,
He plunges into his lane,
Kicking away from me.
Bolt from my bow.

Through autumn mist
And winter sleet
We have never seen
The dawn so often.

Now I am tired
Of early morning training
At the swimming pool,
Yet fear its ending.

Tony Johnson

50 THE ROAD FROM EDEN 16/10/2013

Which way is it, the road from Eden?

He has no joy, only an endless road,
Moving with him so that progress is nil.
To stand still is to arrive at the same point
As those travelling on.
Indifferent rubbish accumulates.
Steel hoops band the rolling giant
Forever striding the long and dusty road.

Which way is it?

Let him smell his way to the city,
Where they foul the pavement,
Collect dust and soot,
Clippings, peelings, grass
Decaying, worm-ridden:
Their own dirt recycled
To mulch the tree
Shooting to ripe fruit
In the new garden soil.

Tony Johnson

51 EXAM INVIGILATION 21/1/2017

(After reading "Waiting For Godot" by Samuel Becket)

You too realise you are constantly
Waiting for meaning to appear
Waiting for the invigilation to end
Waiting for someone
Anyone to arrive
Anyone to say something
To break the near silence
Of people filling leaves of paper
With words words words
Scuffling shoes
Paper crackling
Like sails flapping
Like leaves snapping
Brittle beneath you feet.

Tony Johnson

52 EYE APPLE 9/2/2006

When time has left you weary, worn and wasted,
Your shanks quite thinned, your hair grizzled or gone,
Your lips cracked and dry, no longer tasted,
Kisses from blossom beauties no longer won,

Who will love you then when for love you sigh,
Forgive the rage you hold against time's blast?
But she the ripe and wrinkled apple of your eye,
Frail, weary, worn will love you at the last.

Tony Johnson

53 THE FERRY/ THE HAMBLE FERRY/ TIDAL RIVER FERRY

The Ferryman who comes to fetch
Always waits on the other side.
For years and years he's crossed his patch.
Your short ride's shorter at low tide.

Stand by the water's tidal edge
To let him know you want to go,
Not by the seat, nor the shelter.
You'll need pence to pay your old Foe.

"Shall we cross?"
"Not today. Later."

Tony Johnson

54 FIR CONE/ THIS CONE 14/9/2010

The cone's a symbol, so I'm told.
Eternal life. No less.
This cone is sixty-two years old,
Kept safe, I must confess

To hold the time of childhood lost,
Tight-folded in this cone,
Clamped up against the winter's frost,
When youth and years have flown.

Tony Johnson

55 THE FIRING

Her temper was once as hot as a kiln firing.
Hands would box my ears and her sharp voice screeched.
But she cooled after the flash fire peak was reached
And soon her guilty-concerned tone was enquiring,

"Are you all right?" And I felt the fire was out.
Then soft as unfired clay she wetly kissed
My burning skin and loving-hate would twist
My skin away and risk another clout.

Now her temper has become October sun,

Touching the cooling kiln's burnt yellow brick.
The heat inside has done its own best trick,
Working the clay's and running glaze's fusion,

Leaving the honeyed-coloured solid pot,
Cool-warm and lovely. But mind the ash is hot.

Tony Johnson

56 Five Haiku: Crossing The Tracks 11/1/2016

(The haiku is a short, Japanese poem that must have 17 syllables (5+7+5), a pebble thrown into the pond of your mind, spreading ripples. Here are five pebbles, thrown in one after the other.)

Tonight I don gown.
Last night I slept in my slum,
Now bow to high dons.

* * *

Dons bring on my posh.
Odd-job Frank burrs Wiltshire, broad.
I do speak like 'e.

* * *

Work compels early:
Frank clacks by on hobnailed boots.
I'll read Shakespeare's works.

* * *

Before slum clearance
Councillors inspect. (I read)
"Why aren't you working?"

* * *

University.
Home again. We have moved up!
Third floor council flat!

Tony Johnson

57 THE FJORD

The bend ended in a steeping plunge down
The wet black rock into the dark fjord.
And he, in his father's suede leather coat,
Sponging up water, whacking on dead weight,
Trod water, flailing to release his arms.
All this time he could see his sons and wife,
Distant. They knew something was up. Not where.
He split in two, hovered above them, pointed
To the bend as he fought coat and water,
Then, naked, climbed the black rock bank to woods,
Where he ran in circles for warmth, wanting strength
Of sons and warmth of wife to rescue him.
The wood was warmer than the dark fjord.
He waited fearful and frail in his skin.

Tony Johnson

58 FORCE FIVE 16/1/2013

Windsurfers ride the force five white horses,
Their white wakes slicing manes to shreds.
A kite surfer lifts off with acrobatic skill,
Pirouetting on the wind, insolently taunting
The sea's frothing madness. "You can't ditch me!"
Dripping cyclists stop to admire the free show.
Middle-aged wet suits chat technique by vans
Like beached penguins stood up in wind and rain.
Old walkers put on late spurts for the car,
Facing the wind and the stinging hints of hail.
Olympians all racing waves and weather
With personal bests at every step, lift and ride
Just to stay upright and to keep going.
One more summer over before it's begun.
Force five and glad to be alive in it.

Tony Johnson

59 FOREST OF DEAN 13/10/2008

Do not be fooled. This forest is dangerous:
Look at those foxgloves firing up through ferns;
And that adder winding across the cycle path;
And hear that sudden crackling explosion
Of a huge branch weakened by last night's gale
Falling with thunderous thud to the forest floor.

Down the arched dipple*, holding up that floor, * incline into
 See the ghost of the free miner walk to work the drift mine
 The narrow seam of coal, then edge his pale frame
 Into the narrow ledge to pick it clean
 And stuff rock rubble into its empty gob* * space left by
 To shore up the roof against a deadly fall. the extracted coal
 See those tree roots gripping hard that keystone.

See grey ghosts inhale the smoke and steam
 Of the old terraced Dark Hill Ironworks,
 Ruined like the men who used to work them.
 And watch it now innocently greening
 Over where boiler exploded and ore was blasted.
 Look at those foxgloves firing up through ferns.

Tony Johnson

60 FREEDOM 19/1/1016

I am your gaoler,
 Who would set you free,
 Yet am not free myself
 Nor ever shall be ...

Nor ever shall be
 Till tongue-tied tongue
 Sing the fierce sad song
 Of my freedom.

I would flee away
 Where the otters play
 And the lice linger
 Long in the hair.
 I would dance on the air
 Build a strong-wattled lair
 And sing a song of freedom

Where time lingers long
 I would sing my song
 And feed on fresh fish
 From the stream...

And when night fills the air
 I would lie me down
 And dream of freedom.

Tony Johnson

61 FULL MOON AND LITTLE FRIEDA 17/11/2021

A cool small evening shrunk to a dog bark and the clank of a bucket
 And you listening
 A spider's web tense for the dew's touch
 A pail lifted still and brimming - mirror
 To tempt a first star to a tremor.

Cows are going home in the lane there, looping the
 Hedges with their warm wreaths of breath -
 A dark river of blood, many boulders
 Balancing unspilled milk.
 Moon! you cry suddenly, Moon! Moon!
 The moon has stepped back like an artist amazed at a work
 That points at him amazed.

I would flee away

62 GAIA'S LAMENT 22/8/2022

The Great goddess Gaia rose from her sleep.

A thousand years, as if one night, had passed.

Yet countless times since time began on earth

she'd woke and felt refreshed. This time she sniffed

the stench of poisoned atmosphere. She wept

and coughed and wheezed and retched and wept again

slow tears that fell as rain upon her breasts

and down her flanks. She heard their cries, these men,

who, in their arrogance, could claim to hit

a fly in space; whose choking greed crammed more,

yet more. "They cannot see that less is more

and more is less. When will they ever learn?"

despairingly Great Gaia spoke. No one

Heard nor heeded. "The bees will now succeed

Where man has failed: they are more organised."

Tony Johnson

(In Greek mythology Gaia was the mother goddess of the earth, the ancestral mother of all life. There is a Gaia theory that proposes that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings in a way that helps maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on our planet.)

63 GIFT COAT 22/8/2022 THE COAT

After the stroke he had no need of the coat,
One hundred pounds worth of brown suede leather.
You wouldn't believe we had to sneak out,
His own coat, his extra skin in bad weather,
From his digs, to save it from his landlord,
Who'd "borrowed" it. And left a nasty fag-burn
On the lapel. Reckoned dad, in the hot ward,
Had no need. But he'd worked damned hard to earn
The cash to buy it – cash I'd once refused:
A hundred pound gift from father to son.
The old man was poor. How could I have used
What was to him so vast a sum, so hard won?
The burn I nail-clipped out and so came
To wear dad's gift with many-coloured pride – and shame.

Tony Johnson

64 THE GNOME 20/11/2016

Raking the crisped brown leaves of the whitebeam,
I glimpsed the pointed pixie hat of the gnome,
Pink except where pockmarked grey.
He's heaving a going nowhere empty wheelbarrow.
His mouth's a mild smile below a broad nose.
His cheeks pink apples. His eyes sightless.
A pink and grey beard covers no neck.

He's wearing an open jerkin,
Sheltering snails have humped his back.
He's listing to starboard with stout effort,
Thrusting sturdy going nowhere legs.
Surprise! Surprise! From under his hat
A sly cowlick Elvis kiss curl for the old girl
Who'd had him indoors for company
With his companions for twenty long years,
They couldn't believe their luck.

Gnomes are naff so I'm told,
Should stay out in the cold.
This one was snug on a widow's window ledge,
Then somehow snuck out to her garden,
Just in time before the big pogrom
By the widow's daughter. They were disappeared
Just in time before the parson arrived
To discuss the funeral arrangements.
Rescued from beneath tangled couch grass.
Although he's out in the cold.
This gnome's a survivor and smiles still,

Tony Johnson

65 GOODBYE 8/8/2016

Dead of winter resurrects faces in the trees
Scribbled by the leafless twigs and branches:
Cartoon faces with Pinocchio noses;
Bears with snub snouts, carbuncled angry men,
Always in oak and ash, never in the willow.
Then your face appears there, old friend, eyes downcast,
Pale, bald-pated, and with that neat white beard,
Disembodied on the willow's leafless drooping,
As if engaged in a book or winter search
For sheltering fauna. You are perfectly still.

Sipping tea, I clock the time on my wrist.
Four fifteen. Look up. Light's ebbing. You are gone.

That next morning your daughter phoned. You'd died
The previous afternoon. At four fifteen.
Surely you'd no time to pop in for goodbye
On your way to wherever you were going?

Nor to take a last peek at Chappetts Copse,
Where you'd nursed rare orchids into numbered health
With the same care and gusto you'd applied
To Family, Teaching, Rugby, Burns Nights, Singing,
Sailing and the Sword-leaved Helleborine.

Tony Johnson

66 GREAT GRANDMA'S CHRISTMAS WISH 8/1/2009

"Please, let next Christmas not arrive.
I've had enough!" she cried.
"I'm ninety five and still alive,"
Great grandma said. And sighed.

"What is the point? It's quite absurd.
I wish I was not here."
No one stirred or spoke a word.
"It's not friend death I fear."

"O! Let last Christmas be my last.
If only I could end it all.
Be at last my children's past.
Wrap me in earth. Let the snow fall."

Tony Johnson

(Aunt Ada was 86 when she told me, as I drove
her down from London for a visit, that she'd just
seen her oldest sister Aunt Cis, then aged 95, who
told her she had had enough. Aunt Ada died last year
just short of her 96th birthday, after a series of mini strokes).

67 GUARDIAN ANGELS 14/5/2014

Unafraid, the five year old punched her arm
Across her dazzled eyes to shield herself
From a light too bright, too close for comfort.
Its blade pierced her skin, bone, eyeball, soul.
Then, it faded to reveal through chinked fingers
The face, ebony, still as stone, an angel,
Smiling from the bottom of the bed. No wings!

Years later, on a small tropical island,

A tall Caribbean Ella Fitzgerald
Spoke to her in the mellow tones of Ella singing,
"If a child falls asleep in your lesson,
Don't scold. Wake her up and send her to me.
She might have had nothing to eat that day.
That old tennis court that came with my house
Was beyond repair. Would have cost too much.
So we dug it up and planted vegetables.
Now we have food on the go all day long."
Eyes locked smiles mirrored ad infinitum,
As if they had known each other a long long time.

Tony Johnson

68 THE GULF

A postcard from the past found in "The Gulf",
(Poems by Walcott, not read for several years),
Her surviving words preserved like pressed flowers,
Lost and bound within the confines of his lines,
A bookmark not discarded, just forgotten.
You read the card's ephemeral clichés,
Not the Laureate's careful, crafted words.
"The countryside around here is beautiful.
The two little boys are out of this world.
I'm staying on for another fortnight.
Shirley's on nights. I'll ring when I get back."
A Cornish pixie wishes you Good Luck -
Evil face, on a toadstool, pipe playing.
Those small boys are middle aged, six foot five.
The postmark tells she'd be ninety-seven.
Between the then and now and death and life
The gulf's so great she'll not be back. Nor ring.

Tony Johnson

(Derek Walcott, a Caribbean poet from St Lucia, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. "The Gulf" was published in 1969.)

69 TO HAMLET/TALKING TO HAMLET 13/5/2016

The only light you were able to bring
Was the darkness of your own obsession,
Hamlet, with that strictest of sergeant's, Death,

Who would not let you rest in silence,
But turned your mind to talk of maggots.

Keep watch for us on the high battlements:
We are afraid of ghosts in the night
And of what they might tell us of beyond,
Prefer to carouse in the lighted hall,
Stunning our minds blind drunk and reeling.

We cannot bear too much reality,
Must cling to our crumpled illusions,
Deflect the reflections of the cold
Intensity of the mirror of art.

Tony Johnson

(The four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's
death brings to mind "Hamlet", the first of his plays
I saw, aged 10, at Bradfield College's Greek theatre.
Ordinary folk of the village trooped faithfully to see
it. The Ghost of Hamlet's father still lives in my head).

70 HARRY PATCH 12/8/2009

Other returns included for the BBC's The Last Tommy (2005), when he met a German veteran, Charles Kuentz. Patch told the then prime minister, Tony Blair, that nobody during the first world war should have been shot for cowardice. "War is organised murder," he insisted, "and nothing else." He said that, for him, 11 November was "just showbusiness". Instead, "the day I lost my pals", 22 September 1917, was his true remembrance day. Trench dogs had fought over biscuits snaffled from dead men's tunics, and Patch had thought, "what are we doing that's really any different? Two civilised nations, British and German, fighting for our lives

Patch had always felt, he wrote in The Last Fighting Tommy, that "politicians who took us to war should have been given the guns and told to settle their differences themselves, instead of organising nothing better than legalised mass murder"

Listen to Harry's words and mark them well

71 HARVEST HOME ON THE VERGE 18/9/2015 The small print

Walkers fresh taste guaranteed, ready salted
in a GOLDEN packet.

Bubble gum time sugar free.
Swizzles drumstick raspberry and milk flavour
Amber Leaf finest Virginia hand rolling tobacco.
SMOKING KILLS includes 50 papers.

Totally wicked, the world's premier e-liquid container.
Please read. In case of accident take this box with you
to the doctor. Toxic if swallowed.
Toxic in contact with skin and eyes seek medical advice.
May cause harm to unborn child. Seek medical advice
Vapours may cause dizziness, drowsiness.
Very toxic to aquatic organisms.
May cause long-term effects in aquatic environment.
This material and container must be disposed of safely
To avoid environmental contamination.
Pictured: Skull and crossbones and a struggling tree.

Monster ripper energy juice. The juice is loose
from the flattened can. Pepsi Max Maximum taste.
in a ring pull can. Made in Great Britain.
Hula-hoops. Original potato rings. Bin your bag.
Dairy lea dunkers jumbo tubes.
Nestlé's Drifter biscuits. 99 calories. Portions
should be adjusted for children of differing ages.

(One week's rubbish on the verge and in the ditch
outside my home and there was more!)

Tony Johnson

72 HARVEST 7/1/2019

Pigeonholing brains cannot see the need
For life to feed on sensual muddle.
They strain to drain the sacred ponds,
Nowhere leave a puddle.

We need those who dare to reach
For the moon, who grasp golden dust,
Who plant sacred seed in rough ground
And reap a harvest of stars.

Tony Johnson

73 HALLO POPPY 1/3/2007
WISHES FOR THE NEWBORN SCANNING

At your making there was music.
Hello Poppy Hello poppy you cant hear me, but I'm talking to you anyway, because
you've been such a long time coming. You don't know me I know but I've been waiting
a long long time for you, scanning the horizon so to speak. Just now you're too
busy swimming in your private lake. On the first scan you were a black and white blob.
By the next you were suddenly fully formed. Grow, baby! Grow! There have been
times when adults think that's a good idea.
We hope you will arrive safely and not cause too much difficulty on the way. Tap on
the wires and we'll know how close you are. The world's changing fast. What will you
see?

I hope you will drink the milk of human kindness.
I hope your sense of wonder will stay always and never grows up. I hope your spirit
will hunger and thirst and your mind thrust and be nearly but not quite satisfied for
knowledge and experience that's real.
I wish for you all the invisible things, airy music tinkling drumming sparkling round you
and

It won't matter if you are not beautiful, because it can be a curse,
I hope you will see hear touch feel taste beauty. And that beauty will touch you
I hope you will touch others with kindness and beauty
I hope you will learn to trust and be open.
I hope you will love and honour and respect your parents
I hope you will always find your own way,
And ask for the right kind of help.
I hope that your spirit will soar above clouds and find music there.
I hope oceans of love will surround you and that you will learn to love yourself
Bucketfuls so that you can love others.

74 HELPLESS... 12/6/2010

As when the sparrow hawk leaves
Strewn across the grass, a collar dove,
Unrecognisable, but for feathers,
Its carcase disembowelled, pecked clean,
Except for the inedible sac of foul waste
Abandoned by such appalling Animal Force
That the centrifugal ferocity
Has spun, far out from the ribcage, useless claws
And circular sparrow hawk's leavings.

Tony Johnson

75 HERE BEGINETH 20/4/2005 30/5/2009
HEROES AT THE VE DAY FETE, 1945

I see my thru'penny bit disappear,
Rolling on the back of a wooden ball
And there is nothing to show for it, I fear.
Better try elsewhere. Ah! The bookstall.

Fat chance to win a pig. Food for a starved mind
To digest, inside my fringe-mop head,
Is what I need. Seek strong meat. Go and find
Amazing heroes to admire. I must be fed

On fantasy and myth to satisfy
This boy's imagination. On a spine
In gold: The Heroes. Charles Kingsley. Shall I buy
Medusa's head, crawling with snakes? All mine

For a coppery thru'penny bit. Sold.
Jason! Argonauts! The fleece's pure gold!

Tony Johnson

76 HIGH DEPENDENCE UNIT 6/3/2005

Light pulses snake-wind across a screen.
On the hat stand next to the bed
A plastic bottle dangles,
Wires and tubes and God knows what.
Electronic monitoring
Sounds like a digital camera whirring.
She snuffles oxygen through clear tubes.
A bag collects dark blood from the wound.
Another urine, siphoned by the nurse,
Slightly frothing. Human caring.
Feet are electronically stimulated.
We count. Every ten seconds Phut...Phut
Like a faint fart. Human sounding.
She sleeps.

So hard to sleep when she's away.
The heart monitors deep dependence now
Forty-odd years on...
That cussed hard-won self-reliance gone.
We are so wired up we can now finish

Each other's sentences, read the other's thoughts.
 We know that during this separation
 The surgeon's knife has cut deep as love:
 That there is ...was always the chance...
 Under the deadening anaesthetic
 That there was always the chance...
 That the miraculous high-tech care,
 In spite of nurses watching, might not win.

77 THE HISTORIC FART

In days of old in far off Kaukaban
 There lived a Bedouin named Abu Hassan.
 He had left the desert and settled down,
 A wealthy merchant to live in town.
 Now Abu Hassan tired of the widower's life
 And was persuaded by friends to take a wife.
 The house in celebration was opened wide
 To toast the groom and admire the bride.
 The wedding went on in right good style.
 On everyone's plate was heaped a huge pile
 Of rice of every hue and flavour.
 There was nothing for it but to savour
 Such rich delights as: almonds in a bowl,
 Sherbets, pistachios, young camel roasted whole.
 Meanwhile in seven robes the bride was dressed
 That all were enraptured. Not a single guest
 Could find fault with her. "As a lovely tune
 Or as beautiful as the shining moon
 Are you to me," said Abu Hassan,
 As solemnly he rose from the divan.
 But being bloated with drink and meat
 He lifted himself slowly from his seat.
 Then horror of horrors! Before he could start
 Towards the bridal chamber a long fart
 Resounded loudly through the embarrassed room,
 Reverberating like sonic boom.
 The guests filling the room with lavish praise
 Of the beautiful bride began to raise
 Their voices in a desperately forced bid
 To pretend they'd heard nothing...But they did!
 Abu Hassan was so completely mortified
 He wept with shame, sighed and might well have died.
 "Please, excuse me I must pay a call," he mumbled
 And straight into the courtyard he stumbled,

Saddled his horse, rode off into the night
 And disappeared a long way out of sight.
 Then he boarded a ship bound for India,
 Reached Calicut on the coast of Malabar,
 Was recommended by Arabs to the king,
 An infidel, who took him under his wing
 And because Abu Hassan worked so hard,
 Promoted him captain of his bodyguard.
 He lived in happiness for ten years long
 But was seized by a pining so strong
 For his native land that he could resist
 No longer and just as his heart had wished
 Boarded a ship for Makalla in Hadramaut
 But first there crept into his mind the thought,
 "I'll disguise myself in the rags of the poor.
 No one will know who I am." So footsore
 And quite exhausted from hunger and thirst,
 Braving lions and snakes and ghosts of the worst
 Sort, he travelled on foot to Kaukaban.
 "No one will recognise Abu Hassan."
 He said to himself. "I sincerely pray
 No one recalls what I did to this day."
 He journeyed round the outskirts of the town,
 Came to rest by a door and sat down.
 "What day was it?" a young girl said.
 "What day of the week when you were brought to bed
 And gave birth to me?"... "It was the same night
 Of Abu Hassan's fart and rapid flight,"
 Her mother replied. Abu Hassan fled
 Once more and muttering to himself fled
 Back to India. "The day of your Fart
 Will be remembered always. It is the start
 Of a new calendar." After a while
 -Allah have mercy- he died in exile.

Tony Johnson

78 HOLE 9/11/2006

I can dart through a hole of light
 In the branches, and in a brief flight
 Make swift return through sixty years.
 No magic, sweat, regret nor tears.

I mean to filch from yesteryear,

Then flit. What do I always hear?
"Who are you? The boy's gone." Quick! Back!
As a martin's dart-under-eaves-thwack."

Tony Johnson

79 HOW TO READ POEMS 8/9/2014

Select from the contents diagram on the box.
Pop it in your mouth. Suck it. Suck it...Suck slowly.
On no account crunch it. Do not crunch it.
It is refined, honed. It must melt in the mouth.
Tongue-lift it to your palate. Hold it there.
Let it ooze flavour, aroma, pleasure,
dark bitter sweet or hard and soft centred.
Do not think. DO NOT THINK. Not yet. Not yet.
Let it melt. Then swallow the liquid bliss.
Feel the beat. Feel the beat. And then engage
heart and mind. Seek and you shall surely find
what you will, how you will and when you will.
Select one more from the box or dip in blindly.
No matter what, one more: then scoff the lot.

Tony Johnson

80 I CAME RUNNING 2/7/2009

I came running when I was born, didn't I, dad?
You were in such a hurry, you came running, lad.

But, first you climbed the wrong way up and stuck,
And fell into this narrow neck of rock.
Only the bivouac sac stopped the shock.

Then on your head a rare white water broke.
You slept until with tidal tug you woke
To ride the harbour bar in your slim kayak.

Your winging feet felt for a timely push.
You came running like flame on a fox's brush,
Firing the burnished corn ablaze in your rush.

You were in such a hurry, you came running, lad.

Tony Johnson

81 I Woke Up Again This Morning 13/5/2013

I woke up again this morning
The skies were pearly grey
The sun just would not show his face
And stayed away all day

I woke up again this morning
The clouds were black as ink.
The rain was simply rodding down
Time to sit down to think.

I woke up again this morning
The sun was up and red.
Time to get up and going,
Not lie around in bed.

I woke up again this morning
The frost was hoary white
The spider's web was jewelled lace
That sparkled in the light.

If you don't wake up this morning
One thing is quite certain:
You'll miss the wondrous weather
When we draw back the curtain.

I woke up again this morning
On this third rock from the sun,
Poised and spinning fast in vast space.
And seized the day, had fun.

Tony Johnson

82 IN THE DARK 11/8/2011

We are in the dark about Wales.
A memorial seat informs us
That a youth who sought truth and beauty
Died in dark caves
Where a white gargoyle devil
Laughs at our feeble penetration.

We are in the dark about Wales.

Signs remind us
That deaths have occurred
By the white waterfall
And the dark snake's head rock –
I fling an apple core at the froth.

We are in the dark about Wales.
A stone insists
That a death occurred
On the grey-green slopes of Pen-y-fan,
Where sheep safely graze and lambs
Ripen for slaughter.

We are in the dark about Wales.
Until everything becomes a sign:
Buzzards and rooks on the air;
Standing stones, a starving dog,
A fallen ewe, graffiti of despair
Tell us that deaths will occur.

Tony Johnson

83 IN THE LECTURE ROOM 12/6/2013

Drone of words drowns us.
Spread fingers of cedar
Conduct the air
And beckon us.
Mocking caws punctuate.
Drones all of us,
Lost from the land,
Where fields cry
For our human touch.

Tony Johnson

**84 ITS ALL ABOUT THE BEAR 14/9/2005
IT'S REALLY ABOUT THE BEAR**

Go down to the abbey tonight
To see the big brown bear.
He's learnt to caper, crouch and creep.
He's certain to be there.

Take your seat and enjoy the show.

There's no need to take fright:
He's chained. His fur's a bit unreal,
But inside he's pure might!

"Up! Up!" cries his barking master.
The brown bear lifts his paws,
A pathetic dance with no grace,
Eliciting applause.

The abbey stones absorb the heat
Of the late evening sun.
The cruel farce cranks up its plot:
The audience senses fun.

A girl in white unchains the bear
And leads him in disguise
Across the grass in comic creep
Before our very eyes.

The boy in the bear suit dances
And twirls the girl in white.
They dance as one. He lifts her high:
Grace in the fading light.

The interlude bear reeks of sweat.
His fur's been worn before!
The girl tiptoes to kiss his nose.
He holds her with his paw.

Moths in the light-glare spark and flame
High on the abbey walls.
People laugh at the crazy farce
A deeper darkness falls.

Look! The bear's taking his head off!
Soon real drama can start.
There's a grown man inside, saddened
That man and bear must part.

Now after the final curtain,
Lifeless fur on the floor,
The young man musters strength to weep
That the bear is no more.

Go down to the abbey tonight

To see what you see there.
There's a Shakespeare farce that's playing,
But it's really about the bear.

Tony Johnson

85 Mr. JACK POCOCK, GUARDIAN 11/2/2015

Jack Pocock bowled fast for the village team,
A fraction short of a length, with bite – mean.
The team he played for was Bradfield village
Pitched once a year against Bradfield College.
A stuttering run and his arm whipped over:
It took courage not to run for cover.
Public schoolboys fenced as missiles fizzed past.
All avowed, “He is seriously fast!”
Big fish paid respect to village minnow,
My guardian, who was my boyhood hero.
He mended roads and later cut hedges,
A council workman on modest wages
In holey buff envelope, paid weekly,
Handed to missus on Fridays meekly.
She gave back coins for beer, Woodbines and cricket.
Listen! Wireless forecast. State of the wicket!

At confirmation class asked our parson,
“How many fathers have you?” I said, “One.”
“No. Your earthly one and Father in Heaven.”
Same question next class. I was wrong again.
My answer, “Three,” left him in a state of shock.
“My dad, my heavenly father and Mr. Pocock.”

Tony Johnson

86 JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES 31/1/2012

“Jehovah's witnesses on the path!”
“Don't let them in:
I'm in the bath.”

“Jehovah's witnesses. What a bore!”
“Just be polite,
But close the door.”

Jehovah's witnesses dressed so smart.
So nice and clean,
Don't even fart.

Jehovah's witnesses will unfold
The Bible's truths,
Visions untold.

Jehovah's witnesses softly knock.
Male and female?
Holy wedlock?

Jehovah's witness quietly speaks,
“Share our future.
He finds who seeks.”

“Jehovah's witnesses, Time will stop.
My wife's upstairs.
Do let's swap.

Jehovah's witnesses have some fun.
The bomb will drop.
Armageddon!”

“Jehovah's witnesses, why not sin?
When you repent,
God takes you in.”

Jehovah's witnesses see mistake.
Wily devil
Is secret snake

Jehovah's witnesses hear no more.
Go to knock at
Another door.

Tony Johnson

87 A DOG WITH SENSE 13/4/2014

An older, tired-looking dog wandered into my yard.
I could tell from his collar and well-fed belly that he had a home and was well taken care of.

He calmly came over to me, I gave him a few pats on his head; he then followed me into my house, slowly walked down the hall, curled up in the corner and fell asleep.

An hour later, he went to the door, and I let him out..

The next day he was back, greeted me in my yard, walked inside and resumed his spot in the hall and again slept for about an hour. This continued off and on for several weeks.

Curious I pinned a note to his collar: 'I would like to find out who the owner of this wonderful sweet dog is and ask if you are aware that almost every afternoon your dog comes to my house for a nap.'

The next day he arrived for his nap, with a different note pinned to his collar: 'He lives in a home with 6 children, 2 under the age of 3 - he's trying to catch up on his sleep. Can I come with him tomorrow?'

88 JUST SMOULDERING 18/9/2009

Throwing the cigarette through the window,
He watched it gleam like a glow-worm
Through the dark of his reflected body
Then dim and go out...

...And sat down to write.

But his mind remained dark and pedestrian,
Refused to run or leap or fly,
Try as he might. The sounds of supper
Clattered in the kitchen. The television
Performed jauntily in the adjacent room.
A dullness only lodged in his brain.
Too late, too late to start a fire there.

Later checking the flat battery charging
In the garage, among the dry, curled leaves
A smouldering and a thin musk of smoke
Alerted his nostrils. He bent down,
Gently inspired a flame, faltering in the dark.

KILNS

KILNS AND FIRING 21/11/2011

89 1. KILNS 9/11/2011

My son once asked his A Level ceramics teacher at his Sixth Form College, "How can I fire my pots in a wood-fired kiln?"

"You build one," came the reply. That was 27 years ago. At the end of the garden there is still a working kiln.

The first two kilns for earthenware were built with loose laid house bricks on a concrete plinth and a single external firebox, creating an updraft. The mortar substitute was our own clayey mud. When firing the first kiln, smoke escaped through gaps in the walls as well as through the chimney top. His teacher and parents helped to slap mud into the nooks and crannies. It worked. These kilns were later dismantled; which was sad in a way, because it was never quite as exciting again as the temperature crept up to the required 1060 degrees.

The third kiln also had a single external firebox, but created a cross draft. It was better built, so required no mud slinging. Indeed, he was able to fire this kiln without assistance after the initial firing. The fourth kiln was built in order to be able to reach 1280 degrees, stoneware temperature, and to avoid the problems of saggars. The mathematics for the calculation of the construction for the top arch of bricks of the chamber of this kiln defeated him, but his brother's degree came to the rescue. The internal chamber was lined with homemade high temperature insulation bricks fired in the third kiln. It achieved the effects of wood firing on the surfaces of glazed and unglazed pots. It has twin internal fireboxes creating a cross draft.

"You can't move now," asserted my son, having moved out himself. Dinner guests would enquire, "What's that structure at the end of the garden?"

"Come and see it."

The kiln was wreathed in a grey mist in the failing light, a ghostly temple to the god of fire, literally an icebreaker. Magical.

"You're so obsessed with fire you'd burn your grandmother," I'd say to my son. However, she passed away some years ago and was buried. But it occurred to me that, now well beyond my allotted three score years and ten, we could save on crematorium costs and fire a few good pots whilst we were at it; and with a certain kind of immortality to boot. What a way to go!

What with the ubiquity of gas and electric kilns, I felt that my son's latest kiln was a rarity in the modern world and the product of such hard work and experimentation that it deserved a poem. His grandmother deserved one too as he succeeded her in her profession. I guess the authorities will not allow me to lend one final assistance to fire a few more pots in the garden, so instead of pots a poem: one poem, a sonnet, for both his kiln and grandmother.

90 FIRING

THE FIRING

Her temper was once as hot as a kiln firing.
Hands would box my ears and her sharp voice screeched.
But she cooled after the flash fire peak was reached
And soon her guilty-concerned tone was enquiring,

"Are you all right?" And I felt the fire was out.

Then soft as unfired clay she wetly kissed
My burning skin and loving-hate would twist
My skin away and risk another clout.

Later her temper became October sun
Touching the cooling kiln's burnt yellow brick.
The heat inside has done its own best trick,
Working the clay's and running glaze's fusion,

Leaving the honeyed-coloured solid pot,
Cool-warm and lovely. But, mind! The ash is hot!

**91 THE KNOCK/ KNOCKING DOWN 9/2/2016 17/11/2010
KNOCK DOWN**

7 Orange Grove 1957

There's a knock on our peeling nut-brown door.
I close the book and let the knockers in.

"Why aren't you at work?"

"I'm studying."

"What for?"

Her voice is dismissive broken glass, thin.

The Council's come, at last, t'inspect our slum.

Rotten row must, we hope, soon be knocked down.

There's just us and odd job Frank, sweet on mum,
Clogging up the hovels this end of town.

"Mum works. She says be sure to go upstairs:
that's where the bed leg pierced a rotten board."

Three's a crowd in this pokey room. She stares
at my book, my secret weapon, the word-hoard.

They slide sideways between table and sofa
through kitchen to stairs. She turns, decides to shift
out. I am down in her book as a loafer.

"For a degree," I say. And her eyebrows lift.

Tony Johnson

92 LASTING 11/1/2014

There were those old rugby boots sneaked out,
hidden from wives for that last game of the foolish,
trying to get away with it in more senses than one.
And the dead giveaway of that cut on the bald pate
of your partner in that daft recklessness.

Then the return home after the battle was lost
to the indulgent look on the women's faces
that said, "Boys will be boys", making us young -
momentarily. Worthwhile though and memorable.
No harm done, knowing that was finally it.

Then that last game of cricket creaking at the wicket,
desperately straining to reach double figures,
skill remnants lasting to stop the good ball,
hoping the dodgy knee would hold in the swivel
for your famous - on the local scene, that is -
hook shot, and failing to get after the full toss,
invisible fours going begging,
wishing game over and you were in the pub.
Time to hang up another pair of boots.

Then that last acting part (those old army boots
of Lance corporal Jones's were killing),
playing the silly old man once again.
At least there were not so many lines to learn.
If only you could insert a memory stick!
Just creak about the stage and avoid the prat fall.
Yet later on you managed to hit the deck hip first.
Acting is very dangerous the doctor said.

Who cares about rugby, cricket and the stage?
There's singing, reading, talking, writing, walking,
Waiting. Ah yes! Waiting. And lasting!

Tony Johnson

93 LEECH HYPOCHONDRIACUS 1/11/2005 16/10/2006

Six weeks after his operation he was back again,
Brandishing a tube of ointment
For the scar on his abdomen,
Which was fading nicely without it.
"I read about this in the paper.

"Do you know how much that costs?

My GP had never heard of it."

He told us, triumphantly. £"30."

Mean-mouthed, skinny, hunched, cunning

Too knowing by half how best to suck blood.

There's nothing wrong with him.

What's he in here for? The free meals?

What's he doing now? He's waving an envelope
His wife has just brought in.
He explains to his audience agog
Triumphantly again, " Tickets. Ho! Ho!
Tickets for Majorca. Three weeks to day.
"You might not be able to go!"
"Oh! I'm determined. Determined."
Is he saving on meals for extra holiday money?

LEECH 2 1/11/2005 ARCHY IN HOSPITAL

(The American poet, Don Marquis created Archy, the cockroach. Archy came out at night and used the office typewriter to compose his thoughts, but he couldn't hit the capitals key and his punctuation was nonexistent. With acknowledgements to Don Marquis, Archy, the cockroach, tells of a spell in hospital.)

i was all snug in this box of tissues
and somebody carted it off to hospital
when i woke up i peeped
through a tear in the cardboard
no kidding I saw this new species

he strode into the ward
expertly adjusted the bed backrest
swung up his legs, extracted the telegraph
from his bag and lay down to read
i think hed been in hospital before

later he was brandishing a tube of ointment
do you know how much that cost
no one could reply.
thirty pounds daylight robbery
somebodys making a packet
ripping off the nhs
i read about it in the paper
my gp had never heard of it
showed him the article
do you know what its for
no one could reply
it helps heal the scar

The drinks trolley came round
i have to have a special drink
i only do tea or coffee

i don't want to be a nuisance
now just you serve everybody else
and when you've finished
you come back and i'll tell you where
it is im on a special diet.

then he was waving an envelope
tickets for madeira three weeks today
how do you know youll make it
oh im determined determined

back again tom a nurse said
he glanced around the ward
she knows me you know
suddenly the united nations swept in
why are you back you had an operation
only six weeks ago
what did you eat today
he couldnt remember
last evening he couldnt remember
suddenly the consultant flashed
go home mondays bank holiday
come back tuesday
thank you doctor thank you thank you and
he packed his bag for home and holiday

they say theres a new top bug in here
i always thought i was im not
sticking around to find out
i might wake up no cockroach and mutate into
leech hypochondriacus munchausensis
or something

Tony Johnson

94 THE LIE

When she said she had lied
her lightening words ripped his trunk.
He shrivelled inwards.
Love died.

Coiled in his intestine
like an enormous tapeworm
on the soul's excrement
Hate fed.

He stared like a vacant guy,
stuffed with straw and shredded paper,
was a square-eyed head case,
Straw-crammed,

a zombie doomed to wander,
not hoping for release,
nor finding clear path home.
Rootless.

He wrote, cut back dead wood,
Grubbed out ivy by the root
Restored the pith.
Sap rose.

Tony Johnson

95 LIVING ROOM 2/9/2011

It must have seemed like an outbreak of war.
The lawnmower engine tattered the peace
Of the Sunday siesta and scattered
The guinea pigs behind the wire mesh
In several directions to one destination,
Their hutch, lebensraum, an illusion
Of domestic safety from the larger world
Of domestic illusion, compounded
Of sly mutual insecurities,
Masquerading as strength. Soon the light
Is gone and night pours murder, death by crash,
Rumours of war from the television,
Window on the larger world outside,
Into the living room. There is nowhere to hide.

Tony Johnson

96 LOLLIPOP MAN 17/11/2013

I used to be ashamed of my father
To really tell you the truth.
Now he's seventy-nine and feeling fine,
And I'm no longer a youth.

Once he stood in a Woolworth's doorway,
When I was a lad at school.

My cruel friends laughed he looked so daft,
And I laughed like a silly fool.

His eyes were red and swollen,
He had a dirty raincoat on.
He was talking odd like a silly clod,
And I wished that he was gone.

Once dirty and unshaven he met me.
He was about to go off his head.
So we travelled by bus the pair of us
And I wished that I was dead.

We travelled to another city
And a barber shaved his stubble,
He began to repeat, "I want milk to eat."
And I knew we were in trouble.

I used to be ashamed of my father,
But now I have come to know
(The passing years have quelled my fears)
That my father was a mad hero.

One clear night on the embankment
To save us from his depression
He had left his home and started to roam
Just pennies in his possession.

Just pennies were not so princely.
It was less than the doss house cost.
Even the sally army aren't keen on the barmy.
And my father simply got lost.

When he left his home forever
He tramped the streets for work.
Jobs were rare and he took good care,
When in one, never to shirk.

But the dark of his depression would raze
The very temples of his mind.
In a garden of weeds and terrible needs
He was left with a serpent to bind.

He was night watchman in a factory,
Had menial jobs by the score.
When his mind gave way, so did the pay.

They were quick to show him the door.

He was Father Christmas in a grotto.
In the best job that he had
Traffic would stop for his lollipop
And the children called him Dad

I'm no longer ashamed of my father.
He's a tragedy nobody wrote.
But a fictional prince can soon convince
He's real and worthy of note.

Tony Johnson

97 LUCKY GIRL 1940 12/10/2010
Born 24 August 1940

When this baby was born, the bomb was dropping,
Then randomly ditched on the hospital wing.
This child raced to the basement on borrowed feet,
Left her mother bereft on the nursing seat.
No intimate cuddle. Swift bonding denied.
Just vague longing. Lucky no one died.

Next bomb – a direct hit some way down the street.
“Get under those stairs! Quick!” We beat a retreat.
Engine rattle. Cut out. Silence. Thud. Walls shook,
Glass flew...The kaleidoscope settled. Our nook
Was safe as houses. And I was like a kite high
And laughed like crazy, up with the fights in the sky.

The third bomb marched through the front door.
Our world was smashed: Dad was back from the war.
Those three pips he'd acquired had gone to his head.
“Form up, you pipsqueaks!” (I could've wished him dead).
“Fatigue party, 'shun. Our task is to complete
From there to here one path, paving, crazy, feet
For the use of.” Stripped to the waist we saw
The hole at the bottom of his back. In awe
We longed to feel with fingers just how deep
The wound was. Fetching and carrying must keep
His path going. We were his tiny pressed team,
Bound together to finish his homely scheme.

I know now, but it took a long time to suss

That the path was the last crazy bit of his long way back to us.

(Captain Richard Arthur Gittings, Ann's Johnson's father, finally came home from the Second World War in 1947. His brother, Pilot Officer Eric George Gittings was shot down and lies in The British Cemetery, Solymar, Budapest.)
Tony Johnson

98 MACHISMO MAN 16/4/20184

Macho-sycophant flexed his big muscles.
We admirers, following, were amazed.
Tree-trunk legs, forced into Wellington boots,
Steered him, splashing through puddles, down the road.
His little paper boat of goods for sale
Sailed in the gutter, making for the drain.
He cried as the little boat, falling down,
Clung momentarily to the vortex,
Plunged into the sewers of conformity
And was lost. Returning to his big desk,
He logged on to his computer.
A light touch of the keys made all seem well.

Tony Johnson

99 MALLARD DUCK 26/10/2015

I simply need to find some feed
Beneath this surface where there's weed,
So wedge my bottom in the air.
I do so wish you wouldn't stare!

I know you think my waddle's daft,
But my smile's a smirk that's full of craft,
For who can resist my jewelled head?
No need to beg for your best bread.

Then quack, quack, quack off I toddle
On flipper feet in comic waddle.
Now! Watch this grace and flashing flair
As I arrowhead the whooshing air.

Tony Johnson

[“The Iron Wolf” by Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber 1995)
has loads of brilliant animal verses for children of all ages.

He left out Duck and Rabbit from that volume. Are there a youngsters out there who wants to write about a rabbit or other animal? I bet you can do better than this duck poem.]

100 MEMORY 12/11/2015

Old Stafford had been a labouring man
On grand Lord So and So's estate.
He never had seen the sea
And now it was too late.

Old Stafford spent his last few days
In the day room's haze of smoke
With a smile on his face
As if life was just a joke.

Each night on an arm he'd aim his feet
For bed and repeat, "Where's my roost?"
With a smile on his face.
Then, "Where on earth *is* my roost?"

Frail and pale as a featherless bird
You heard as he settled to lie
For sleep with the faintest of smiles
And a short whispered sigh,

"I never thought I'd ever end up in 'ere."
You could hear his secret shame.
He knew, he knew the hospital
Was the workhouse by another name.

Tony Johnson

101 DEREK AND TAMMY'S WEDDING

Once upon a time long long ago Ann and I had a lovely time trying for a third child, which we hoped might be a daughter. Whereas David and Derek appeared on the scene in a twinkling the daughter did not appear. Now at last we've acquired an extremely talented one, called Tammy-Jo, without even trying! And Jackie has likewise acquired the pleasure of another son!

(There are various influences on what follows: my mother, Geoffrey Chaucer. D.H. Lawrence, W.B. Yeats, Carl Rogers and various mistakes parents made. Just because I don't know much about a subject has never stopped me talking about it.)

There are a lot of people with Psychiatric training, but here goes.

MICKEY MOUSE'S PSYCHOLOGICAL ADVICE 15/3/2006 22/5/2008 TO NEWLY WEDS (AND 2 OTHER VERSIONS)

Laugh together, especially in bed
Have fun! Remember, you're a long time dead!

Becoming one flesh leaves no space between.
Leave room and love becomes an evergreen.

Do some things together: some things apart.
That way you will always stay in good heart.

"Love is a spirit free as any bird."
Old Chaucer never spoke a truer word!

Cage love: and it flies straight through bars. Beware!
Too much possessiveness can be a snare.

Keep talking. Don't hide your deep desires.
Bring them into light: fan them into fires.

Banish fear. It's a bully and a lout.
For what you fear will often come about.

Debt's a real pain. Money enough is fine.
Sort it! And what's yours isn't always mine.

Playing games is just not worth the candle.
It simply makes you too hot to handle.

Too much sacrifice makes the heart a stone,
Breeds resentment. May make you start to moan.

Mothers-in-law, more often boon than bane
Can be such treasures, should not be a pain.

Don't nag. Instead make a no strings request.
You are likely to find that works out best.

Don't pick holes. Don't try to change each other.
You won't win, so it's not worth the bother.

But some adjustments do have to be made

To ensure love endures and does not fade.

The piste of true love never did run smooth
Ski over lumps and bumps and love will sooth.

Children and marriage are such damned hard work,
But can be worth the effort not to shirk.

Between you both a rainbow arch will span,
Where children play and thrive and say, "I can!"

Let piping clarinet and deep bassoon
Make gorgeous music such that love will swoon.

Let the kiln of love become just so hot
That cooling leaves behind the lasting pot.

Laugh together, especially in bed.
Have fun! Remember you're a long time dead!

Advice is meant to be ignored, but there just might be one grain that is
needed. In any case you'll do it your way because you're a couple of
strong-minded people. Derek and Tammy. Good luck and good
health and happiness.

102 MIRACLE BIRD 15/9/2007 24/2/2010

Late summer. Low spring tide. The causeway dried.
For once the old 'uns switched on their mobile.
Expectant for its ring, they ambled on.
Sultry. The tidal smell of fertile mud.
Several greenshank buried beaks, probed deep.
Some roughhouse crows beaked aside seaweed clumps.
White-chested heron elegantly still.
Close by, a tuft-headed, one-legged lapwing.
Dunlin puddled quickly at the water's edge.
The throaty, raucous screeches of some gulls,
Like pointless ugly pain, skewered the peace.

Then purposefully beating North inland
A huge fantastical figment of a bird,
Flew sky high above the grounded feeders,
Beyond its limits, out of Space and Time.
On its back a featherless French princess.

(Bérénice Charlotte was born to Derek and Tammy-Jo Johnson at 1.25 p.m. in
Winchester on 4 September 2007)

Tony Johnson

103 MODERNITY AND MYTHOLOGY 13/9/2011

Through the window of the book
Modernity met mythology.
They boarded together. At her call
Modernity watched the sharp air, startled,
Through which Hephaestus hurtled
And Icarus plunged silently
Into that waiting wine-dark sea.

Riding the riveted bird
Modernity waited for a fall.
There was a sigh, a woman's earth cries,
A blaze of meteor glory,
A shining moment when all trembled.

Safe-landed he missed her...
He turned. Mythology met his stare.
A smile as of the Sphinx
Told him he had missed his story.

(Hephaestus was the Greek god of fire, especially the blacksmith's fire. He was lame
and ugly so his mother threw him from Mount Olympus. He fell for a whole day and
landed in the sea and survived. Icarus flew too close to the sun on wings made by his
father Daedalus. The wax melted and he fell to his death.)

Tony Johnson

104 MORE HANDOUTS 9/11/2010

maggie and milly and molly and may
went down to the beach to play one day)
and Maggie discovered a shell that sang
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and

and milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;

and molly was chased by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and

may came home with a smooth round stone

as small as a world and as large as alone.

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
It's always ourselves we find in the sea.

105 MORNING 11/1/2016

The morning's clean cream.
Blue tits stab the bottle cap,
Dipping dirty beaks.

Tony Johnson

106 THE MUSE AT HOME WITH THE POET

Lady Muse cracked a whip
To watch her poet skip.

She cracked him a joke
And gave him a poke.

She blew him a kiss.
He replied with a hiss.

She said, "I must sup
And you can wash up."

She sat down to eat,
Her poet at her feet.

She showed him her bust.
He was lost in lust.

They tip-toed up to bed.
It was then she said,

"Before you can mate,
You must first create.

Tony Johnson

107 NIGHTMARE 21/11/2012

This man was sweeping an empty plain
To cover tracks he himself had made

In a tight circle where tracks were laid
Desperately sweeping dust in vain.

A circle of steel grew small and smaller.
The sweeping man could step inside.
The welcome darkness was a place to hide
As the circle of steel grew tall and taller.

But the darkness brought a withering cold.
Then the tower of steel brought the people.
So he climbed the ladder inside the steeple
And this was the message this man told,

"I am high above you: my words are law.
Each letter is written in words of steel.
Before my law's might all must kneel
And obey." The people knelt and saw

In letters of steel above his head,
"My will is law. Never disobey
Never question what I have to say.
Obedience is your daily bread."

But steel and man were built on a lie
The people quietly bided their time.
He failed to notice their silent crime:
On the power of steel he could rely.

When man and steel collapsed in a heap,
The dust came sweeping over the plain.
The people shouted as if insane.
The nightmare dead: it was joy to weep.

Tony Johnson

108 NO BACKGROUND 2/4/2010

I slaved sixteen hours a day on that farm,
Slept on a concrete verandah. No pay.
No medical care. Denied school. A stray.
They'd shopped me overseas for a better life,
They said. Told me that mum and dad were dead.
They lied. I lost my brother. Found another
Christian Brother masked in a black soutane,
Who clasped my naked back. Abuse. Abuse.

Abuse. They stood us in a horseshoe ring.
Made us witness sickening punishing.
No use complaining. No background, you see.
Such loneliness: an ice block in your heart
That will not melt. Where are my folks? Such lies.
Where are they? Who am I? Time's running out.
Who were they, the nameless faceless liars?

Late, late Prime Ministers apologise.

Tony Johnson

(Thousands of children were sent overseas to Canada and Australia in the 19th and 20th Centuries, right up until 1967 from children's homes, including Barnado and Church of England homes. The Australian Prime Minister apologised at the end of last year and Gordon Brown on 24 February 2010.)
NO BACKGROUND

109 THE OAK

The gale, a spiteful whistling bully,
Mindlessly whacked the oak.
The trunk cracked, sprang back,
And with a kicking recoil, split
Raggedly. Some accidental earth
Piled against its bole the cause of rot.
Its corpse lies across the compost heap,
Cushioned. Top branches across the next garden.
Count the rings: its years are long.
It should have outlived you.
Maybe its long trunk rot
Will outlast you yet,
(The chainsaw buzzes)
But maybe not.

I'd rather have the tree.

Tony Johnson

110 THE ONION SANDWICH Circa 1944

Four years old and far from the battle, the child,
Skinny, anxious, alert, stole part way down
Dark stairs, pressed her forehead on a banister,

Listening to her mother's quiet crying
Into the dry bread and raw onion sandwich.
In the grate the last glow of the last coal,
A cocoon of weak light, gave false comfort,
The house briefly safe after the last bomb blast.
Far from the battle, the child crept back to bed,
Her face marked by the turned wood's impress,
Silent sorrow, fears, tears, the onion sandwich.

Tony Johnson

111 THE OTHER FRONT LINE

5 June 2014 Coleville-Montgomery

Tonight fireworks pop, cascading down the sky,
like miniature shells bursting...phut...phut,
above the channel and small towns of Normandy.
We watch from a beach harmlessly celebrating peace.

6 June 2014 Ouistreham

This morning we watch stiff black fascists
mime-marching, terrorising a people
on a beach where politicians make speeches:
they were not born when the veterans they greet
fought for footholds on this sand,
raked clean for the ceremony.
These medalled old men view their younger ghosts,
briefly resurrected on the black and white screens,
landing, young again, seventy years on.

6 June 2014 Coleville-Montgomery

An old Frenchman fourteen in '44 opens a bottle.
We sip wine in the sunshine on his terrace.
This morning's ceremony has time-travelled him
to the wine cellar below his home in Caen.
Seventy years on his words are urgent bullets
from a boy's heart, from the cobwebbed dark
of his old home cellar, sheltering from friendly shells.
In a lull he emerges. Intact. Quietly his father says,
"This is just the start. We must leave. Now."
Pots, pans dangle clanging from bikes, prams are piled
with blankets, tools, food, snatched anything.
We're assigned as food foragers, shelter constructors, scouts,

surviving in the forest beyond the bombarding shells,
outsmarting friend and foe with civilian nous.
Returning, we search for our homes, finding rubble.
Rubble has buried alive stay-put neighbours in their cellars.

Someone says, "Civilians are now another front line."
We sip the uneasy wine of our peace.

Tony Johnson

112 OUR NANNY 9/4/2013

Our Nanny never held our hands
As we climbed up the stairs.
She never tucked us up in bed,
Nor made us say our prayers.

But Nanny saw that we were fed.
She never flew around,
Or rode a broomstick like a witch.
Her feet were on the ground.

Our Nanny taught us how to read
And gave us milk at breaks.
She saw we had a dinner cooked,
'Cos some were thin as rakes.

She made us do a dotty test,
Which told her we were bright.
She packed us off to grammar school.
We didn't feel quite right.

We thought nannies cared for rich kids
Not us who'd lost a dad.
But Nanny gave us bed and board,
The best teachers she had.

We worked and played and passed exams.
We made it to a college.
Nanny paid the fees for our degrees,
That stuffed us full of knowledge.

Nanny was proud. How well we'd done!
Prof. Pete, the medical man,
Electronic Tom and teacher Ted

Pay back the best we can.

We knew she cared, but not her name.
We were not left to Fate.
Grown up, we found out who she was.
Her name was Nanny State.

Tony Johnson

113 OFTEN 10/4/2015

(Richard Dimbleby said the first
victims of the concentration camps
that he saw were wandering aimlessly.
In 1945 a front page of the Daily
Mirror had a gruesome picture.)

Among aimless wanderers
He sat quite still,
Until a soldier
Touched his shoulder
Lightly from behind.
Too late for kindness,
He fell into flakes.
He had kept his shape
Like burnt cardboard.
So bore witness
To the fresh crime,
To the man he had been,
So gave up even
The ghost of himself,
Spilled to wander
A restless witness
In a child's mind,
Resuming his shape,
Often...often...

Tony Johnson

114 O JERUSALEM, JERUSALEM...18/1/2012

(How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a
hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!)

Matthew 23.37

We left those dominant churches higher up

118 PHOTOS ON DISPLAY 3/4/2012
PHOTOS

The photo's ceremony of innocence
Is iced chocolate cake, sacred delight,
Five candles. There's no need for priest or incense.
But bright open smiley eyes must shut tight.
Dad will light the candles, the wish be wished.
And "Blow!" Then the ritual cutting of the cake,
Its sacred sharing. All eat. Eucharist.
If only from innocence she'd not awake.
This photo's displayed, never out of sight,
Kept safe from others deep in grandad's head:
The frightened ghetto boy, ringed by the might
Of Nazi guns, hands aloft, not yet dead;
The running, naked, napalmed girl, in anguish.
Grandad must shut his eyes and make his wish.

Tony Johnson

119 PLASTIC 9/1/2018

(A verse averse to plastic)

There's plastic in the seas
There's plastic on the beach
There's plastic high on screes
Where not a soul can reach.

Plastic bags for wrapping,
Wrapping everything
When it's already wrapped!
Wrapping that'll cling and cling.

There's bags that cling on trees
Along the country lane,
Ballooning in the breeze.
Determined to remain.

Plastic that clogs the ditch
Trash travelled from afar,
Plastic cartons, cups, which
Would just foul up the car.

There's plastic in the fields
With other crops that grow.
What other crop can yield
Bright harvests in the snow?

There's plastic in the harbour:
Plastic bottles, plastic dross,
Collecting in a corner,
Where no one gives a toss.

There's plastic in the ocean
There's plastic in the fish.
Think upon this notion:
It makes a fine fish dish!

Tony Johnson

Playing at Inside Out
120 PLAYING AT INSIDE OUT 15/8/2013

He puts himself outside the pale,
Hitching a lift, not going by train.
What's he doing out in a gale.
The sky laden, teeming with rain.

Inside your painted bubble of steel
You're cosy and safe: it feels well built.
A lonely hitcher throws some guilt.
It sticks. You feel the perfect heel.

He's waited for an hour let's say,
Hoping to thumb a decent lift,
Watching the whizzing traffic shift,
In the lay-by on the motorway.

Here's what by-flashers feel and think:
Middle-aged and grey. Suspicious!
Just out of jail? Could be vicious?
Loony? Must be wet. Does he stink?

Here is what that hitcher sees:
A couple consulting separate maps,
Soon to be divorced, perhaps?
An anxious old man stops and pees.

All is well. The hitcher was bored.
Now watch him at work back in the fold.
Awfully clean grubbing for gold
 Inside the pale and a terrible fraud.

Tony Johnson

121 POVERTY 10/9/2018

Poverty can break you.
Poverty can make you.
Poverty can mar you.
Determination can shift you.
Determination can lift you,
Given the chance.
Given the chance.
Given the chance.
Poverty scours the mind,
Devours free knowledge.
Knowledge empowers you.
Knowledge can enrich you.
Riches can make you.
Riches can mar you.
Riches can break you...

Tony Johnson

122 POWER CUT 4/5/2022

Damn! Power cut. Lights off.
Where did we put the candles?
 Matches. Matches Ah! Candlelight

Look at that flame.
Blue light at the base.
Green tinge beyond the blue.
Dark lozenge of grey inside,
Enclosed by yellow
That pulls upwards, sinks back,
Seeking more fuel
In the bowl of white hot wax.
Ah! Candlelight:
Colours of life.

Lights back on.

Harsh electric light.
Monochrome.
Snuff the candle.
No churchy snuffers hereabouts.
Primitive technology only:
Spit, finger and thumb.
Snuff it. Don't blow. Don't blow.
You'll get thin grey smoke.
Out, out, brief candle.

Tony Johnson

P123 PROBABLY 4/8/2012

If you own a yacht and a half-decent house,
You are, probably, as poor as a church mouse.
Well, you are, because assets mean you're cash poor,
Probably, you are in dire need of much more.
Get rid of assets and so you're cash rich,
But then you're asset poor. Isn't life a bitch?
Assets or cash: cash or assets. You can't win.
A church mouse exists on crumbs wafer thin,
Is probably is better off, can eat candle wax.
If one sells some assets one must pay tax:
Fewer assets and less cash. Prepare to sail,
Victual up. Better off offshore. Can't fail.
Rent out the half-decent house. Stash the cash.
Avoid the tax. Pursue the dream. Must dash.

Tony Johnson

124 RABBITS 23/3/2013

Those Romans brought their rabbits here
To feed sad soldiers pining for the sun.
Waiting for the Picts and Scots to appear
They watched their dinner hop and run.

Rabbits do that when frightened stupid,
Don't sit on walls and keep on pining.
They dart to cosy burrows and stay hid.
Leaving drenched soldiers to their whining

For lousy pay that's slow in coming.
A rabbit's life's quite short if caught.

The soldier's may soon be shortening,
Once battle's joined and fiercely fought.

The Romans left us roads and laws,
Rabbit droppings and rabbit pie
Now rabbits scratch my patch and I

Apart from roads and laws and central heating
What they really left behind is rabbit pie and droppings
These rabbits on my lawn the Romans failed to eat/catch
Is driving me insane
He should be added to my meat
Or driven down the lane.pain

125 RED –BERRIED LOVE 9/1/2008

The firelight brought a touch of summer sun
To your shoulders as you knelt on cushions
After love on a frosty February evening.

You knelt there, silently, smiling at me.
Flames flickered in your eyes.
Red-berried love grew in the evergreen space between.

Tony Johnson

126 A REED BENDING 11/8/2007

A bruised reed shall he not break
And the smoking flax shall he not quench.
Isaiah 42.3

The auburn wig is too young
For the wrinkles rivering her face.
Young girls laugh at her,
Not knowing the time of her life
Is not yet over. She fought
All the way through two wars,
Surviving the orphaning.
When trodden down she went on,
Until she came to the place
Where there is still singing.
Even the devil loneliness
Cannot break her spirit.
She remains soft and heart-pliable,
A smoking flax, a reed bending.
Tony Johnson

127 REMEMBERING 15/1/2014

29295 PRIVATE HENRY (HARRY) JOHN PATCH
Born 17 June 1898 – died 25 July 2009
7th DUKE OF CORNWALL'S LIGHT INFANTRY

Remember Harry's words. Remember well,
For Harry forged them in the fires of hell.
Honour him not because he lived so long
But told it like it was...And now he's gone.

"I was conscripted. Why should I want to go
And kill anybody I didn't know?"
Pay attention to what he has to say.
Don't let them spin his whispered words away

With lying tales of willing sacrifice.
Three of his gunner team blasted in a trice.
No trace. No flesh. No bone. No disc. No face.
Harry, shrapnel-wounded, a Blighty case,

The lucky one, who each late September
Shut himself away, alone, to remember
His bonded pals who made that solemn pact
To shoot to wound, to bring down only. Backed

Words with action, sparing that German's life,
Shot in the leg, sending him back to wife.
Wheelchair-bound, age-scarred, sane, on peaceful land,
He shook, ninety years on, a German's hand.

You are the enemy I would not kill,
My friend. Passchendaele mud has had its fill.
Were his words heard among cathedral bells?
" War is organised murder - nothing else."

Tony Johnson

128 RETIRING BRIEF CASE 15/9/2007

It might have lasted another year.
The leather, once smooth brown
Lined like a palm
Is now scuffed lemon

After the zest is grated,
Or cracked like dry elephant.
Sweat has worn the grip to base metal.
Some stitching has unseamed itself,
An escape hole.
Inside detritus of work:
Memos, minutes, messages;
Paper, paper, paper;
Payslip;
Cycle clip;
Fluff.

Plastic sandwich wrap;
Something vaguely vegetable,
Rolled between finger and thumb,
A brief mystery,
Not worth thinking about.
What's the point?
Empty!

What's to do?
"You're the brief case now.
Loosen your grip.
Let go!
Live!"

Today I collected my daily bread in it.

129 THE RETURN

They say you should not go back, but I did;
And walked again the rutted, tussocked lane.
It was raining. They were all gone, the birds:
Bantam, Rhode Island Red, Muscovy duck
From the muddy dip where the lane petered,
Then bridged the swollen stream and rose a path
To nowhere in particular, just country.
The birds were gone. A hedge had been grubbed out,
Usurped by a triple rustic garage,
The holy hedge where I'd searched for warm eggs.
Builder's rubble, sand and shingle cluttered
Ground where once my first spuds had flowered.

The kindly owner, proud of his extensions,
Walked me round the back. The apple had gone.

No sign of wintering bean sticks wigwamming
Around its trunk. Gone the thirsty standpipe
Gulping hot libation to cough down cold.
Gone the privy's merciful wooden seat.
Gone the garden's saving wartime bounty.
Through glass a bespoke rustic kitchen gleamed
Where fires in the black-leaded range had glowed.
No oil lamp to singe a homeworking head.

No sweat! It was worth it to stretch old legs;
Trudge the lane; know I'd lifted those warm eggs.

Tony Johnson

130 THE ROAD FROM EDEN THE ROAD FROM EDEN

Which way is it, the road from Eden?

He has no joy, only an endless road,
Moving with him so that progress is nil.
To stand still is to arrive at the same point
As those travelling on.
Indifferent rubbish accumulates.
Steel hoops band the rolling giant
Forever striding the long and dusty road.

Which way is it?

Let him smell his way to the city,
Where they foul the pavement,
Collect dust and soot,
Clippings, peelings, grass
Decaying, worm-ridden:
Their own dirt recycled
To mulch the tree
Shooting to ripe fruit
In the new garden soil.

Tony Johnson

131 REUNION
CLASSROOM EXAMINATION **23/3/2015**
2a Price's School 1966

These ageing men were boys I used to teach.
Now, rôle reversed, I listen and I learn,
For one boy's now the canon come to preach
To attentive silence more than I could earn.

They were the cunning masters of mayhem,
Of artful doodle and of daring daydream.
Such fine bubbling brains! No one could stop them
From acting like a loose anarchic team.

Memory draws a classroom castle in the air,
Where appear thirty brilliant pairs of eyes,
Which stalk the ether and begin to stare.
To scrutinise, assess, and analyse.

Are you weak? Are you strong? You cannot bluff.
We can shave off a beard or rip off a mask.
Who are you? Do you care? D'ya know your stuff?
Answer! Before you set us any task!

Tony Johnson

(Canon Martin Seeley greeted me and simply said, "2a."
He gave the address at St Peter and St Paul on 8th June
2008, in a ceremony to mark one hundred years after
the move of Price's School from West Street to Park Lane.
He was in 2a and was one of several in that class who eventually
went to Cambridge - the best class I ever taught.)

SAND AND WATER (See All Children Love)

132 SATURDAY NIGHT THEATRE **19/11/2009**
Saturday Night Theatre

Too darned dog-tired to take it off,
She hitched her sister's uniform up
And poked the fire to mottle her legs.
Perched on its shelf, sloping its shoulders,
The green radio was clicked on, tuned,
Drawing back the curtains of our minds.

We had the best seats in the house:
There were only two to be had.
Wizard innards sucked from the ether
Places, faces. Dramatic speech
Poured into the darkening room
From some far country of hurt hearts
And brought them warmly near.

The gas mantle fizzed like Epsom salts.
Then hissed. Low. House lights faded up.
As picturesque coconut horses'
Hooves vanished, real rain sluiced the alley,
The radio's rainbows washed out
In the hardened light. To bed. To dream.

Tony Johnson.

133 THE SCAR

The scar surfaced very quickly from the road
To nose by way of a piece of aggressive flint.
Nine stitches later the scar acquired a tint
Of healing blue, something like ancient woad.

As a boy, proud of my scar I used to lie:
"An eagle's talon tore it when I disturbed its nest.
We were on jungle patrol. Aw! The pain! Honest!
The knife just cut the bone, but missed the eye."

As a man your scar retains a dangerous musk,
Alley cats think you are fighting tom,
A psychedelic man with a mushroom bomb.
Or a raunchy boar with a ripping tusk.

Symbolic? Sexual? Or psychological?
The scar is a simple surface scar - that's all.

134 SEIZING THE DAY **30/5/2010**
For Monty

The strong man stood upon the hill
With his longed for son in his arms.

They waited as one, silent, still,
While cocks crowed their noisy alarms.

The sun lay hid, a rosy glow.
The silver horses would not stay.
They broke out plodding, pulling slow
The sun's gold chariot into day.

The vital boy then seized the reins.
With telling voice, insistent touch
He urged them on. Their flying manes
Whipped his face. Their pace quickened such

That father reined the horses in,
Whispered with loving, lightest voice,
"The horses do not need to win.
The day is won. Give them the choice,

The choice how fast they want to run.
And I will do the same for you.
They'll run on with the noonday sun.
Seize your day. Love those horses too."

The strong man stood upon the hill
With his longed for son in his arms.
They waited as one, silent, still,
While cocks crowed their noisy alarms.

Tony Johnson

(Montgomery means strong man on the hill. Philip means lover of horses. Apollo, the sun god, patron of music and poetry in mythology, rode daily across the sky in his chariot, pulled by horses. Monty Philip, a brother for Poppy and Bérénice, was born to Tammy and Derek Johnson on 3 June 2009).

135 SILLY OLD FOOL 9/3/2009

For Poppy

At table we clinked glasses,
Laughed and smiled,
Locked gaze like any corny pair
Anywhere
While invisible threads shuttled between.
Just a silly old fool
In love again

With a new-sprung beauty.

(Mountain wilderness became lush valley.
Cobwebs pearled in the sun.
Goldfinch shone.)

And the child clinked glasses
Again and again and again.

Tony Johnson

136 THE SINGER THE SINGER

The man who'd died was round and warm and fun
And many stood and said that it was so.
Another silent, surplised and morose
Wore a razor face, stropped ready to slash.
The man who'd died chose not to delay death's day.
He'd found his yoke light and his burden easy.
The other strained to carve his mark on rock,
Became a tyrant bully with a pigmy heart.
The dead man, at ease with sinner and saint,
Had known life's trial was a joyful event.
The other would not burst a grape in his mouth,
Shut himself out from life's free-given feast.

Some said both had worshipped the self-same God.
One grabbed a good tune and sang a good song.

Tony Johnson

SOFT SELL 15/5/2004

I have been bosomed in the square,
Bounced by bosoms for the sake
Of cake and bottles. The affair
Was soon over ; softness sells cake.

Tony Johnson

137 SOLDIER BOYS 4/11/2014

Aged thirteen and a boy's neat foot
Crammed into a bright-bulled boot.
Aged thirteen and learning to drill:
Some were thrilled and drilled with a will.

Aged thirteen and handed a gun:
Some sensed power and thought, "What fun!"

But there was the deadbeat platoon.
Their instinct was this was too soon.
Just out of short trousers they sang
Bawdy songs and their voices rang
An earful for the drilling barker
As they mock-marched onto the marker.

Once one paraded in full school kit.
He'd lost his khaki: didn't fit.
Next he dressed as if for cricket.
Still not enough to work his ticket.
They were Fred Karno's ragtime army.
Misfits. Bolshie. Peaceniks. Conchie.

Aged thirteen and forced into khaki
In this sceptred isle, land of the free.

Tony Johnson

138 SOON 7/4/2006

After the oil ran out and the wars ceased,
The pony traps sprinted into morning.
The pace was slower than before that end.
Roads stayed good for years and soon we learned
That life was much better lived more slowly.
We wondered how we'd let it get so bad.
We travelled less and marvelled just how much
There was to do at heart of hearth, village
And town. We became stars in our own right
Bored with others 'silly fame and fortune.
The useless cars became our children's dens,
Or were melted down for the shire horses'
Hooves and tackle and metal parts of carts;
Or made great sculptures along the cycle ways.
We learned to walk and late in the evening
Polished the brasses of our brilliant horses.

Tony Johnson

**139 SOUR AND SWEET 5/10/2006
(PETWORTH AND UPPARK)**

So this monstrous big pile housed
That bigger monster, Arrogance,
Who disinherited his daughter
For sitting down in his presence.
And sacked the dutiful servant
For turning his back on him,
While bellowing the fire for his benefit.
(Let's hope he was damnedly cold).

If he'd known what it was like
To live in a hovel, slopping out mornings
To a brick privy in the alley,
He might have sweetened his temper
With excrement and hard work.
No. He'd have had Roger saddled
For a canter through the deer park
To his Folly. Then a splash in the lake.

He should have walked like his neighbour
To the dairy to drink the buttermilk,
Sweet-talking the singing young dairymaid,
(Who could quell a quarrel with "Peace!")
Into wedlock for a delightful, daft old age.

But his Arrogance had painted for posterity
His cantankerous pomposity-
For the hoi polloi to admire.

Tony Johnson

140 SOWING THE DRAGON'S TEETH 15/10/2014

Were knights of old thugs,
medieval bovver boys,
lusting for a fight?

Were they the dragons,
killing for their lust and spite?
Were damsels just raped?

Did they scatter teeth
as seed on furrowed earth
for armoured war's birth?

(To obtain the golden fleece one of Jason's
tasks was to sow the dragon's teeth, from
which sprang fully armed men he had to fight.)

Tony Johnson

141 STEEL 11/2/2013

This man was sweeping the empty plain
To cover tracks he himself had made.
In a circle, where his tracks were laid,
He swept with a will red dust in vain.

The circle of steel grew smaller, smaller.
The sweeping man was trapped inside,
The welcome darkness a place to hide.
The circle of steel rose taller, taller.

But the darkness brought a withering cold.
And the tower of steel brought the people.
So he climbed the ladder inside the steeple
And this was the message this man told.

"I am high above you: my word is law.
Each letter is written in words of steel.
Before my law's might all must kneel
And obey." The people knelt and saw

In letters of steel above his head,
"My will is law. Never disobey
Or question what I have to say.
Obedience is your daily bread."

Steel and man were built on a lie.
People simply bided their time.
He failed to notice their silent crime.
On the power of steel he could rely.

Steel and man collapsed in a heap.
The dust came sweeping over the plain.
The people shouted as if insane.
The nightmare dead: it was joy to weep.

Tony Johnson

142 THE STUMP

Call in the grinders and have done with it.
What's left of an old man's will won't shift it.
Admit defeat. Know when you are beaten.
Go on. Put your wedges and your axe away.
Stop gritting your teeth as if you'd just bit
into a bitter sloe and at every blow spat out
a lodged stone jolted from your inmost core.
It won't budge. Your stubborn will served you well
in the past. Give it a decent burial.
Iron leverage has failed to crack it.
Admit defeat: it's more stubborn than you are.
Don't waste more precious time and sweat. Go on.
Give in. Right. A couple more whacks for luck?

Tony Johnson

143 SUMMER TERM HAIKU 13/4/2016

The Time's crossword done,
Comatose heads nod forward.
Smoke fogs the staffroom.

The teacher drones on.
Words buzzing like summer flies.
Pupils are dozing.

Hot outside. Inside
Chalk dust snows in the sunbeam.
The class is restless.

He's shouting again.
Paper darts sail on the air.
Classroom's a riot.

Tony Johnson

144 SUMMER'S LATE ARRIVAL 28/6/2006 A Villanelle

Kick out! Come swimming into light of day.
What kept you that you come so very late?
We want to witness your delightful play.

Time's taken its toll: long years rolled away
And still you ask the ancient ones to wait.
Kick out! Come swimming into light of day.

Come on! And let us hear you have your say.
We're greying fast; our limbs are in a state.
We want to witness your delightful play.

Our minds have grown the palest shade of grey
Till you come. Though we're stale, we still fight fate.
Kick out! Come swimming into light of day.

For you someone told summer flowers, "Stay!
Wait!" Push hard! Open wide the garden gate.
We want to witness your delightful play.

Summer's here now, grass grown, the poppy gay,
Come on! Now we're all expectant. All wait.
Kick out! Come swimming into light of day.
We want to witness your delightful play.

Tony Johnson

(Poppy-Maria was born to Tammy-Jo and Derek Johnson on 10 June 2006 in the pool at Winchester Hospital, a week after her poem was written.)

145 SUNFLOWER 15/10/2020

The sunflower's an old lady past her prime,

Who packs a secret punch to cheat on Time.

Her heavy head is bearing down her spine,

A spine once strong, but now a brittle sign

That autumn's ageing sun's a tropic curse

As rodding rain and alphabet storms strain worse.

Her broad green leaves decayed to dirty rags,

Yet still she stands – the lady – by her bags.

Her treasure's stored from the sun's hidden rays

That powered her growth and soon will end her days.

Her secret force is in her deep-lined face,

A beauty mathematical – fine as lace,

An arching alchemy that turns decay to life:

White seeds packed and primed for death to spill – rife.

Tony Johnson

146 THAT CHRISTMAS ONCE UPON ONCE UPON A TIME AT CHRISTMAS

That Christmas morning knees were mountain peaks;
Shins were slippery slopes. Whoopee! Whoopee!
The crinkled sheet a vast and snowy waste,
And hidden feet were warming valley floors.
All was high hilarity and gurgling fun.

Later on the cheap-shine plastic toys broke.
Snow melted into ice-cold tearful streams.

Quick! Fetch the old string beach bag. Cram it full
With wrapping paper, any soft old thing,
Press-gang the broom, button-eye, red-tongue the bag.
Behold the nag, prancing horse hilarity,
With two astride, and stamina all day long!

In bed that Christmas knees were mountain peaks
Shins were slippery slopes. Whoopee! Whoopee!

Tony Johnson

147 THE YOUNG LADY OF TRING LIMERICKS AND HAIKU

How about kicking off your poetic life? How about trying your hand at a limerick? They are short and need to follow the pattern of the one below, which came unbidden one morning before breakfast! Limericks have a reputation for being naughty. Remember, "to shoot the policeman in your head." It would be good to see some more in the magazine.

If they are too naughty the editors may have to exercise discretion!
But you will have the satisfaction of having written one.

THE YOUNG LADY OF TRING

There was a young lady of Tring,
Who was once addicted to bling.
Now she's so old
She has no use for gold
And can hardly remember a thing.

Tony Johnson

The haiku is a short Japanese poem that must have 17 syllables (5+7+5). It's like a pebble thrown into a pond, spreading ripples in the mind. Here a pebble written when milk was delivered and not homogenised.

MORNING

The morning's clean cream.
Blue tits stab the bottle top,
Dipping dirty beaks.

Tony Johnson

The old man of Locks Heath

There was an old man of Locks Heath.
Who never put brush to his teeth.
Bad eggs could not tell
How bad was the smell
From teeth, gums above and beneath.

Tony Johnson

148 THIRTEEN USES FOR ROPE 16/4/2013

Rope will break the wild stallion to the bit.
Rope can lead an old bull by the nose.
Rope bound the slave and lashed him into line.
Rope was a cat that ripped the sailor's back.
Rope moors the boat quite safely to the shore.

Rope bars infidels from the cricket square.
Rope marks the boundary only fools will cross.
Rope fast to mast fend off the sultry siren.
Rope skips the tough boxer fighting fit.
Rope's best knots hold fast, but easily undo.
Rope clings cool climbers to the mountain face.
Rope breeds total trust in the rocky place.

Rope's a bond paying out the freedom of the wild.
Good luck.

Tony Johnson

149 THREE HAIKU: CROSSING LINES ree Haiku: Crossing Lines

24/8/2015

Tonight I don gown.
Last night I slept in my slum,
Now bow to daisied dons.

Dons bring out my posh.
Odd-job Frank burrs Wiltshire, broad.
I do speak like 'e.

Work compels early:
Frank clacks by on hobnailed boots.
I'll read Shakespeare's works.

150 THREE SCORE AND TEN 11/4/2008

(The other day glancing at my A Shropshire Lad by A.E. Houseman - bought for 10p on the 13th June 1981 at the church fête - I came across these lines:

Now of my three score years and ten
Twenty will not come again.
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

A reply came on. What was he worried about?)

Three score and ten are up ...and gone.

You still survive and it is spring.
You bumped along. You never shone.
It's too late now to put on bling.

Winter has sapped what's left of strength
The candle now burns soft and low
And greasy tears glide down its length
The mind's alert: the body slow.

No agent calls. You're out of luck.
The cold and empty space on stone,
(Now parts are played and set is struck)
Awaits your lettetr. Then you're bone!

Warm village folk who knew you well
Will send you off with pleasant song.
It's why you stayed! They'll hear that bell
And know their time is not so long.

Tony Johnson

151 TIME AND THE CRICKETER 23/2/2005

Time loops the wrist of the cricketer
Twisting his bat, adjusting his cap
Against the late sun
Arriving as he takes strike.

Little magic now conjured from the willow.
Less likely to strike the oak
With a red bang in its branches
On guard over the churchyard.

The clock strikes the quarter.
The stance seems firm,
A click...and the snickering
Grey reaper lifts a flickering finger.

Tony Johnson

152 Toast to the lassies 24/1/2014

Are there lassies here that sup on beer?
Are there some that sip on wine?
Whatever you drink what I think

You lassies all look fine.

Some we've known for many a year
Since Youth first flushed their cheeks.
We men have aged along with them
But only hear our creaks.

Lines on their faces tell a tale
Or three or four or more.
They're beauty lines that last,
For Youth's a stuff will not endure.

There's many a beauty, who turns heads
One year, don't last another.
With toothpaste smiles and botoxed skin
You can't tell one from t'other.

The lassies here have been around
They've sailed the seven seas,
Tied knots, climbed masts galore
And got up off their knees.

We love you lassies when you're feisty
We have no time for girls.
Real tough lassies are so tasty
And past hard shells there's pearls.

To see her is to love her
And love but her forever
For nature made her what she is
And never made another

So raise a glass and toast the lassies
Faithful through thick and thin
Just think what we have put them through,
The mess we might be in!

Tony Johnson

(Burns night should include a toast to the lassies and pay homage to Burns by including reference to him, in this case a quotation in italics woven in. There were many female sailors present last year when I proposed the toast so you may need to doctor one verse. Feel free to use it if you wish to.)

153 TRICKSY SPIRIT 15/2/2008

(In Shakespeare's "The Tempest" Ariel was imprisoned for years inside a tree by the witch, Sycorax. Ariel was released by Prospero to serve and please him. He calls Ariel, who is neither male nor female, his tricky spirit. Ariel longs to be completely free.)

There was this tricky spirit, such a fine spirit.
There was the high forehead, unlined;
There were the eyes knowing yet virginal;
There was the elfin chin.

There was the thin back, marked with moles;
There were neck and hands wrinkled deep;
There was the neat brown form,
Hermaphrodite.

But there was also the witch, Fear.
There was becoming the tree's pith,
Hidden, ringed with years,
Bounded by bark.

There was the doom of the double bind:
Desperate to please, yet fear of not pleasing,
And then failure to seize pleasure for self,
Waiting on a wave.

There was the cramping fear of failure.
There was the fear of being one sex or the other,
The fear of the master's tongue lash
Grip of control.

Yet somehow (s)he emerged, poised,
Flying high above and ahead of the wave,
Wrists untied from the knot intricate...
... And (s)he was gone!

154 THE VOICE/ THAT VOICE 8/2/2012

Going back after the stone was set
There was her voice again - alive,
Fluting up and down the octaves,
Excited, commonsensical,
Matter-of-fact, at ease, kindly.
This was no spiritualist fancy:
Her voice is always in my head,

A cockney voice from cockney stock,
Stock-in-trade greeting, "All right, ducks?"
And those wonderfully appropriate
Malapropisms coined from the Dickens'
Novels shakily remembered,
Read secretly, skiving when meant
To be skivvyng in the bedroom,
"Let's permanganate these together."

By the stone these words were new-struck,
Made perfect sense, set me at ease.
"I'm all right. Look after the living."
Energy surged through the cold air
From dead to living. The task set.

155 UP THE LINE (University of the Third Age) 12/9/2013

The line's been closed longer than it was open
We cycle on the hottest day of the year,
Up the line's slow incline and down again.
In the cool gloom of the trees 'churchy shade
On the back of the navvies' slog and wasted bones,
Our bones shaken by proud roots rattling wheels.

The line's a lifeline now, safe corridor,
Linking bird and mammal, plant and insect.
But keep your mouth shut as you pass the cloud
Of manic dung flies panicked into motion.

When you pass horse and rider, dog and walker,
Other cyclists pushing hard for fitness,
Old-fashioned country courtesy still rules,
Far from road hog Toad's speed-honking madness.
Don't hanker after steam: your line's still open.

Tony Johnson

156 WESTERN SOLENT 3/5/2006

(Caedmon and Cenewulf, ferries plying between
Lymington and Yarmouth, are named after Anglo-Saxon poets, who often called the
sea the swan's road.)

Yesterday the sea was green lumps,

Thumping our tacking bow,
Bumping us down the Western Solent,
Salting our stanchions,
Our mast alarming.
Double-reefed, we'd skedaddled for shelter.

Today Caedmon and Cenewulf flatly
Glide on the swan's road
Collide only with their own images.
Hurst Castle's a mirage.
The spit's lost in this early mist,
No breath to inspire a sail hoist,
Old wool tell-tales a perfection of limp,
A low tide and mud glistening.

Now the sun's gold line easterly reckons us home.

Tony Johnson

157 WHAT SHALL WE DO 4/10/2010

What shall we do?

1. What shall we do with the toxic banker?
What shall we do with the toxic banker?
What shall we do with the toxic banker?
Early in the morning.
Tell him we've rumbled his greedy racket.
Tell him we've rumbled his greedy racket.
Tell him we've rumbled his greedy racket.
Early in the morning.
Hooray and take away his rises.
Hooray and take away his rises.
Hooray and take away his rises.
Early in the morning

2. What shall we do with the greedy banker?
What shall we do with the greedy banker?
What shall we do with the greedy banker?
Early in the morning.
Sack him and put him in an orange jacket.
Sack him and put him in an orange jacket.
Sack him and put him in an orange jacket.
Early in the morning.

Hooray and take away his bonus.
Hooray and take away his bonus.
Hooray and take away his bonus.
Early in the morning.

3. What shall we do with the greedy banker?
Etc
What shall we do with the greedy banker?
Early in the morning.
Put him in a gang and make him do some payback.
Etc
Late into the evening,
Hooray and take away his pension. Etc.
Early in the morning.

4. What shall we do with the greedy banker?
Etc
Early in the morning.
Let him seek a job to teach him a lesson. Etc
Early in the morning.
Hooray and benefit will be bonus. Etc
Early in the morning

Tony Johnson

158 WHAT'S NEW? 4/10/2007

Another day. Put the kettle on. Warm the pot.
She's asleep. For tea in bed she'll wake up.
What's that on the grass? Another damned rabbit?
Too big. Mother and offspring, perhaps? Surely not
A hare? Quite still. Dead? Something brownish coiled
Like a dog in a basket. Asleep? ...Fox!
Resting... Then lifting himself up. Proud. Tall.
Limping off slow. Old. And somewhat mangy.
But full of old life for another day.
Lame he may be, but life is still worth it.
Tail up. Easing through a hole in the hedge.
Exit. Enter next-door's garden. What's new?

Tony Johnson

159 WHATEVER NEXT?

The night the leg pierced the floorboards,
Tilting the bed and tipping those in out
On to the floor of the rotten room,
High-pitched laughter pierced the thin wall.

"Ooh! Er! Whatever next? Help! Help!"

I heaved up the bed, stood the leg
On a cheap tin tray to spread the weight,
Crept back to my cupboard room,
And slept through our improvised night.
Whatever rotten hand would Fate deal her next?

I learned a good lesson that night:
Whatever was next, laughter was the key.

Tony Johnson

160 WHITEY 8/2/2009

Facing North he's all shiny black.
Facing South one feather's half white,
As if dipped into paint and put back
After use, unclean and off-white.

The black mafia mob comes to call.
"Touch that apple, bird, and you're dead.
"You're not a real blackbird at all."
Whitey flies off. The table's spread

With breadcrumbs, apple cores, tit fat.
"That mafia mob can't frighten me.
"I can feast all winter long on that,
" So close to the house," he sang. "You'll see!"

When cruel spring arrives, he's alive
And singing, "Told you I'd survive."

Bread drops. He flies to ground. Bones crack
In waiting jaws and all is black.

Tony Johnson

161 Winter wonder woman 20/1/2013

She was sculpted out of snow, her eyes were fierce as frost.
her dress white muslin, her garland green for hope of spring,
her waist thick, so she'd last solidly longer in the thaw

162

WITHE BINDE

You cleared
Your desk.
You walked
Away.
But work's
A bind-
Weed
In
the soul.
White
Tendrils,
A devil
To uproot,
Coil
In your soil
To grow
Again
Ill-white
Flowers...

Tony Johnson

163 YORKSHIRE BILL 9/9/2011

Yorkshire Bill had drifted a long way South,
Creeping along hedgerows with sickle and saw,
Whetstone, oil and rag, and a dead dog's paw
(About which he'd never opened his mouth)
In his pocket. No one knew his real name.
Alone, he layered hedges, wounding and bend-
-ing stubborn stems, letting them slowly mend
And thicken to swollen knuckles. So when spring came
The sheep and newborn lambs were safely penned.
Into the pasture raced our roughhouse mongrel
And havoc. Bill's shrill effective whistle
Stopped him dead. And drew him, guilty. "I'll tend
To this." Bill said, unbuckling his belt and dealt
The dog's pelt such fierce blows they were heartfelt.

Tony Johnson

164 YOUNES 20/4/2009
(Our Moroccan-German surrogate grandchild)

I AM YOUNES CITIZEN OF THE WORLD
TO-DAY ENGLAND TOMORROW GERMANY NEXT MORROCCO OVER LAND
UNDER SEA THROUGH THE TUNNEL SPEEDING THROUGH AIR I SEE BRIGHT
MORNINGS
BOUNDING INTO VIEW I'M COMING
TO SIEZE MY GRAND DAY OUT
THERE'S A CROW A HERON A STORK
THERE'S A COW A SHEEP A CAMEL
APPLE RASPBERRY ORANGE
I CAN SQUEEZE THEM ALL TO MAKE JUICE
I RUN I CRAM CARROT CAKE GRAPE COUSCOUS I EAT I DRINK I FEEL I THINK
I PLAY I WALK I RUN
I SLEEPEEP I SLEEPEEP I SLEEP...

ANOTHER DAY COME ON ANOTHER DAY
COME ON COME ON

Tony Johnson

BABY RUNNING BAREFOOT

D H Lawrence

When the barefoot of the baby beat across the grass
The little white feet nod like whit flowers in the wind.
They poise and run like puffs of wind that pass
Over water where the reeds are thinned.

And the sight of their white playing in the grass
Is winsome as a robin's wing, so fluttering
Or like two butterflies that settle on a glass
Cup for a moment, soft little whit wing-beats uttering.

And I wish that the baby would tack across here to me
Like a window-shadow running on a pond, so she could stand
With two little bare white feet upon my knee
And I could feel her feet in either hand

Cool as syringa buds in morning hours
Or firm and silken as young peony flowers.

D H Lawrence

CHRISTMAS POEM

CHRISTMAS POEM by WENDY COPE

At Christmas little children sing and merry bells jingle,

The cold air makes our hands and faces tingle

And happy families go to church and cheerily they mingle

And the whole business is unbelievably dreadful –if

you're single.

CHRISTMAS POEM by WENDY COPE

At Christmas little children sing and merry bells jingle,

The cold air makes our hands and faces tingle

And happy families go to church and cheerily they mingle

And the whole business is unbelievably dreadful –if

you're single.

HARLEM

by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over---
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

I HAVE A DREAM BY MARTIN L. KING.doc

"Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream...

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering in the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.
With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."

ST GEORGE'S DAY

John of Gaunt

John of Gaunt for a while had a page called Geoffrey Chaucer for whom he paid a large ransom when the French captured him. Here John speaks of his love for his country and his despair at how it has been betrayed. In the credit titles of Evan Davies' recent TV programmes about how the banking crisis happened a black dragon winged its way through City buildings.

John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster Uncle to King Richard the Second. From Shakespeare's Richard II Act ii Scene 1

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in a silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,
Feared by their breed and famous by their birth,
This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,
Dear for her reputation through the world,
Is now leased out, -I die pronouncing it, -
Like to a tenement, or pelting farm:
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of watery Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With inky blots, and rotten parchment bonds:
That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.
Ah! Would the scandal vanish with my life,
How happy then my ensuing death.

England, April, Shakespeare's birthday, our island home, St George and dragons.

Some of us have lived abroad for a while.
Robert Browning writes from Italy.

OH, TO BE IN ENGLAND

Oh, to be in England now that April's there
And whoever wakes in England sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm tree bowl are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England –now.

SEASCAPE

W.H.AUDEN

Look, stranger, on this island now
The leaping light for your delight discover.
Stand stable here
And silent be
That through the channels of the ear
May wander like a river
The swaying sounds of the sea.
Here at a small fields ending pause
When the chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges
Oppose the pluck and knock
Of the tide
And the shingle scrambles
After the suck-
Ing surf
And a gull lodges a moment
On its sheer side.

Far off like floating seeds the ships
Diverge on urgent voluntary errands
And this full view
Indeed may enter
And move in memory
As now these clouds do
That pass the harbour mirror
And all the summer though the water saunter.

SPORTSMEN IN PARADISE

T.P Cameron Wilson

From 'Some Corner of a foreign field: Poetry of the Great War'

They left the fury of the fight,
And they were very tired.

The gates of Heaven were open, quite
Unguarded and unwired.
There was no sound of any gun;
The land was still and green:
Wide hills lay silent in the sun,
Blue valleys slept between.

They saw far off a little wood
Stand up against the sky.
Knee-deep in grass a great tree stood...
Some lazy cows went by...
There were some rooks sailed overhead –
And once a church bell pealed.
'God! But it's England,' someone said,
'And there's a cricket field.'

After the Norman Conquest anybody who was anybody wrote and spoke French.
French was the official language of parliament until 1362. Just after that Chaucer, the
father of English poetry, miraculously wrote in Middle English. April again and pilgrims
think of making a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas a Becket in Canterbury.

THE PROLOGUE
To
THE CANTERBURY TALES
By
GEOFFREY CHAUCER

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote (sweet)
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour: (vertu- power strength)
Whan that Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe course y-ronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the night with open eye,
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages, (corages-hearts)
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes (... strondes-foreign shores)
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sundry londes; (ferne halwes-ancient shrines)
