

The Tide Turns

John Herbert Marr

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Saltburn Tiding

Tides beat time back:

Clopping at the tired cliff-face
Gulping out the slips of dead rock
In the anger and the anguish,
Beating back the coughing doggerel,
Slaying oozing consciousness.

Only in the aching silence
Can we hear the lonely beating
Of a pulse we cannot measure,
In a land caught through with dread.

It was pleasant, our delighting,
Caught and crumpled by the beating,
Memories still softly playing
By the present, by the parting –
Only at each second's landfall
Do the moments slough their meaning,
Catching breath for what is dead.

Timeless tides pull at a timeless cliff
And beat it back to dust;

Puny waters pull at lowering hills
And weather them to full submission:
Giants laid low to fouling dogs.
Gashes ripped through mighty hillsides,
Great ravines through solid rock sides,
Spell the movement of past waters
In the alphabet of years.

Here, this universe was set to mark its course
Before men's minds first caught its deadly pulse –
And on will mark in slow pursuit
Of some inbuilt calling.
Of its essence we are powerless –
Beating time out with our clenched fists,
Hammering the walls of silence,
Keepers of the gathering glooming,
Caught inside a web of motions,
Long pursued, inviolate,
We stand in awe – yet then ignore them.
Gods at play, we trifle onward,
Shuffling like a crippled cockroach,
Grasping crumbs in ignorance,
To scuttle back beneath the floor.

The Dream

Whilst supped and dined the other night, perchance
I fell into a reverie of dreaming.
The room was spinning: ideas in a dance,
Came rushing through my brain, like minnows teeming.

I saw a scroll of parchment ten yards long
Inscribed with sturdy laws, of shires and wide seas;
There – heralded to all by sounding gong –
A Bill of Rights from which vain mockery flees.

And at its head, in letters bold and clear,
Its title read, "Freedom of Information".
Forthwith my heart lost all its cloying fear –
To read those laws without intimidation.

First, every citizen should have access
To all those documents kept by Government.
No matter if it causes some distress,
All to disclose must be policies intent;

Each Departmental Head must truly keep
A daily register of correspondence,
For journalists to take a reg'lar peep,
That politicians words are giv'n due credence.

Next, should a civil servant duty feel
To give to journalists some information,
His head of department must help the deal,
And doing so receive firm approbation.

Public opinion has a special place
As fully informed Governmental arm here,
(Where nothing shall be hidden without trace)
For only by consent shall new laws grow clear.

News agencies must have a special man
Who makes a daily tour of all Ministries,
And any file he wants to see, he can,
To send out on the wire précis and summ'ries.

Problems or disagreements twixt the two
Shall all be settled by the Press Ombudsman;
Full knowing that 'tis better e'er to view,
Excepting very rarest secretive plan.

The law specifically protects each one -
Statesman or public servant: nor cares it who –
And journalists their source must give to none,
On pain of prosecution if they dare to.

The Police are not exempt from freedom's law:

To pass on information is police duty;

To see their notes they journalists implore -

No matter if from files held or enquiry.

A fallen paper, glimpsed upon the floor,

With headlines for the world at large to read out,

Said, "Peter Wright's book banned again by law!"

My Swedish friend's astonishment left no doubt.

As final ignominy, there below:

"Long-serving policeman fined for helping brother."

He'd traced his brother's child, for his woe,

Using files from the national computer.

And when from this fine reverie I woke,

I found myself at table here in Sweden,

Where laws act not as freedom's strangling yoke,

But serve the people through a Constitution.

"Two hundred years," my friend said, "this has been,

And only by elections can be altered."

I could not help but contrast what I'd seen

With England's laws - where bugger all's consulted!

Coloured Cans

I looked upon the scene below,
Viewed from windows high aloft,
And watched the noisy traffic flow;
Juggling places to and fro:
Bright coloured cans lined in a row.

Each jostles for a forward place:
Vans hold heavy-laden frames;
While others perfumed flowers or lace,
Enmeshed in iron carapace,
Move on – and passing leave no trace.

Exciting lines form as I view,
Lumbering horse-drawn carts of junk;
Sedate saloons of ugly hue,
Speeding Jacks whom police pursue,
But unique vintage models few.

The lights change and they're off again:
Strident siren's wailing yowl,
Blue flashing lights our peace profane,
Cutting short another's reign,
Betokens one who drives inane.

When next a limousine arrives,
We expect a special man.
A flunkie with the police contrives –
Hidden from our prying lives –
To take him off down secret drives.

While some were parked or left untended,
Others had not moved for years –
Till they with the scenery blended:
Rusting heaps cannot be mended
Once their owners have descended.

But look – each bright car is a word,
Built of letters cut in steel.
For some are gentle; some disturbed;
Some reek badly; some maids lured;
And yet the best are hardly heard.

Some had travelled far from London,
Just to view our little streets!
When sudden ceased the jostling fun –
Time stopped short, as stream frozen –
And now my poem it is done.

(This image grew whilst typing on an old Amstrad Computer. It was so slow, the words would shuffle into place if any changes were made, and take an unimaginable minute to reformat.)

Bob Dylan

He wrote with golden sounds of beauty –
Sounds that danced o'er stream and hill;
Sounds to move men past mere duty:
Fluting, laughing lakeland rills.

He heard the notes pour out their balsam,
Tuneful, joyous to dull ear;
Chipped away all feelings loathsome,
Yet was left one silent fear.

Cruel tones! The more he heard his music,
So the greater grew his loss –
Till of loving friends he sickened,
Thought their works but cheapest dross.

With each distress he turned more inward,
Wrote more frantic score on score;
Till he could not steer to windward –
Till he broke unwritten lore.

This rich-laid mulch by lives of others,
Forms the sap to feed the plant;
Hearing music of his brothers
Might allay his sickly cant.

He labours on with tuneless jangles;
Painless dirges duty sings,
Looking for that gold world dangles,
Plectrum scratched on leaden strings.

Now one last record he'll bequeath us;
One goodbye to break our hearts,
He whose protests worked like beavers
Damning what sets men apart.

The Recluse

There was a man who vowed to know no pain,
So locked himself away in prick-proof box.
His grieving friends said, "let him boxed remain:
He has no wish to wash or change his socks."

There, well immured, content to leave each day,
He lived dark hours in peace – then visions saw –
So had his eyes plucked out. Sounds came his way –
Unhappy, worldly echoes heard before;

He felt cot pinpricks in his softening flesh,
And ague in his feet and stiffening joints;
His brain, this storm of signals to enmesh,
He measured carefully each one with points

And cut them off – ears, limbs, torso, tongue, frame;
But never did return to know his fame.

Faster Than Light

In brackish waters dying seals
Groan with vicious scaly wheals.

The mighty whale is slain for sport,
And Everest's a rest resort.

Yet nothing in the universe
Can match our minds – and there's the curse!

Do any doubt that earth is spent?
Now man must take a star-ward bent.

The starry heavens shall be our heir;
Not earth constrained like caged bear.

We'll rise beyond the plains of war,
And forge the peace a heaven's for.

The speed of light is much too slow,
And limits space like slothful foe!

Compel the scientist in his lair
To tackle this task – if he dare!

And then we'll be as gods again;
Astride the phalanx; 'cross the main.

For I cannot believe
That our minds can conceive
More than God can achieve.

10 August 1988

Steps Upon The Stair – 1

At the end of the day as I climb up the stair,
I pause and look back in case anyone's there,
And I hear the still silence of plans not begun:
The stillness that echoes the things I have done.
Then I ask of my shadow, "Who yet will I meet?
Will any come with me to face my defeat?"

Halt! Halt! Who goes there?
Whose the footstep on the stair?
'Tis silence.

I peep through the folds of my comforting quilt
And lie, oh! so still, while the world moves full tilt;
And listen, and snuggle, my nose peeping out;
And listen for footsteps, though no one's about;
And a clock chimes the hour with monotonous tone.
I wait in the darkness, unsure and alone.

Halt! Halt! Who goes there?
Whose the footstep on the stair?
'Tis the day done.

And my eyelids grow heavy from deeds hardly done.
I force them to open in case there be one –
One whisper of footsteps to touch the still air;
One soft hint of – something; of someone to care;
For surely there's someone – or something – beyond me:
One glint in the darkness to let mankind see?

Halt! Halt! Who goes there?
Whose the footstep on the stair?
'Tis the dead king.

In darkness I sleep, but my mind restless yearns;
Wild images gimble in subconscious turns:
Past youth, old friends, or a chase, or a girl;
Nothing acts properly; great rocks I hurl;
Now drowning, now flying, or being pursued.
I waken in darkness, and on these things brood.

Halt! Halt! Who goes there?
Whose the footstep on the stair?
'Tis just the footsteps of my mind.

Steps Upon The Stair – 2

A drunken mewling in the hall;
 Crashing as steps are missed;
Loud curses and an angry drawl
Followed by my mother's bawl
 Tell dad is back, – and pissed.

With creaking steps, half-hidden sob,
My mother then comes up.
I hear the rattle of the knob;
She hides with me; this drawn-up glob
 Whimpers like my beaten pup.

My dad is hairy and so strong;
 I hear him start for work –
He seems to be away so long,
Singing loud, like nothing's wrong;
 No one knows he's such a berk.

Then, in the stillness, when he's out,
 I hear a furtive step;
A gentle voice that doesn't shout,
Who loves my mum and doesn't clout:
 It's our smiling Avon Rep.

Steps Upon The Stair – 3

In fire we saw electrons flash their form
Through switching orbits of some outer shell,
To roast our protein; light us; keep us warm –
Or frighten lesser beasts, which fear this spell.

Within the nucleus we tried to peer,
And thought we were as gods to change its state
By fusing atoms, like some ancient seer,
(Though knowing now its end, we bombs berate.)

Next looking outward, we observed the stars,
And saw the earth swing through eternal space;
We calculated tracks for ruddy Mars,
And set off for the moon with quickening pace.

Nor all our striving lays life's secret bare:
Our knowledge but one step upon the stair.

Steps Upon The Stair – 4

Day is done and night has come;
I tiptoe up the stairs with mum,
To snuggle down upon my turn,
And see what dreams the night will bring.

(Her gentle steps
Upon the stair
Sooth all pain –
Release all care.)

Lying still upon the sheet,
I think about a coming treat –
Of music and the tom-tom's beat,
Until the tingling ear shall sing.

(The rhythm's tread
Upon the stair
Numbs my brain,
And frees all care.)

Wriggling down to try and warm –
A huddled heap, a tiny form –
I listen to the outer storm:
Cross words the angry grown-ups fling.

(Loud crashing steps
Upon the stair
Frighten me,
And threaten care.)

The voices fade and all is still;
A soft bird whispers on a hill –
Sad notes that bring some inner thrill –
And to his haunting voice I cling.

(His feathered flutes
Upon the stair
Calm the night,
With temperate care.)

Oners And Goners

They walked along the streets of Linthorpe,
Looking in the leafy lanes:

The day Matthew and dad went conk'ring
'Mongst the kerbs and grassy drains.

His friends had all scored with their 'niners',
Others had rich crops to show;
This youngest son longed to be equal,
Chiding dad for being slow.

They walked a good mile to the church-yard,
Searching for that rare nut-brown;
But all to find was empty cases:
Other boys had pulled them down.

Then, looking up, the lad espied some
In the highest branch of all;
Dad threw sticks and jumped and shouted,
But the bloody things won't fall!

Finally, in desperation,
Dad leapt high and grabbed a branch
Which snared and dropped him on his bottom –
Then impaled him like a ganch.

How the lad did laugh with pleasure,
As they found one tiny stub;
They placed it in their bag to carry,
Then set off to check the pub.

Here, alas, the trees were all bare;
Dad went in to get some drinks
While the lad climbed in the branches –
Left the bag without more thinks.

A youth passed by while dad was ordering,
Past their bag with its new oner;
In two secs flat he stole the contents:
Now Matt's 'oner' is a 'goner'!

Press Ganged

We chased along the violent sea-shore;
Tore their world with gestures lewd;
Crewed our warships with their smart men;
Tart men shouting, "Victory!"

Bunked within their swinging hammocks,
Stomachs churning disbelief;
Relief found them yet still living,
Giving hell to those who funk'd.

Top-mast boys crawled aloft o'er us:
Just to see them made me weep.
Sleep was fitful dire assemblies;
Memories of my own youth stop.

Why should I not press these soft men,
Frothed when scarcely pump was primed?
Grimed myself from early childhood,
Wildhood seas are all I cry.

I Stand Alone

I am the weakness from which death is built.
My darling past, what have I done to you?
Blaspheme, rage, scream, shout:— words are still too few
To press upon me my full weight of guilt.

Impoverished with struggling early years,
You loved and trusted none, but me — who left.
Where now your justice, with your life bereft?
Though saddened and alone, I sense your tears.

I stand apart with none to share my pain;
In leaving you, I leave myself behind:
My children, home and friends! All who were kind
Consider my whole life to be inane.

Yet, standing without hope of homeliness,
I'll not return to utter loneliness.

Isolation

Did anyone pretend it would be fun?
Locked alone in silence, in a silent room?
Now I know the curse of growing stubborn:
Stinking voids will all my thoughts consume.

Light grows dim; chained dogs howl the coming night;
Books grow heavy; weariness consumes me;
Too frequently I question what is right,
While prattling maids conspire to exhume me.

Hand, heart and feet grow cold with idleness;
My pen is like a turgid weight to wield;
And she, deprived now of her bridleness,
Is locked in silent combat till I yield.

With urgent pleas I call up repressed fate;
"Guide me, with token signs, through your next gate."

First Thoughts

Clean, moulded sculpture to life's grand design;
Perfect containment to conceal all change;
Shape fashioned out of function with this spline:
That perfect form must break to further range.

So soft at first, the slightest tap is heard:
The beautiful round shape will crack and spoil.
Above the murmuring world, which hardly stirred,
These sticky, fly-crawled fragments thoughts embroil.

I see the mess, the loss of ancient form,
Which surely never can be carved anew;
But hardly do I notice new life born –
What hopes can this enfeebled lump accrue?

My old ideas must likewise crack and die,
Before the new can shake their wing and fly.

Number Thirteen

I glimpsed the old canal where once I played,
Behind the mill my granddad sweated for;
And knew afresh his sadness midst the braid
That rolled from long-dead looms to feed wealth more.

The segregated doorways of the school
Barred girl from boy with cages of high wire;
My accent led them fight me as a fool,
While mother nursed through grief and death her sire.

I climbed the flag-stoned hill with terraced rows,
And felt a ghostly presence there enshrined:
Dank walls enshrouding silence like wet clothes
Remembered in the cobbled yards behind.

New children, playing now in granddad's street,
Build snapshots in their minds of all they meet.

*On returning to my Grandfather's house, 13 Coniston Street,
Burnley. October 1988*

Ecce Homine

You came in common flesh which split
Your mother's side as any babe.
You crawled and stood and learnt
Speech like a man, in common words
Tried by your father long before.

You walked with brothers and with friends
And all the while
You learnt:
The pain of growing
In a wizened world; of seeing
Death and sickness, and the burden
Of a servile race. You learnt the names
Of they who'd foretold better times –
And worse.

You saw
Starvation like a ragged wound upon
The beggar and the thief; and in your name
Care moved. You yearned to help
The lame and sick; to feed
The poor. To visit
The outcast, bringing hope
To those in cells, condemned to die.
You gave love to those you met, despising
None, taking each as she-he came; and sang
Their tune in rhythm with their care.
You saw not rich nor good, not slave nor free;
Not woman, man, vain, bad, well-bred or low:
Just the person, of purpose and alone.

They saw your help – the sick grew strong – and said,
 It was a miracle.
You showed us joy in simple things – with plainest water –
and they said,
 It must be wine.
They saw your love – the prisoner smiled – and said,
 It was a miracle.
They saw you laugh in the face of the storm and said,
 You trod on water.
To the grieving came such comfort that they said,
 He can't be dead.
They feared you, then, your simple love, and said,
 You must be God.

For God they could contain, by ceremonial constraint,
To fit their rigid mould
By finery and flummery and repetitious chants,
Never calling into question
 That you were a man.
They stripped and scourged you
 Of humanity
And revered you and – in doing so –
 Dismissed you.
For as a God, you could not be
Understood, nor followed.

exile

born

in a steel-ribbed cage

from all he knows and loves

the child is

torn

peers

pulling filial ties asunder

separating man from his own past

wrenching him across a bleak abyss of

tears

art

burning paper bridges

across a desolate crevasse

lances his immortal

part

wine

dressed for banishment

fills his mind with comradeship

setting falsely one more

sign

friends

and women whom he loves

seem closer yet

sharing bodies show diverging

trends

breath

leaves him now as first

it found him

to his one last place in

death

Last Laughter's Lost

Have a care, all you boys,
When you make too much noise,
Of the quiet primrose when it's rising;
But the height of true fright
Is the sound in the night
Of hot chocolate drops when they're dripping!

Girls will often pursue
Good young men, though they're few –
And they can't hear their din for the dining.
Yet better by far
As they cook in the car
Is the scream of the cream when it's whipping!

And any who fear
The strong gas of draught beer
Should pour down sweet wine and stop whining;
Let's call for a halt
To the sale of the malt:
Like Canute with the tide when it's ripping!

The queen pulled a face
At Edwina's disgrace*,
By asking, then begging, "stop egging!"
But much more obscene
Than this Tory has-been
Is the joke that her quips have stopped quipping!

Now if you approve
Of this childish oeuvre,
Give a clap and a slap on the backing!
If not – then desist,
I won't try to insist –
But I'll know that your kidding is kipping!

**Edwina Currie, Tory MP who linked eggs to Salmonella*
December 1988

Money Talks

Pulled back patches of out-worn rhyme forms,
Scuffed little cuffs of threnodies,
How shall we recall your real forms,
Sinking under archaic lines?

Gone fast horse and broken chariot;
'Neath dead walls now rust the swords;
Whence proud archers, honest huntsmen,
Fables swiftly flaunting past?

Mariners move 'mongst forests of ghost pines:
Long matured they carpet seas.
No more shanties creak rope rigging;
Anchors weigh out romance shards.

We are the iron men, moved by the markets;
Brains of silicon, ground from sand,
Count vain tolerance, compute kindness;
Lucre's ditties play sick bands.

December 1988

In Clover

My dear old Jo, my darling Jo,
Could I but come a runting;
There's nothing like a Leicester lass
To stir me for the hunting.

And lay her low

And lay her high

And lay her ten times over:

There's nothing like a Leicester lass
For rolling in the clover.

I ambled by, I shambled by,
The house wherein she dallied,
And thought to take her off with me
And show her how I sallied.

I rolled her in,

I rolled her out,

I rolled her ten times over:

There's nothing like a Leicester lass
For rolling in the clover.

As days went by and ways went by,
I rose to greet her coming;
To my delight all through the night
She sang and kept on humming:

"He pushed her in

He pushed her out

He pushed her ten times over:

There's nothing like a Leicester lad
For rolling in the clover."

*Leicester is a city in the Midlands of the UK, and pronounced
"Lester", justly famed for its wonderful women.*

Dry Stone Walls

Dry stone walls lie crumbling;
At the year's end,
Each stone marks one long month passed.
Here, you stumbled on a frozen ground
And stretched a hand for steadying;
Here, I held you till we brought the night
To weld the hollow chinks as one.
There, you leapt in yielding chase
Across the moorland to my hot pursuit.
And there, we lay in breathless wonder –
Shadowed by these stones from prying spring.
That rock, heavy with a rimey moss,
Gave itself to cushion your frail face
Through all of summer;
These were pulled by argument,
Ripped from their ancient bed
To spoil an autumn hill-scape.
Weakened, gaunt, exposed, grey winter's blast
Loosened to prise free these last
Until a sheltering sheep might lean them down.
Now, with the year's death, falls my love.

Yorkshire, 1 January 1989

No Hoper

In silence, armless men mouth canvas birds;
Blind organists learn Bach to finger fire;
Some Russian girl, imprisoned, stuns with words
And modern Don Juans pen sick desire;

Lapsed Catholics, Muslim rebels or tired Jews
Bewail their problems as the critics rave;
Aids, homosexuals, deviants press new views,
While royalty can't cough without a wave;

The paw prints of a dog hang in the Tate;
Slick television hosts performing fleas;
Loud, bossy women still lament their fate;
Dead druggos' diaries all command fat fees.

Misfortune cast me as a normal male –
Not bent, oppressed, nor spied on: thus I fail!

"Anya-Lee"

I'll tell you the tale of a marvellous strange dog,
A dog that was called Anya-Lee:
This dog had the smell of a hog in a bog,
And the straightest long snout you could see.

She walked like a barrel of beer rolling by;
She barked like the spark of a tram.
Her ears were as high as a jet in the sky,
And her tail was her babe in a pram.

She'd scent an old bone well before it was lost:
Her greed was well-fabled for miles;
She'd eat up the floor, as I know to my cost,
Then for pudding she'd start on the tiles!

If any dog chased her or threatened to bark,
She'd roll on her back and play dead;
Till she once met a hamster out for a lark,
And bounced and stood up on her head!

She went for a walk with my mistress one night
When two youths snatched her bag and cried, "lynch
her!"
But they called for the police as their fright reached its height:
Anya-Lee became Doberman Pinscher!

Yes, this is the tale of a marvellous old dog –
A dog that was called Anya-Lee.
They buried her out in the field with a frog,
Two mice, a pet rabbit, and me.

Epitaph

Is this a poem? Filled with unspent promises
Of things I did not write,
Catching moods I never knew,
Breathing airs I never breathed;
Unrhymed, unmetred,
With all the "might have beens" of years?

Coursing slowly with unhectored lines,
This oxymoronic soup
Of mismatched themes
And philosophers' dreams;

Drifting with the purpose of a mist upon the hill,
Whisked away like spindrift on the slightest wind
To yield gruff outcroppings, the real-estate of earth
Bare stones that build more solid scenes
To crush our toes in nightmares of reality;
Yet there is power in the dream to drive men on.

When rocks are ground to powdery dust;
Our mighty engines fallen rust;
Grand empires crumpled, wars forgot;
And once proud monarchs left to rot:

Though this sparse shell to ash be laid,
My poet's dreams shall never fade.

Hexham Curse

May your mortar crumble
And your church fall foul of beetles;
May Northumbrian desolation
Rot your timbers and smite your homes;
May not one stone on stone stay standing,
Of less import than ruined Roman walls;
May you fall to worthless wonder,
That future men may marvel at your fate.

Oh, most inhospitable,
Most unwelcoming dark town,
May pestilence annihilate you all.

(On the imposition of a parking ticket in Cattle Market, Hexham)

The Song of a dog

His marriage failed from many years

Of sadness and neglect,

And in the gloom and silence

His faults he may reflect:

How he would shout, and come home late,

And leave on muddy shoes;

And how his dog did poos upon the carpet.

His children left – that's natural –

To keep their mother's side.

Just photos and his memories:

Perched on his back they'd ride,

Or play fierce Jaggoroths at night,

Instead of tucking up in bed.

Now – just his dog does poos upon the carpet.

His back gave out – alone he'd lie

And wonder in his pain;

No friends called round to comfort,

Alone he must remain–

And silently he'd shuffle to

The tap and brew more tea,

And try to scrape the dog poo from the carpet.

His car, left parked along the street,

Now rusted in the damp.

And one unseen drove swiftly on,

From smashing off his lamp.

A traffic warden out of hell

Then docketted his crimes,

And dog continued poeing on the carpet.

The plaster crumbled from the walls

Where damp and mould now climbed.

The sink was piled with unwashed filth,

The room was bare and grimed.

Where once his dog had played so free,

Grew weeds and littered briars:

No more his dog does poos upon the carpet.

In Fragante Delicto

With youth's hyperbole and wit
And scintillating prose,
Wilde's love was shown through scented flowers—
The hyacinth and rose—
Until a vicious, brutal man
Turned love head over toes.

This man, who named the 'Queensbury Rules'
(And made rough fights polite),
Loathed all his son had grown to be;
Loathed love that feared the light,
So— striking nameless love with hate—
Wrote, 'posing sodomite'.

Such libellous stench a man must douche,
Or flee like beaten cur.
The careful pleas of prudent friends
Could not Oscar deter;
He bravely stood and fought — and lost,
And spent two years in stir.

All letters from dear friends withheld;
His books and poems sold;
Through fighting for integrity—
Bankrupt to pay swine-gold;
And still for love must suffer more—
Society's chill cold.

Yet from this odious libel case—
And two years spent in goal—
The flower of Art fresh-bloomed in him,
To scent a ballad's tale
And perfume many a darkened cell
Where lesser men still fail.

Prize Winner, Literary Review

The Settlement

Now bites the penny with its smooth rolled edge;
Entrail-enwrapping letters guts consume;
Niggardly solicitors plough and dredge
Through summoned spectres from the past's raw tomb.

Parade a naked income to the world
With every florin spent, by all perused.
List the times and words from temper hurled—
Forgetting all the while how minds are bruised.

Beat back the broken promises which haunt;
Grit teeth on edge to firm a deep resolve.
She holds the house, with children kept to flaunt:
Though taken all, their love will not devolve.

Events move slowly down their legal course;
How powerless we stand before divorce.

Woodworm

A tiny little woodworm
Knocked at my window pane,
And asked to be admitted—
With silken hat and cane.

He chose the quiet hearthside
To fashion for his house,
And drilled a tiny dot-hole,
Too small to fit a mouse.

I did not mind this lone one
Eating old beam ends,
Rut soon my house was eaten
By his relatives and friends!

Rose-Woman

Your touch is the touch of the rose tree;
Your face is its petal-soft hue;
Scent-laden, your voice is the wild bee
That carries sweet food for our youth.
Ah, Rose-Woman, rose-fresh as the bright dew,
Your smile is the rose bud of truth.

Fine hands, brushing strength through deep silence,
Careen wretched doubtings away;
Half-hues, iridescent in brilliance,
Your touch becomes tenderest night;
Ah, Rose-Woman, sweet woman so canny,
Trim to brightness my spluttering light.

Still, powerful warmths all pervade you,
Whose glowing chill fears move aside;
The clock's call shall never persuade you—
More timeless than stars gleam your eyes.
Oh Rose-Woman, your wise thorns pierce weak pride—
On such lips, the coward soon dies.

Each movement cracks through me as thunder,
Whose forces extrude the sure man.
Your looks fill the world with such wonder
In welcome of each fresh surmise.
Ah, woman, sweet rose-petalled woman,
I am caught by the kiss of your eyes.

Halberd Mace and Pike

Lance, spike, break, smash
Knights gone by cut quite a dash.
Youth today on causes short—
Broken bottles arm their sport.

Hack, poke, mash, tear.
Feel the blood hot in your hair.
Soldiers now when waging war,
Wonder what the button's for.

Cut, thrash, gouge, wack.
Fight with others on their back.
Modern man knows so much more—
Lick their boots and vote for more.

Bash, thrust, chop, maim.
Ancient times were all the same.
Now we're civilised old birds—
All our wounding's done with words.

You want to write a poem?

You want to write a poem?
It's an easy thing to do!
Shout out and swear and cry, "Blow 'im!"
And hope that the bugger don't sue!

Take A Leaf...

Before us stands one solitary pine
Which points its place by dignified design;
Proud marker of maturing Nature's dance,
A high branched tree with solemn moving stance.
Each needle takes the aspect of a life,
Locked to its grander system through blunt strife.
See now: each one becomes a mighty form,
Compelling in its power as naked storm,
To seemle creatures in a countless throng;
Myriads of species make the whole tree strong.

Competing for their light yet sharing space
In balance – all keep all – no sense of race,
Interdependent for integrity,
The tree gives air and height for each to be.
Eagle, elephant or fluffed up kitten,
Mouse, rhinoceros or booming bitten –
All life, in close related harmony –
Giving ancient power to this thrusting tree.

Many branches from its past form gaunt stumps,
While needles beyond measure rot in clumps
Around the base, extinct long before.
Others, browner now, stand stark as hoar,
On point of falling, lost beyond all sight
To mingle with the rest through breezes slight.
Yet from this falling multitude of leaves
New budding shoots thrust out, and each conceives
A new-formed species on the pyramid:
Each entwined its past, while future carried.

Suddenly, lost within that lofty tree,
One tiny speck, well hid in canopy,
Like mutant canker, swelled from low domain
Giant-like in semblance of some beast insane,
It grew and hung in hideous extent,
Thrusting past small lesser forms without dissent.
It seemed to fill the air in numbing size;
Movements shook the tree as if it might despise
That very thing that gave it sap and suck.
It caught each stirring wind, and pulsed and shook
Showers of yellowed leaves to make a mulch
To feed itself across a chasmic gulch.
This growth of men, whose awful hegemony
Attempts to overwhelm the living tree,
Enthreatens other leaves which fall, displaced,
And shakes the very trunk to which it's laced
As though it can pull free – and still survive!
Yet through such threats the tree must stay alive.

Already now, the trunk: looks starkly spare
As acid rain defoliates it bare.
Man must emerge from apathy and sloth –
For total death, of tree or his own growth,
Need not predict his ultimate sad end
If he with insight will but condescend
To control growth by judicious pruning
Of wasteful excess, and teach by tuning
Youthful attitudes to our whole estate.
Despairing man must never cry, "Too late!"
This would we have: preserve, defend, protect,
Before more scanty species become wrecked.
Our heirs deserve the best that we can leave;
Now humankind must act – or ever grieve.

One People In Particular

Many people formed my past and stirred my days,
Correcting faults, suggesting schemes of play;
Many ragged, fraying scraps of fading memory
Stuff a saggy rag-bag plumped by conventionality—
But from these many disparate strands of conviviality
 Stands out one people in particular.

There's no escape from people of the past —
From people who were central in our lives —
They fester and mangle through relationships anew,
Breeding gross disharmony in everything we do —
And from this forest, filled with ghosts we thought we knew,
 Hovers one people in particular.

Be sentient to sorrows from the past;
Grovel at the memories that plague us;
Slide into oblivion from everything once seen —
Calling bingo numbers, or the flickering T.V. screen —
Live a life of make-believe where nothing's ever been,
 Far from one people in particular.

Tunnel by uncertainty to silence —
By hollowing your mind to far-flung place;
Turn to slight, new records drowning feelings at full blast;
Hope graffiti carved on oaks of history will last;
Break the stagnant mould in which you're prematurely cast —
 By one people in particular.

With time, shall there not sound another age,
Brought on by love and war, by need and thirst?
When this sickly carnage of my weak mortality
Yields, through the whip of scorn and welting cuts of jealousy,
To a greater force — which hints at immortality —
 Drawn by one people in particular?

Nosiness

Uncle Arthur had two noses
Which were fine for smelling roses—
But not so good if things smelt bad:
 Blocked-up sewers drove him mad!

Once when he had too much wine on,
Both his noses got a shine on.
Our Aunty – seeing double red –
 Thought a car had backed in bed.

In the winter, things were funny –
Both his noses became runny!
We'd watch him strain beyond belief
 To catch them in one handkerchief.

On our picnic he tried pickle
But the smell made Uncle tickle;
He blew the leaves clean off the trees
 When he gave a double sneeze.

Uncle Egbert fell a sleeping
While he smoked, till flames came leaping;
His brother Arthur smelt the smoke—
 Down the town it made him choke.

Without too much further bother
Arthur blew upon his brother:
He spun the fire brigade about,
 And blew the whole house inside-out.

Nosiness gave him much trouble—
Uncle always found it double.
I think when all is said and done,
 Too much noses isn't fun.

Auberonicles Weeds: the Literary Cat

Auberonicles Weeds is that rarest of breeds,
A suave cat with a cheerful demeanour;
If for Art he must needs travel First-Class to Leeds,
You'll find there ain't any cat keener.

If you need a review or a feature or two,
Auberonicles types up a dozen –
And that work he can't do when he's under Cat Flu,
He'll delegate to Tabby Cousin.

Now Weeds tried to nurse from the grip of the hearse
Those old English rhymes he grew up on,
By encouraging verse with the lure of a purse –
It's as cream for a young cat to sup on!

No matter a cuss if some grumpy old puss
Throws out what a young cub has written;
What Weeds holds 'A Plus' he'll defend without fuss,
As though 'twas his own saucy kitten.

To unvirtuous pleads and to fish and cream greeds,
This Literary Cat is unbending;
But for stylish deeds Auberonicles Weeds
Is a feline who's well worth befriending.

*Written for 'Cats' – a poetry competition in Literary Review to
honour T.S. Eliot.*

Rejected by Auberon Waugh as 'too personal'

June 1989

In Memoriam – Lorna Hobbert

You lobbed from life gamely as you lived it,
Determined to meet this ending challenge

As once you faced them all –

With cheerful puzzlement for lost activity.

Legs stilled and disconnected from your keening mind,

Buried in mounds of visits and sheets,

With unregulated comings and functions

Pacing the slipping days,

You graced our calls with quiet acceptance

And gave us strength while yet yours ebbed

And slipped so slowly by

We hardly knew you'd left.

Farewell, dear friend, and live in memories

Held close by a gentled hand and parting kiss.

*On news of my ex-mother-in-law's death, 29 June 89, after cancer
and a stroke*

All Moderate Men Rejoice...

From Greenwich fields to Harrow,
Past the towns beyond Stonehenge,
From ancient Wealds to Cleveland,
Round the drab purlieus of Penge,
There's the sigh of breath abating
As the lads are done with waiting
And insist they're tired of hating and revenge.

In English pubs and houses
Knocking pints back by the score,
In working clubs, or lounges
With the local village bore,
You will find them perched on bar stools
Sipping gin by lush indoor pools,
Ever arguing on cricket's rules and law.

The Tory men in Ipswich
And Young Liberals of the West
Agree to pen their schisms
With "The middle-way is best!"
For such freedom, let your chest swell;
Socialists with Communists dwell,
And in Downing Street the Green's a welcome guest.

While fundamental bigots
Wield brute power to make folk prance,
Extremists dent true Nature
Just to make men join their dance;
Taking life for one more dollar,
They go red beneath the collar,
Never giving love nor toleration chance.

Let's beat this glut of anger
And religion's petty hate;
This world is but one unit
With a common human freight.
So rejoice at moderation,
It's our country's one salvation –
Let us fight for liberation through debate.

The Judges of Age

Within the crowded circle of the room,
 The Old One sits aloofly in her chair;
This is her plot, her padded, silent doom—
 Immobile, pinioned in the T.V.'s glare.
And simple tea-girls tell her, "This is fun!"

Her Sunday-daughter dutifully calls
 To shuffle down low ramps and push her out;
(But never past the limit of the walls,
 For fear some jeering children laugh or shout;)
With timed returning for her tea and bun.

Perambulating round the trim estates
 With faulting, distanced memories at odds,
Each wheeled and liminary bundle waits
 Upon immaculate, swept-gravel trods,
While sullen minders grumble at the sun.

No vegetating weeds chance loiter here,
 Cluttering through this artificial bound;
Each is abruptly as its shoots appear—
 Upon the corner pyre, burnt back to ground
A surly gardener has grimly won.

"How empty she's become, just festering there."
 "She slobbers food and smells of stale urine."
"I judged it right to move her – for her care!"
 "I could not cope at home!" – this with a grin.
"Beside, it's only fair to the children."

Thus spoke the comforters, who thought the same,
 Relating mutual trials for each crime.
Within the confines of a shrivelled frame
 The Old One judged in silent prayer: "With time,
Your turn will come, my dear, when we are done."

Class Jazz

It's said that on the other side
much greener grows the grass;
in Eastern Europe recently,
strange things have come to pass.

East Germans locked behind the wall
think Western life's a gas,
while Poles who've left their past behind
see Catholics sharing mass.

Chinese students' call for votes
brings out the tanks and brass;
a watching world looks sadly on
then turns to play more jazz.

Satellites' extended views
show Yankee wealth and class
to poorer people locked in fear,
and lectured to by Tass.

My instant personal videophone
breaks borders like thin glass –
I'll phone at eight to book a meal
and date a Moscow lass.

Eclipse Eighty-Nine

We walked upon a swelling midnight hill;
Below, thin strands of mist lay soft and still,
Each sinuously weaved in moorland dells,
Picked out as greying threads spun on high fells.

A crystal, scalloped sea gleamed in the bay,
With frozen tiny ships stilled under way;
And over all, with limp, unholy glow,
A waiting, heavy moon lay full and low.

We did not quarrel then, or break the night
With foolish talk to prove who held the right,
But paused in solitude; two silent forms
Harbouring sad memories of older storms.

How long we lay, within that eerie scene
With sad insipid dreams of "Might have been",
I could not tell – if it were long or soon –
When suddenly a shadow caught the moon

And marked its face, and cut its brilliant arc,
As we lay gripped together in the chilling dark.
I dozed – then woke to find the moon had gone:
Just a rusty, faint penumbral patch now shone.

I started up and reached to touch your hand –
But was alone, locked in a silent land.
My heart could scent your parting on my lips;
But, like the moon, my life lay in eclipse.

A Little While

A little while and we will be no more,
No treasures ours, no locket ever dear;
Kisses stolen by a secret door
Hold all we will remember here.

No more to whisper in the sad moon's glow,
Or touch a careless finger as we pass;
Now time has paled us with his sorrow
Like silvered shadows in a glass.

I cannot weep, though we won't meet again,
But I regret the passing of the days;
Sad goodbyes will always bring much pain
For lovers forced to separate ways.

I have been happy – more than ever I knew –
Though happiness takes flight and is so rare:
I have shared my naked soul with you –
I beg you keep it in your care.

from an original by Ann Elliott

A Doctor From Saltburn-on-Sea

A doctor from Saltburn-on-Sea
Said, "Of patients I want to be free!"
He went into hiding
And took up Hang Gliding,
But crashed with a badly sprained knee.

from an original rhyme by Richard Marr, 'Roselyn', 1989

Past Remembered Days

I have fled the solid comforts of my home
 To leave the prim sojourns of well worn ways;
I travel down a dim-lit path, alone—
 And call in sorrow past remembered days.

We had fought through drawn-out months on trivia—
 Such as the careless way I tilt my hat—
Or violent debates to choose Tunisia!
 — I wonder if you still remember that?

Our last parting was like navvies shovelling dirt;
 Your light, which fed my eyes, no longer shines;
In final desperation, we're apart —
 Two carriages upon divergent lines.

When I first resolved to utter that farewell,
 It rippled out past friends, to neighbours flew,
And circled round me like a tolling bell;
 One small goodbye which multiplied and grew.

We have parted, yet again I call to you—
 I miss the hushed remembrance of your sigh;
My pain grows more, the more I let you go,
 And try to bridge that final, sad goodbye.

I am cold, with shivery rumours drizzling down
 To eke their sodden stains beneath cold skin;
But more than all, I miss your caring doubt,
 Or shared remembrance of a childhood grin.

Now we are divorced — the world has long gone by;
 My children cold, while former friends revile.
Our parting was pure sorrow, without spice —
 No kiss, no tear, no lingering gentle smile.

Farewell To Innocence

With pity once I saw a world
 Which moved with Nature's ways;
I loved the wild east wind which curled
 About the casement bays,
And shook the leaves from mossy trees
And tossed dried straws around bare knees.

I loved the sweet spring in the wood
 Which bubbled from clear rills,
And carried laughter in its flood
 Past villages and hills,
To give the miller power to grind
Plump corn a horse and man could bind.

I left the place where I was born,
 My books and writings banned;
To freedom from oppression drawn—
 An exile from my land—
While families who had held me fond
Now cursed to see this vagabond.

I wandered down the streets and lanes
 Of slums and city grime,
And glimpsed new power through window panes:
 Of drugs and ugly crime
Which rose like poisonous stench from drains
Meandering through youthful veins.

My writings now receive no prize
 From politics or men.
I blindly gape through drug-shot eyes,
 And fever shakes my pen —
No longer wielded in scorn
At innocence from children torn.

I left my land while yet a youth
 For travel far from home;
Now crabbed of back and sparse of tooth,
 No longer fit to roam,
I sit and brood how life has fled
Among these shifting, hollow dead.

I Am The Plaster

I am the plaster on the wall –
Shouting out as hammer blows descend:
"What is this Art they pin on me?
Stored, revered while I offend?"

I am the plaster on the wall-
Wide split as chisels crack my hide;
Your manuscripts in basement vaults
My taunts shall prove were falsified.

There was a writer once who wrote
Within the margins of her book
And auctioned off these marginals
To dealers whom she used to fuck.

Another lost her first draught manuscript
And copied out by hand again the text,
Laid out with care to please an auction house
With transposed notes and emendation mixed.
If this be Art, then where be truth?
For where lies Art when truth is fixed?

But Art, with tears and sweat and palmy grime,
Separating rooms of common use
From passages of time
Contains its truth in ancient plaster walls,
Functional beyond pink-pretty lines:
Utility of purpose with design.

I am the plaster on the wall-
And he who brushed me on with firm held float
Was artist of raw truth,
The hawk his artist's palate,
Measured from the earth in perfect line;
This is my truth, reality of being:
Sure and bold for centuries to gaze upon.

I am the plaster on the wall-
No less than ink upon a page, I'm calling out –
While little hammer's idle clout
Rubbles off my crude veneer
And flings me as a finished lump
For infill to a shifting earth –
And there regain my solid worth.

The Silken Sheet

I lay a-huddling my true love
Upon the sheet so silken;
Smooth was her breast and warm her touch
Upon the sheet so silken.

Then suddenly her flesh was gone,
I was stroking bones barren—
Cold, hard, brutal, chill—
My arm now held her skeleton,
An eyeless skull beside my face;
I looked away in sweat and haste
And trembled from that grim embrace
Upon the sheet so silken.

Where has she gone, my love, my life?
Wherein may I find her?
Reality lies in my mind,
And therein I shall find her.
She lives for ever, part of me—
She lives for ever, youthful—
Therefore I grasp her memory
And form her image, truthful;
More real than all 'reality',
Of cold hard bones' frigidity—
Upon the sheet so silken.

Failure to Provide

I must warn you

Her warning was none –

that if you interfere with the machine

she got in his way.

or do anything wrong –

A walk to the park

you will be done for failure to provide.

was her wrong.

When the red light comes on,

She'd stopped at the light

don't do anything –

held her child by the hand –

wait for the green light

started to cross –

then blow for six seconds. Now blow– blow hard–

Those seconds it took.

don't fall off the seat – hold yourself upright!

Then smashed to the ground.

That's it – stop there!

Inmobile

Now, we wait...

as the child cried.

Ninety-six, and fifteen years old!

Too young to die,

My God! You must have knocked it back.

she breathed as she lay.

Stand up. I'll read you your rights.

She's in hospital now

You don't have to say anything

and they don't know when or if

but anything you do say

she'll ever walk again –

will be taken down

Knocked down by a drunken kid.

and may be used in evidence.

She has failed to provide.

Middlesbrough Police Station, October 1989

To Nineteen-Ninety

Too often we have relished distant hours
Or held in honour some unworthy friend:
Not how it was, not how it might have been,
But how we force each day begets our end.

We celebrate skewed, out-worn rituals
And tritely imitate lost decades' dress;
Re-chorus jingles from forgotten youth
To chase a past we never quite possess.

Rejoice that we're not vain Edwardians,
Enjoying wine while studying for Law
And rallying in mudbaths round a flag,
Or driving ancient crates that scraped the floor.

The Berlin wall has fallen to the West—
Pushed by a widening prosperity.
Let's work for peace in this final decade,
And welcome a new age in Nineteen Ninety.

November 1989

Ex-Wall Guard

I worked hard as a soldier
 Upon the Berlin Wall,
Defending our conformity
 From Westerners who'd call
To sound us out on politics,
 Or spy our market stall.

Until last week I shot them,
 Who came too near the fence,
As traitors to our native state
 Who really were too dense
To live in our society—
 Such people lacked all sense.

But now the gate is open,
 And people freely pass.
They're making me redundant
 And putting me to grass.
A border guard's no fun these days—
 I'll join the middle class!