

CLUTTER

POEMS by

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In Memory of my Aunts Joan and Connie —who were not untidy—

Tidy, Tidy, Everywhere. Part One.

Morning:

The new baby in the house garners clutter.
Things just come and cluster round. Bright pretty
things. Pink and white with frisking lambs.

Noon:

The child that grows, that goes to school,
has needs which shift shape to bags and books
and homework, lunch-box, and lace-up shoes.

Night:

That person who leaves childish things behind
has bigger clutter in mind: lounge suites and
wide-screen TVs, cars and anti-wrinkle creams.

Clutter has come of age.

One Cave.

Wise women take the view the less you have
The less there'll be to mind.

Wise women preferred the stocking of the mind,
The stories, the memories, the history of all.

Wise women believed the cave was not the place
To leave bones and hide and combed-out hair.

Wise women swept the cave of all such clutter, then sat
Around with little ones and told them tales ...

One tell.

When families came together to build and thatch and store
they took a pragmatic view, chose and chipped and slapped,
nice and tight; another floor on top, make the back wall
someone else's front ...

It made a pleasant cosy sense,
the way that houses clustered in together,
felt themselves as friends.

One tent.

One nomad, ten, twenty, packing lives,
thanked portable gods they were so simple
to carry and cart, along with bedding bundled,
pots and pans and little wooden looms.

Our gods travel well, they thought,
as they set up light wood altars at new grazing grounds.
Our gods understand they can't be grand.

One moat.

No matter how many cram inside
There's but one moat to navigate,
One moat to swim,
One way in, one way out.

But in the quiet of the twilight
When the yelling dies and bats come out;
When ladders and siege engines lie and rest,
Fish dart in weedy water over broken bows.

One camp.

The mess left behind soon disappears.
The creaking wagons grumble on.
The flies and beetles come out to feast
On the little left behind.
Trampled grass grows tall again ...

One fort.

It had its moment in history;
the moment can be called massacre;
and sometimes tragedy.
And then history gallops on.

Too small to take in tanks and covered trucks,
rocket launchers, tankers and canteens.

Just a square stone place in encroaching desert.
With its ghosts that had their moment

in the narrow slits
set in time and tumbled walls.

One stop.

It pulls in hard with creaks, moans, whistles
and the battering of metal. A train filled with
kit and soldiers; full of men and women on
their way to market, children off to beaches.

For all the noise, the bundles pushed under seats,
into racks above, held in luggage vans and laps,
there's that sense of moving on, of hoping
the destination's always worth the journey.

One town.

Something that grew at the business end of spades and picks,
at the edge of saws and axes, chipped into flags and cobbles,
put together with nails and wedges;
makes in time a town.

And towns require maps and shops and councils,
water pipes and schools and rubbish dumps.
Towns create mess that needs to be well-hidden
somewhere out the back. (Before the judges come ...)

Not just hidden but swaddled in by-laws and voted acts;
tucked and tidied in behind fences, gates, and rutty roads.

Mess that's worth its salt deserves a name.
Winning towns have recycling depôts; others,
merely tips and dumps.

One capital.

Wise city fathers zeroed in on a central site.

Wise city fathers called for designs to do them proud.

Wise city fathers wanted a name that could not be reduced to something short and silly; no nicknames, laughable.

Wise city fathers laid the founding stone.

Wise city fathers wondered why the people moving in didn't take their rubbish home.

One port.

A raucous place of to and fro.

A sad place of saying good-bye, go well.

A busy place of creaking machinery.

A rustling place of waiting rats.

A gripping place of exotic cargoes, spicy.

A dirty place of dividing slicks.

A rubbish place of overflowing skips.

A seedy place of high wire netting.

A closed-down place, contaminated, unsaleable.

One nation.

When the cry goes out: More people!
The barriers are lowered, and the crooked

can come flooding in. Unfiltered.
When the cry goes out: Less people!
The nation finds ways to shame itself by pointing
crooked fingers into sad eyes. Go home.

We're full. We're furious. Go back. Signs bristle.

More babies wanted here ... Do your duty, women of one nation.

One world.

So round, so sweet, a multi-coloured gleaming bauble;
like peach like plum; like delicious dreamy fruit.

And from far-out space the many-signs are not *quite* readable.

Keep Out. Waste. Toxic. Hazard. Danger. Death ...

One universe.

Old proverbs have gone by the board.
Waste not, want not. A stitch in time ...
Look after the pennies, and many more.

We threw them out when we realised
the universe was vaster than we thought.

That was an example of throwing
your heart over the jump, yet staying put,
of thinking big and being small ...

But we found a way to be both at once:
we would shoot waste into space. Let it orbit.

Part Two.

The Clutter that's found in Minds.

I can't remember. I say it often, a little glumly. Can't remember.
Everyone says it now and then. Especially when they're on the stand
And memos in their writing are placed four-square in front of them.
But what I think I really mean is: I know it's in there,
I just can't remember which cupboard door, which lock,
Down which corridor, in which box, which untidy store room—

Because I never have the sense something's been banished,
Given away, thrown out, leaving space for something else;
No, just this sense the room's too crowded and
I haven't got a decent filing system.

So what if I did? What if I moved one in?
Not a mental one. But real in hard grey metal and signs on drawers:
AF – GJ or names, viz: Old Correspondence.
What if I stored lists of presents sent. What if I stored
Things brought home from funerals, or books of birthday dates.
What if I sorted it and kept it, what if I had a system to knock
Memory loss on the head? What if people said—she'll know,
She never throws a thing away ...
And I would say: I know it's in here somewhere.
Now did I file it under month or year, under name or—
Connecting thought. Did I do death separate from obituary
And condolence letters sent? Was marriage and engagement,
Not to mention later notes on divorce, remarriage
And change of name, all bundled in together?

Relations, I might say, human ones,
Defy my simple categories.

The Clutter in my Keyboard Keys.

Did you, like me, learn to type on a manual?
Did you, like me, gaze into the leaping letters
and find them black and tangled.

The careful unlocking, unlatching, unlinking,
so the world could trundle on.

And someone to come and stand behind
and look over a shoulder. Less border. More.

Leave a space here.

Doing lines of x's to make a frame.

The neat nice way the letters spaced. All alike.

None favoured. None discriminated against.

Across my practice page. And then those pings and tings, the way
to throw back the return. The way to set gaps. The way
to change ribbons. Those black fingers catching ...

And much much later tying up the nectarine to stop its fruit
knocking people on the head. Never waste.

To go back and take out that machine. To set it up.

To feel the keys under my fingers. Their heaviness.

A growing tiredness in my wrists.

But the manual waited patiently for my words.
I felt it there, my workhorse. Something simple
and willing. You tell me, it said, and I will whang
those letters down.

There were distractions. Of course there were. The noise.
Rolling paper in. Setting up a carbon.

But the real distractions were always somewhere else.
Birds in the tree outside my window. The sound
of children playing board games. Your turn. No, t'isn't.
That's my counter. You can't do that. Traffic.
A clock somewhere. A radio. People on the street.

It was life, I s'pose, those sounds around me.
And I didn't fully understand.

But then I had this one lent to me. Try it out.
The ease. The lightness of the touch. The ease of printing.
It doesn't really matter what mattered most.
I put my manual on the shelf.

And became distracted by things waiting at my fingertips.

The story.
Of course the story still is everything. But there are inches marked out
above me. Page numbers change. A disembodied pencil goes from
page to page. The hour catches my eye in the lower right.
Sudden wavy red lines appear under everyday words.
And if I put in common phrases,
common enough for me, the machine treats me as an idiot.
I don't, after all, know best.

Did you, like me, welcome in the revolution.
Can't be left behind, must know what's what.
Said all the things the middling old say
to reassure themselves they haven't yet
been left behind. Did you, like me, believe
a cluttered screen, a raft of waiting keys,
would take the story that lives as zips and pings
in a mind and translate it better into words?

Were you, like me, seduced by the printed page
coughing out (look, mum, no hands!) and thought
it somehow must be better than the old one
pounded out with hands abuzz and letters tangling?

Were you, like me, surprised to find technology
did not make your story sing?

The Clutter that Comes in Dining Rooms.

Years ago I sat in a restaurant and listened
all around me to conversations I couldn't understand.
They were hidden, removed, perhaps diners' views,
their reasons for eating there. And so I tuned them out.

Instead I had the bustling sounds, the clatter and the bang,
of knives on plates and forks put down; of spoons hitting sides,
and swizzle sticks in glasses. Of bottles being uncorked,
of liquid glugging, of glasses chinking.

I wanted to say something of my unexpected thoughts;
how strange, came first to my mind, how much noise
we make to eat a steak with chips and rice and greens;
to eat, to drink, to settle hunger down.

And all our little gadgets to convey, to stir, to cut;
to smile and think, how nice it is tonight with filling food
and friends; and then those moments when you realise
you've used the fork that was better kept ...

Etiquette has rules;
Etiquette comes with tiny pickiness;
Etiquette has books and books to spread it out;

Etiquette is all about ... spoons.

Etiquette is a moment's kindness;
The chance to think on others;
Etiquette fits in busy lives where closer thoughts impinge.
It helps in crowds. It travels kindly.

But etiquette can become confused,
Like a mind when the inner clock runs down;
Etiquette carries no customs dues.
But sometimes finds itself marked 'For Deportation'.

Etiquette lives in trunks under beds and old hat-boxes.
Etiquette, the little ways of long-times-past.
Etiquette feels a little out of place in bumping crowds
But battles gamely on, sure there's still a seat 'Reserved'.

The Clutter that I call Time.

Fitting it all in.
A little word, over-used: Busy.
Everything is busy. From street to home,
from shop and mall to mind.

And not enough hours in the day.

I wonder: Would we want days of sixty hours?
Years of five hundred days.

A minute that never ends.

The tide up, the tide back,
a sonorous sense of the expected.

It comes in, it goes out.
The pattern, the song,
 but unlike the music of its falling it leaves ...

People say: this song, it goes around,
 this song, it won't leave me alone,
 this song, it's plaguing me to death—

The windrows drying, all pushed up,
the sand in swathes of taupe and gray,
 in palest gold and muddy-yellow, leaves ...

Like lines of notes across the smooth expanse ...

Unwanted things. Weed torn from rocks, weed full of tiny life.

Plastic bottles, nameless metal things, glass smoothed,
wood, wild and tame, dead jellyfish.

And stranger things which suggest a long time coming.
Bottles of thick blue glass, purplish, red and brown.
Bottles with lids rusted on, or cork firm still.

Bottles caught up in fisher floats and damaged nets.

Bottles in old boxes, product of ... and chests and inch-thick
china ware ...

It's a thought beyond me, this idea that bottles encase time.

Because they can still hold letters ... SOS, a place, a time.

Sometimes the time's too far back ... and the finder finds
in this a sense of sorrow, like a sudden pain halfway

between head and pragmatic thought, and feet
that lift and run in wet sand dragging: *Look what I found!*

Time for ...

Time for ...

We invoke time on those most cluttered days;
when the diary's full, the calendar's bristling black.

Calmer days we let it flow.

Two o'clock! Fancy. I wonder where it's gone.

The sun was so lovely as I sat there in the garden
and watched the bees bustle about the spikes of blue;
a beetle on the nearest leaf, clouds floating,
finches in the shrubs along the boundary line ...

Their time too may be precious,

may be flustered,

may send them scurrying to and fro,

but watching them ... my clutter fades ... goes

where clutter goes ...

like litter up against a fence.

Part Three. Interior Decoration.

Did you have an aunt, a family, one of those who clung to the past;
a place to remember that was filled with china, little kitschy things,
knick-knacks, memorabilia, bric-a-brac, things that had their own
attraction ... and understood it was more than a past dictate
of what an interior should be.

Each, in her eyes, was story, anecdote, date and time and place.

Each came with a price tag. Guessed or remembered, depending ...

Each had a link to special times.

Each came wrapped and it was the unwrapping gave things
savour.

A little porcelain piece. A toy with a key to wind. A vase that shone
when lamps were lit. It might be anything.

But that putative aunt—
dress her if you wish in black lace with jet beads, a stiffened net
collar, cherries bobbing on a hat.
Or more modernly in Crimplene and rhinestone rims.
—and you will find her thoughts have come to match her things.

Not her fault, of course; she was charged with care.

But her mind would see a different world if she moved round fireman
red on cupboard doors,
round blonde wood and formica, with white and yellow implements,
stainless steel to deliver hot and cold.

We are what we live around. Next time you decorate ...

I came upon a lovely book that told people how to make dinner
parties
fifty years ago. The care they took, the hues they chose, the
menus
written up. Their sets of plates. The kinds of salt and pepper
shakers
that were given to mums on Christmas Day. But for all the fuss
and
crowding cutlery out—there was something that suggested plain
taste.

I am a person of plain taste. I never wanted china on my walls. Ducks perhaps. I never wanted things precarious. China on a dresser, never.

Nor cupboard shelves crammed with Tupperware. Nor gadgets round

and waiting, jostling for their place on kitchen counters. I wonder why.

This is the thing about clutter, about things, about possessing pie-dishes,

or pyrex, about pretty sets of this and that, because it all comes with that

little unread line on manuals and warranties: ‘things’, you know, come

with inbuilt needs for loving care. And when you’ve cleaned from

inside out … there’s still dust and grime waiting outside in …

Those catalogues some places sit you down—
You might like to browse, you might like to choose.
The gradations in shades on carpet tiles
Keep people busy: designers out of sight,
Customers bemused.

And how will it look, they ask themselves,
In morning sun, the way the trees dapple,
then stand stark outside?

But you, you tell me, are bringing in the experts.
Costs, of course, but might as well have things done well.

Oh, I agree. And how do you explain exactly what you want?
It’s like going to the hair salon: always take a picture.

This is what I want; do mine like this, this is what I like.

It saves much angst; removes confusion, defines the nebulous.

Indeed, I say. Did you ask me for my opinion or merely mention, in passing? I cannot help but think:

was it *that* life you imagined in *that* printed setting
you now saw yourself living; the place, the decoration would now
impose an attitude that belonged you felt in lives others lived;
you reached out, grasped—

I didn't say thin air. I understood your corollary. I didn't think of ghosts, not then.

Until I found you constrained by a stranger's interior ...

Moving House: Part Four.

Vans. Lettus & Co. Your Moving People. Trust Us.

The way a lifetime can be wangled in by people with experience.
Pressed up tight, turned upside down, the bubblewrap for mirrors;
blankets, mattresses, things wrapped hurriedly in old newspaper—
but you left carpets, curtains, blinds.

When you've packed it in and driven off to wait at the other end—
a faint thought intrudes: did I need it all, was it all essential,
will our new house welcome it when it's unloaded and carried in.

Do houses resent things that don't belong? Who knows.

But some houses never seem quite right. Flats of course.
But they're home to birds of passage. Sometimes office blocks
and churches jar. Sometimes the things that go inside scrape
up against the wrong colour walls, the wrong-shaped rooms,
get in the way of passage-ways and views ...

But they can't be discarded ... they cost so much to move ...

Yet it's hard to live with carted clutter that came out not quite ...

Your Idea: Part Five, Part Six, Part Seven: And a Dice.

Games. Boards. Things in crates. Children's rooms.
And the users grow and fashions change;
Weren't the games we played fast enough, fraught enough—

And there they sit in tins and boxes, old suitcases under beds.
The classic one-eyed teddy.
Old dolls with sparse hair and eyelids that rattle in their heads.
Ludo and checkers with many pieces missing.
Buttons filling in.
Card packs for all kinds of forgotten games:
The ones where you shout out what you'll buy.
The ones where you snap!
The ones where you guess and beg.
The ones where you hope they'll take your old maid;
dear old soul with nice neat bun and glasses halfway down her nose.
Building blocks which have lost their youthful colours,
Jigsaws ... and I don't know *where* the pieces went.
Down the cracks in time maybe.

Broken scooters, old annuals with cracked spines and someone's gone wild with a crayon halfway through.

But every mother hesitates.
They're out of fashion. Yes, of course.
Been overtaken by space, robots, laser weapons, and eerie boards.
But in their innocence there is something of the children who played before they found the fun of splatting space invaders,
the Pow Pow brigade, the darker faster world—

Parents place their innocence on children.
'When they were young', they say nostalgically
and linger over baby photos ...

Whose innocence, then, lies within these crates and boxes
Under beds, with dust curls fuzzing round their corners?
Mine? Or theirs?

Part Eight: Sounds.

I love ... I love ...

Who? Who do you—

Christine Anu ... Conversations like that in record shops.
I always feel crowded round with music begging me,
new bands, famed cellists, folk groups,
as if they have a living presence no cakeshop can lay claim to.
Not like the chilly reaches of a bank.
Not like the metal racks you look over as you consider coats.
Not like books where the genre is more the point—or a title that
grabs you by the throat.

Not like jewelry winking dully.

Not like shoes on glass shelves waiting for powdered feet.

Not like a pharmacy with its non-human smell.

Or a florist beaming brightly with the newly carried daffodils.

None of that.

Of course people in any shop say I love—

I love cream sponge topped with berries or rich choc.

I love the new season's frilly blouses.

I couldn't resist a bunch of tiger lilies.

I saw this book called—

But nowhere else but music shops do I feel surrounded by
waiting people, hoping people. Buy me.

You'll love my sound. You'll feel better, wilder, whackier,
that insistent sexy beat.

I feel people round me waiting, watching. Their presence hems me in.
All they hope for. All they wish.

I never feel quite at home in record shops.
I want to shop, when I shop, anonymously.

Words.

Babies blow bubbles as they test out sounds and words;
I often feel that when I speak too fast. When I can't find
the exact word I want. Bubbles.

I think words belong in bubbles. Those clever little comments
cartoon people say decisively. They break me up.

And the rainbow bubbles I toss to and fro when words refuse to come.

I'll sit someday and contemplate the empty reaches where my words
got lost; and if I'm fortunate my bubbles will wink and glow—
diamond-bright in sun and wind; empty of words at last, but still with
glowing beauty, to cling against the window as the last sun bursts in.

Leaves.

Who chose to call vellum sheets 'leaves'? Or papyrus? Beaten bark.

Who saw in their soft tones, their fading creamy-browns something
of the sense of fading years; of leaves piled, of changing colours
to mirror thoughts and ages? To catch them as they turn.

Who dipped sharpened goose quills ... why geese ... when geese
were linked to passing follies? Who ground galls and added soot,

when talk of soot contains that sense of things covered, lost, hidden, in long winding chimneys? Or smudged about the mud-brick fire.

Who chose, who scraped, who pigeon-holed, who read?

The very word contains everything from infancy with soft unfurling shoots

through vigorous adulthood; the broad-veined shapes, the rain drumming

on their upper side; the gentle collection and drip underneath; something safe;

the times when things wither and dry and crack; leaves turning ...



Children have a love for leaves, leaves thrown, leaves falling, leaves burrowed into; leaves burned in pungent smoky bonfires. And like fallen leaves they grasp their childish books and turn and twist and tear and throw leaves about and watch their kitten bat them to and fro; and when the crossness descends—‘Naughty boy! Your lovely little book!’—it may not matter much. Leaves have been leaves primeval, long before leaves became a medium for the message.

Nine Parts per Million: A sense of Smallness.

I always feel I take advantage ... in some obscure way ... when I look down on insects. I am so large, so all-powerful, they are too small to understand my power.

One swat. One spray. One step.

I know I hold life and death. And they don't.
Till they find a way to bite and sting. They know then—
what is flesh and what is merely lifeless wood or tin.

But I never water earth and see tiny black ants scurry out, carrying
small
white eggs, without a sense I've misused my power. I gave no
warning.
I didn't build up with ions zissing in the humid air. I didn't make
sugar melt
in the dampness begging rain. I came, I saw, I disrupted.

Briefly there I was god. And I didn't like the feeling. Too devilish.

Dissolving substances in factory pipes; the outlet to the sea;
so big the sea, it will take all and everything and dilute it beyond
any lasting danger. And tiny things that gathered round the shore
were dead beyond repair while others welcomed the sharpness
against each cell wall and found a way to incorporate it, turned
a brilliant toxic-green and spread in mighty sheets.

Children measuring for school; water taken from here, there,
test-tubes and parts per million to write up for that final project;
a smell around the outlet that made their minds grow dizzy
but they were told they were imagining it.

Just a smell of something harmless; citric acid came to mind,
and they finished up and found the school was not averse, like
scientific bodies, to suggesting they tweak figures here and there.

'It was,' the students said, 'very sickly there, and that green
was spongy and bubbled up and let smells loose.' But smells
like things sent ocean-wards soon disperse. Air, like sea, is asked
to dissolve and lose ...

Those students read of fish dying by the shoal round that outlet pipe
and felt the green and fetid slime like something crawling on young
skins, up teenage noses ... and wondered what their future held ...

Part Ten: I scattered them on The Coffee Table.

Holidays. I spread the brochures with a liberal hand.

If I had, if I could, if it wasn't so far away I'd go ...

Those pretty pictures, air-brushed, so carefully composed

To make sure no litter interposed; no power lines intervened;

And all the people in them young, smiling, no sign of weariness,

Not even those who can be expected to clean up after me ...

But when I've gone or not gone ... what will I do with them?

Like old calendars, like advertisements and posters, like the

Latest houses on the market. To be cut out, to be pasted in,

Like old Christmas cards ... I always think, it seems a shame,

In a house where no more children live to cut with child-safe scissors.

Only stamps survive. We gave value to those little squares and
oblongs, put in heavy albums,

and let a raft of other pretty pictures turn in time to worms and burnt-brown soil.

Scatter. I always think of crumbs, of confetti, of bitterness.
Children in a wood with crumbs.
Things spread out with careless liberal hand:
Things on coffee tables: rings from hot cups, marks and scratches,
Spills and rills and cracks.
Places where people butted out.
Newspapers strewn untidily with magazines mistaken
For those catalogues furniture shops include; or vice versa.

But every coffee table has its day. Sanded down. Polished up.
The lovely wood! someone cries. See the grain.
Those charming pinkish tints.
That golden richness, the way it's been cut against the grain ...
The tang of cedar polish.

I take up my brochures again. Stare down. Bare table top.
I never noticed.
Strange. I never noticed.

Part Eleven: This is a Very Long Play.

Junk? Now that is unkind. *Junk!*
In here are lifetimes playing people who never lived.

Don't you smell it all? Sniff it in the air.
Greasepaint? Oh, more than that!

Old costumes bundled up in cupboards rarely opened,
shedding sequins, moulting fur, minus froggings ...
Now this, I remember, was used by one Titania.

And the doublet-and-hose was worn by Jeremy Todd
when he played ... when he played ... he played so many,
specially liked that period, fourteen hundreds to about the death of
Charles.

The hats are a story in themselves. But it got quite hard there
for a while to find a decent feather boa.
Ridiculous things. Really!

But wardrobe mistresses always said: must have!

The sets we made from papier mâché, the painted cardboard,
things from plywood. Things borrowed ...

dear me, and never returned, it seems from the evidence.

Those paintings in the gilt frames piled up in that corner—
lovely little play, can't think of its name now,
a comedy of manners, and these were around the walls,
and we were lent a chaise longue in straw satin.

Must have shown the stains *dreadfully* ...

Over here we've got a century of posters.
The melodramas always caught my eye.

Quite frightening, some of them, those elongated figures,
those black cloaks, those long bony fingers.

And the happy things, the puppet shows and declining vaudeville,
the musicals and Christmas pantomimes. All in here.

Now this—oh, do come through, still other rooms, and you wouldn't

believe the junk that got stored under stairs!

Junk. Did I say junk? Of course it isn't junk!
Memorabilia. Heritage. Our past. All laid out in hats.
Hats are the litmus test of—
Yes, hats can tell you anything you want to know
about an age, an era, it's what I always say—hats—

Cloaks? Yes, cloaks are handy things—and more so if you've spilt
coffee on your vest—but nothing can beat hats.

*

I knew a playwright once;
started out to change the world
with hard-hitting satire, political things
that pulled ... He had some worries over his planned punches.
How tough is tough?

The paper piled up around his desk and he
began to look like hibernating things in children's books.
The nest, the peace, the seclusion,
the protection from winter chills.

His writing warmed him.

But each piece came to this startled halt.

Libel.

Every word at last became a vehicle for libel.

The long strands of hard-hitting words;
the chance to deride people who had disappointed him,
the way to humiliate them on stage.

The way to change the world by staging follies
played out in other venues.

He would strike out, water down,
change, agonise.

I felt his pain. He had to write.
The alternative was—throwing things at TV sets.

But his agent had been crystal-clear:
they're getting more and more ... *sensitive*, on libel.

His pain was palpable.

Then one night, sitting doodling at his desk,
he drew his characters and put their words into
little floating clouds.

They didn't look much like folk we knew.
So he had to label them: it added to the humour.
Like waxwork dummies standing round.

There is a moral there I think: I hesitate to spell it out.

They're saying his cartoons are the grossest libels.
They're taking him to court.

A martyr at last. And we'll all come out like creatures
stretching
after lengthy hibernations and say to power, a little out of
practice,
‘Can't you take a joke?’

*

The school play is over for another year.
Mothers cart out bundles of dress-up clothes to waiting cars.
Kids try to scrub off whiskers or round red cheeks.

They scratch white powder out of hair.
They feel an imaginary itch where that tail was pinned.
They touch the red line where the pirate's patch cut in.

All this to pretend for an hour.
All this to prove to mum and dad they're getting an education.
All this to have the chance to sing and dance.

They're thankful they got through without forgetting lines.
But not sure that acting on a stage is really what they want to do.
Okay, of course. Better than learning tables or doing sums.

And now it's out into the chilly night and yawning.

But one, somewhere in that crowd filling up the doors and corridors,
felt the moment's magic. To pretend. To be someone else
for ten, twenty minutes there. And a whole crowded world of
possibilities

opened up its brief temptation ...

And then the sound of a slamming car door, the sound
of parents saying, 'thank goodness, that's over!' and the stardust
falling in clouds to collect as debris on the floor.

A Baker's Dozen: Twelve, or Thirteen.

No one explained, when I was young, why a baker's dozen wasn't a dozen.

It was like the curate's egg. They just smiled knowingly.

Some things come in time. But some drop off the little squeaking cart and I forget I ever wondered.

Did it matter if I knew one thing but not another?

Did it matter if I was the one to smile knowingly and others merely looked blank and went on to talk of other things ...

And when people come round my final bed and don't know whether to speak of eternity or merely dwell on highlights of this life almost past ... will I manage a little knowing smile and say to them: some things are slow in finding answers, in the jumble that is life.

But this I'm sure is a different way of knowing, waiting there beyond my mortal bed, discreetly curtained from others' stares ...

And in it I'll find answers to the bigger questions I've pondered on.

Smile knowingly? No. I think I'll leave that little conceit to age, and crumble.

Fourteen Parts: from when families were often large and it was hard to reach and feel the specialness.

‘Bedtime!’ ‘Bathtime!’ ‘Dinnertime’ and round they came, those barefoot

children; all crowding in. Yours and yours and yours. Names stumbled over.

Who did what, and whose turn was it ... and I didn't want to have the bath last

because the water had grown cold and brown. Those children in their lists.

Forms filled in. Subsidies and bonuses needed. Those children in their eerie rows beneath high kerosene lamps on shelves; those children like moths around the light; they, unlike moths, owned individual names beyond their species and genera. But they were put to bed like automatons.

In. In. No lagging now. Don't forget your prayers. No talking now. No moment to express a childish fear and want a childish hug.

Only the one who began the list, the last one out before the light grew dim,

they might've said, if they'd wanted to be unpopular, that they felt there

was a moment when they knew they were special. And then it was snatched

away again. Children in rows, in schools and orphanages, children lining up

for vaccinations, to receive a prize, children like creatures in the race for life.

They understood they were products too; that it took a lot to be noticed; to be the king's son, or the one who struck him down. Most were content to live and die with just a little love, a moment where they knew they were they and not that anonymous thing: a child.

I think of them as I run my finger down the lists that might yield me up

another ancestor; those children that lived and died and were given names,

and try to believe that in every life there came a moment filled with joy.

A name granted, given, imposed, a gift because ... or a replacement child.

I see behind them those trillion acts when prospective parents reached out,
when they planted kisses, when they scrabbled with clothes, heavy cloaks,
skins, grass skirts, togas, when there were long night-shirts and tight corsets,
when in the light of lamps and candles, fathers, mothers, made those lists
of children, and after saying 'bedtime!' 'bathtime' 'dinnertime!' and all the rest,
went into darkened rooms and lay down to make more children to be listed
for me to run my finger down those lines of long-dead names and think again:
I hope, I hope, in there somewhere, they felt a moment when they were truly special.

Special needs.
Special schools.
Special teachers.
Special training.
Special course.
Special tools.

Special child?

An Op-Shop Shelf: Fifteen Ways per Inch.

Bins and tubs and baskets;
bursting out with other people's trash.
Things waiting to be fingered through. Yet again.
I'm not alone, never solitary, when I go op-shop shopping.

There's all that airport fiction to be passed over
in search of a sudden shining little gem.

Unlike other leftover books I never feel moved to pity;
those books all had their day in the sun.

Though the gilt has faded they all claimed themselves as
Number One Bestseller, the Book that's sold a Million Copies.
These are no shy retiring orphans on the knocked-up shelves.

And clothes galore. But it's a fact, and I'm not alone,
op-shop clothes rarely fit people of my size.

I hold up these pretty things, size 8, size 10,
and the only way I'll ever wear them is in imagination.

Knick-knacks. Some pretty glass, shabby paintings, piles of cushions.
Umbrellas! Now, you can never have too many umbrellas.

Plates and bowls and saucers, mugs and dishes,
rarely matching. But matching doesn't matter when there's only me.

Handy things. Tools and gadgets, tin-openers and cookie-cutters.
Moulds and pans and shakers.

(However did we live before we had—gadgets?)

Old Butterick patterns and magazines galore. Every size of handbag.

Scarves and shoes and hats and coats and sheets and baby blankets.

And outside: nameless parts for bicycles, prams, vacuum-cleaners.

Op-shops. Love 'em. I come out with the happy thought someone's
trash proved my treasure.

What can I give away; what can I donate?
Yet another stall. All imploring: Give us,
surely you can spare ... other people are needier—
I'm sure they are. I never felt I needed much.

I always wander up and down my shelves,
asking firmly, 'That? Surely I don't need that.'
Books I haven't read in years; and how many
pillow-slips does one self-effacing person need?

Will I ever use those pans and tins again;
date rolls seem to have gone out of fashion,
and pottery things for soup, ramekins and crock-pots ...
Stalls are ways to dismiss a pleasant moment in the past.

Part Sixteen: You Never Know—

True. You don't. The things I've kept in my time!
Candle stubs and rubber bands. Old underwear for dusting things.
Bits of string. The blank backs of a million flyers.
Packets of every shape and size. Old biscuit tins.
Fine wire, hooks, springs. Lengths of elastic.
Pencil stubs. The tops off things.
Calendars too pretty to throw away. The kids might like to cut
the pictures out. They might. They don't.
Magazines ditto. Holiday post cards.
Holey socks that might make puppets.
Old coats and hats for dressing up. Ties to use in patchwork.
Cardboard for backing something. Pretty paper for next Christmas.
Plastic bags. Little bowls and trays.
Zips and buttons, clips and studs. Might come in handy.

It's a law, I've come to think: anything I throw away this week

I'll miss the next.

Seventeen, a Very Sweet ...

A teenage room imposes love and greed, a kind of aching security;
All these things spread around and smelling of life and sex and sweat.
Perfumes lingering. The smell of shop bags and boxes.
The look and sound of noise provision.

The unmade bed hidden in between.

It's a fallacy: that each generation gets more untidy.
It's only that each one has and clings to more.

We had, and before us, they had, and they can be taken back in time,
till there's nothing to them but a little horsehair trunk or a simple
banded box.

Those people who moved home with their precious possessions all in
one small case
and a basket on the arm.

The little carried things; a brooch with mama's hair, a packet of pins
and laces, even hatpins.
A pair of scissors. Did you ever treasure your pair?

A portrait taken in a studio; faces stern and firm. But all that now
exists to hang so many memories round.

Some cards. Some letters. Taken out and read again. The little homely
details;
how it rained, the number of kittens born, what an old neighbour said.

All this tidied up in ribbon and kept in shelves and drawers;

the fate of those a settled sense. The roving venture held.

But come anywhere and start over—if any life truly can—and new things

are added in: recipes for cooking damper, how to make a simple whitewash.

Ways to rid the house of ants. Little tips on keeping cut flowers fresh.

Year by year—the accretion.

And people clearing out decades later.

‘Such a pity,’ they say vaguely, ‘the way
the mice and silverfish got in. I wonder what all this stuff was?’

The boxes up-ended in the breeze float away in tiny blizzards.

The emotions that swirl around those teenage years:

Peer pressure.

The fear that no one will ‘want’ me.

The fear of ugliness.

The fear of being left behind somehow.

The hope for love.

The hope to find my little niche.

Those confusions, those red-faced embarrassments,

Those humiliations that loom so large

Like a leering face at the window.

Hah! Thought you were getting there.

Not knowing how to start a relationship.

Not knowing how to end it ...

Not knowing which route's mine and which is yours.
Too immersed in the moment to imagine how it may play out in
memory.

That teenage room holds the comfort and rejection of a childish past.

But its future, bundled up on chairs and shoved away in shelves,
is still unsorted.

Part Eighteen: Don't you feel the Rhythm gathering?

It's called experience.

All those things that build and build, till the patterns
Become ... patterns. Observable.

Not the chaos of early life: where you're never certain
if Part A slots in at D or F.

The shape of lives, like novels, has a sense of patting into shape.

Not anarchy from go to whoa.

Not chaos from dawn till sleep mercifully intervenes.

Every life is somehow shaped,
like a child rolling, squeezing, patting plasticine,
until it can say, smiling in the sense of shapes achieved:

'Look Mummy,
See Daddy,
It's a cow,
It's a cat,
It's a house,
It's the sun,
It's a snake,
It's a dinosaur.'

Then, praised for the wonder of shape out of primeval mess,

the child grows busy squashing up and rolling out again.

Something different this time. A wall. A fence. A tree. Tiny balls to roll around the flat like gran and granpa on the bowling green.

Chaos, clutter, mess and all, it seems,
contain a clear imperative. To resolve the self
into patterns.

Even mess that overwhelms tends to come in piles,
in geometric patterns, in cartons and old chests, filling corners first,
then under beds and topping wardrobes, then it moves out
in waves, impervious to pleas, imperative in taking space.

Is that comfort? Or something else?

Cars on roads.

The way that patterns of changing lights, red, amber, green,
flick on and off.

Trains marked on lines underground.

A lovely pattern.

And doesn't prepare you for dark and dirt and people jostling.

Town plans. Subdivisions.

They all have this seductive sense of patterns
imposed on the careless landscape that was here before.

Neat curbing. Canal developments. The mess of mudflats dredged.

Rivers straightened. Roads straightened. Lives straightened.

The straight and narrow. But the broad was never winding.

And sometimes I fear for a world which must have human patterns transferred from plan to land. When they speak of abstract design they don't mean they'll let something wild again leap free ...

The concrete truck is here to finish curbing. Oh, doesn't it look
neat and nice. All grey. So nice and lifeless.

Nineteen: The Parts of Childhood Fading.

I can't decide if it's the things or the sense of irreversibility ... now.
I didn't then. Childhood gone? Phoo! I sent it on its way,
like dandelion seeds. Be gone.
As unimportant. As carelessly left to float.

Only later, much much later,
each tiny floating seed acquires a life, lodges somewhere
not easily seen; behind my shoulders, in my hair,
behind my thoughts, tickling somewhere unseen,
unpleasant between my toes.

A whole cloud of them, so wispy, so delicately white.
So light. At first.

It comes sometimes; a pain almost,
when I'm pondering on children's things.
Will I keep, will I pack and store, put out somewhere,
keep ... keep for the sake ...

Creatures sewn (I think of those little fingers
trying to manipulate a needle) and stuffed with
sand or dried beans; their eyes little buttons ...
and sooner or later they'll come apart at the seams
and leak ...

Books of writing, books of drawings,
coloured pencils, crayons, little pieces

to illustrate forgotten incidents, dramas here at home.
Things coloured in. Things cut out.
They don't have a use, precisely ...

And yet they tie me to a time and place
and I am reluctant to pull that bow and
watch the ribbon float away;
such effort that went in, that struggle,
those little figures immersed over paper

or struggling to make a plastic or a cardboard
thing behave as required; little things worked on
that break apart; things with essential parts now lost.
Yet each and every one belongs ...

And then I am firm. It's not the things themselves.
It's something deeper. All my own regrets.
That I didn't take more time, that I didn't do
those E-things more: enthuse, encourage, enjoy.
That I let those years rush past not understanding

they can't be clawed back; they with their joys and
failings; the things I did, didn't do, wish I did,
those things ... the things said, not said, somewhere
caught in that wind that knows only one direction;
and little bits of paper are all that's left to prove ...

Part Twenty: My Plate is far from Empty—this is, as you know, a meditation on Clutter ...

We, I mean, writers, commentators, anthropologists, historians,
that kind of we,

make pronouncements upon our remote ancestors.

In them we see ourselves.

In them we see mystery.

In them we see violence and The Brutal personified.

We feel their minds were stuffed with superstition and fear.

We thank something, usually our lucky stars,

that times have changed.

But what was a mind dwelling on ten thousand years ago.

What rooms and locks, what winding corridors and great halls
made up its architecture?

I would like to think its internalities expressed a profound sense
of being at one, of welcoming sunrise and gathering round the fire
at night ... and in that space came conversations that were as
profound as ours.

Not filled with ums and yeahs, not padded out with 'you know'
but telling tales that had in them all kinds of things:
adventure, humour, moral suasion, excitement, hope.

Because in those moments when people gathered round they felt the
night

beyond the light and felt in the touch and shape of bodies pressed up
tight,

a sense of safety.

Together we ...

Eyes came up close and glittered in the dark maybe.

And those people neither fled nor fought, but put their trust in fire
and felt the warm security of cave mouth behind them, or little bound-
up withies, wood and stone.

We can carefully disinter hints of their day-by-day ways of doing things;

the middens they left on shores,
the bones, the burials, the sketched out hands and feet,
the ash and charred remains of long-dead fires.

We can marvel at the pictures they chose to draw.

We can look at beads and shells strung on rolled husky pith
or gut or plaited hair.

We can do all the things with material that cluttered round those simple hearths;

but hidden from our invasive fingers, our extrapolated explanations,
are the thoughts they conveyed in words,
the thoughts that existed as thoughts
and maybe gave them anxious moments,
of times of song, of joy ... the thoughts that are forever thoughts
and cluttered ancient minds—which we cannot pin and slice and prick.

Beyond the clutter that has form and temperature, molecules and atoms,

is the clustering of every thought thought since time began.

We live, we walk, we sit, we eat, we weaken and finally we die,
always enclosed in those unseen bubbles of thoughts thought.

We don't know what the fate of unspoken thoughts can ever be.

The ether, we say casually, and think it empty.

But it too is never empty. Thoughts linger.

Dark matter, they now say, clutters up our universe.

Dark matter might be matter but we can only guess.

It might, like thoughts, have nothing that is substance.

It may be the perfect stasis to hold the clutter and the mess,

It may hold the universe in place.

THE END

Excuse me—Is this the Index or the Waiting-Room?

There never was a thought that didn't prompt another thought.
The night sky waiting.

I've stood out there and seen the rings around the moon,
the lovely golden glow on shredding clouds.
And beyond them—stars.

They haven't even all been named—
The ones I can see with my 'naked eye'.

This swirling stuff that looks like foam and is a million stars.
A million?
A hundred million?

Should I sit here overwhelmed by puniness
surrounded by my petty clutter.

Or should my thoughts range in those wondrous
distant whorls and streams;
those scenes of crowding stars
and those that seem entirely empty as I look up into blue-blackness.
Then the thoughts that range—should they be something
grander than remembering to put the garbage out, write a letter,
ring a friend, finish—

I want to find the words from the lists tucked away in brain cells;
the words that can be disentangled from the mundane.
Yet we, I fear, have mixed the sacred too thoroughly with the profane
and my words fail me.

But close my eyes.
Let my imagination go beyond the clutter of yarded words.
And I wing free at last. Home among the stars.