

Selected Poems

from

J. L. Herrera

For Patrick, Ken, Nicci, and Scarlett

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THE CASTLE IN THE SAND

No noise, said Mrs Beech, not after ten—I rule a quiet house.
We understand—and the children will be—like mice—
Of course they will, the little pets. Mrs Beech doubted;
in years of summing up ... but less boister ... and the mother,
such nice stuff in her garments, style, that brocade, but discreet ...
quite the lady ... And your husband, madam, we are to expect—
Oh, indeed. He will be down from town, a day or two ...
what would our holiday be ...
Mrs Beech stepped back. Such vehemence. *Our* holiday.
Breakfast then, from eight till nine (he won't come, silly woman,
her eyes full of dashed hopes). Thank you and might we take a lunch?
No, madam, I suggest the Blackbird Café, they do a nice
double sandwich, sundaes for the children—I do an excellent
two course dinner, from seven on, my crumbed sweetbreads are—
Yes, yes, we'll look forward—Children! Come now, it's late!
She was sharp. In haste to finish conversation.
The sheets are well-aired ... and hot water to suffice ...
Mrs Beech, duty done, went down the stairs. Doom, Doom,
said every tread, or merely Down

The sun will shine, Mama, Mama, it must, it really will—
won't it? Of course, my darlings, the sunniest sun
and the sea-iest sea. As warm as our baths? Nearly. Now to bed
and say your prayers ... And Papa will come? He will, say he will.
My promise, what is my promise? Laudanum words.
Yes, my little ones. He will come and the sea will be blue
and the gulls will swoop, there'll be funny furtive crabs
and laughing children on the strand—Did we bring
the buckets with our spades, Mama, did we? Yes, so
shiny new, gleaming red (devil-red). And the yellow spades;
brighter than the sweetest sand. Gulls whiter than Drake's sails
(greedier than Miss Sanders?)—
... her lips red as beach buckets, her eyes changeable as an
English sea. But cheeks of youth. I leave you, Henry, in my heart
I leave ... my love departs beyond the horizon ... but I am
unforgiving as a Penzance rock ...
Jane! Don't whine! I know you're tired. Nightgowns. John! Alexandra!
Please try ... and Mrs Beech saw my lies—sweetbreads ...
oh, forgive me, Lord, for lying to a stranger at the shore ...

Mumma, Mumma, where is the sun? You *promised*—
It's hiding, just there, that glow beyond the mist. Sea mist.
Will we go down to the sand. I want to see the sand. She thought

of the pebbled beach, round pink-grey rattling stones, to turn and click beneath their feet. Turnstones. But sand there was, a-plenty, beyond the point. And rock pools. And the view back to bobbing boats, fathers at the oars, the red-brick town in gentle curves, and Punch and Judy by the pier. She remembered them. Donkey rides. Fashion passing and new parasols. Cream teas. Smart vehicles. Dowagers come for the sea baths. Because of Miss Sanders we are put away here, this unfashionable house, far from the shore. Blind windows. Not even a basket lunch. No noise. Pettiness. Oh, if I could cry, just once ... Johnny don't! If nanny was here she would ... But Papa said nanny must go because he "unwisely peculated"—what is peculate, Mama? He had Mr Timms, such a good clerk ... this new desire for secretaries ... Mr Timms had the longest nose in the world, I liked his nose, Mama (so did I, oh, so did I) ... this last bow now, and down to breakfast. Kippers, like as not. A seaside meal.

Mumma, when will Papa come? I want him to see me in my pink, my pretty pink. A sea-pink ... she watched them go, unsatisfied with her words. I hate him. Do they hear my hate. My bitterness. I shudder.

Put up my parasol to hide my eyes, as best ... such beads of mist. Oh sun! A hidden world. His turning, a half-sentence. My pretence. The maids ... and Nanny Biggs—"The master, ma'am ... " and a world of knowing. I hate her too. No, not hate—she would comfort—if I cried. Tell me he doesn't deserve—deserve! See the blue coming, children, in the sky, the patch on a Dutchman's trousers ... John, don't throw stones ... we'll walk to the pier, by then ... the blue ...

Putch-n-Judy, Mumma?

Punch, you silly—

Don't quarrel. Yes. Punch. He hits his poor Judy. I don't know why we laugh—but then *we* don't hit, *we* are not hit, such a common thing ... we suffer silences, absences, and tighten our lips. Pretend. Think—'excuses'—and say, Yes, dear, how unfortunate. Evade. Know conversations over tea cups. Fluted. Thornless buds.

Will Papa make a sandcastle, with us? A big big castle. With turrets, my darling. The strongest castle ever seen, holding brave men, beautiful maidens, at its archers' windows, and a moat. (To keep out the Miss Sanders of life ... that come creeping, creeping ...) Fidelity in its secret sandy ways. We'll walk to the point. See the rock pools, crystal clear. Sand beyond. Deserted sand in a wide pale crescent. Desert sands. Arabee sands. Loveless.

Hold tight to your spade, my darling, the rocks may slip underfoot—
see the anemones waving,
and barn-ackles, we called them, when I was young ...
mussels, winkles ... such happy lives they lead, more than the birds
of the air, the lilies of the field—(to envy a wrinkle)—
John! Mind your little sister! Hold her hand—
She didn't mind me, she never does—
She is little ... *you* know that ... my baby ...
but then are we not all as grains of sand, as many, as myriad—
as unmatting

We will dig here ... lift the heavy lustreless grains, wet and sharp.
Scoop and pat. And if you tip your bucket over gently, here and here,
magnificent castle walls, thick and firm,
pour out the stuff of fun—
Later we'll find shells, adorn the walls,
seaweed pennants or a gull's feather.
I will sit down to watch. Watch. Such unfeigned joy.
Was there a moment—
I remember my father, frowning in his blackest whiskers, called
a southerly storm, Boer clouds ... and my little ones ...
will they ever fear—the south, the west, the east, a swinging compass—
see such clouds building ... blessed be ...
A wind lifting nimbus, lifting sand, rilling, ridging, in the marram—
and the waves curling over, steel-grey, to beat and beat the shore.
I remember ... moments of happiness ...
I thought them cliffs and rocks, bulwarks, not simple castles made
of sand ... the tide ... each foam-line bounding forward, smoothing
evidence. Did those moments exist—like—
lustrous shells, pink and white, in bladder-wrack ... pictures in my mind

Mama! Mama! see our castle! see the tower! so strong!
Oh yes! But—where is little Jane?
We don't know—We were busy—You sat and watched.
Mama, didn't you watch us, didn't you?

THE THROAT OF DAWN

Silver-emerald isles
Strung about the throat of dawn,
Gold-hinged, shining
 With a thousand wiles
 For any Crusoe; profligate
 And flush with dining

Turtle eggs, crabs, vie;
Fins, milk-of-nuts, soft tropic fruit
Pungent in their season
 I would list and lie
 Cornucopia'd till I die
 Softly lose my reason

MOTHER CAREY'S COUNTY TOWN

Plump purple clouds tower in my topaz-tinted sky,
Tipped with gold and ermine trims, brilliant to the eye,
The colour of coronetted kings, the shape of spires,
Bind splendid earthly forms in sunset skies ...
A place of subject things, contemning size or substance,
Neither petty hearts nor puny quarrels, never piffling cant.
Buy and sell the best, the glory, tumbling rich, no sinecure for tares;
Round crimson beets, fat juicy plums and golden pears,
Pure-white aylesburies on a teardrop pond there, with weeping
Willows, and sonsy aproned maids, gossip-laden yet keeping
Sharp eyes trained on bonny bouncing heirs, fat and firm,
Laughing in the last sun, before nursery tea and small feets' return
To waiting hearth; no cold attics in my aery pillowed home
Where sunburst rays are held by eaves, tucked in by pearly dome,
Another roof beyond the cloud manor, church, Masonic hall, chapels
Of cream stone, shop awnings, diamond panes and shadowed lintels,
Must be a spreading place of learning, boys with lurking manly dreams,
Construing Virgil, thinking bat and ball and waiting tea, quoting reams
Of Paradise Lost and Gained and gained and lost again;
While somewhere chestnuts roast rich brown and mothers fain
Would kiss and nurture fast passing childhood in this ether realm.

Cloud purple turns to slate, wind billows out, sun, orb and light, fades forlorn
And cold cramped Venus is the lamp upon my failing faery world. Till dawn.

FRITILLARY

Sweet bright grasses fringed about a secret cove,
With little rasping voices, softer than the waves that curl,
Softer than the winds that trill a harmony across the dunes,
 Telling tales ...
Butterflies brown and white, with lead-light marks upon their wings,
With tiny cooing voices, softer than terns, softer far than dolphin gulls,
Softer than a million sand midges with their tiny beating wings,
 Telling tales ...

'We saw it there', 'it was so long ago', 'they passed the story on',
 'Years and countless years', 'a hundred generations, *I* dare suggest',
 'It flew, our ancestors claimed, like a thing possessed'
 Telling tales ...
 'How it cried!' — 'like a beast bled, *I* heard', 'and all the while
 A flapping', 'a noise, *my* family passed to me, like a clap of thunder'
 — 'In a summer storm' — They drowsed together, in lush seed-head,
 Telling tales ...

Victualling: Mr. Philobert Jenkins' Account

That picher, sir? A fine ship, she were, on the
 Nitrate run a while—carried forty men—and Shorty Sloane—
 I've been with the firm near forty years, seen the fam'ly
 Come and go—but it's the ships you remember—Yes, sir?
 Biscuits?—Mr. Mullins will serve you, sir—It were port
 Not brandy for Lord 'amer's yacht—Beg yours—
 Shorty Sloane? I remember 'im particular—Brought bad luck,
 The men said, casual-like—Couldn't see it meself—but never sailed,
 No sir—Salt, sir? Nine-and-sixpence that'll be—
 They paid 'im orf, Shorty, left 'im in this port an' that—
 Poor Shorty—couldn't leave the sea alone—
 'e finally got a berth in 'obart Town—'e loved that ship.
 And Shorty weren't a sentimental man—a perfect clipper—
 Pine—'aven't seen the 'uon pine, sir? Lovely yellow wood.
 Made fine ships, that it did ... Loved 'er like a son, they said,
 Went overboard one night, left a note—
 To give the ship good luck, 'e wrote, poor bloke—
 Quaffed the cap'n's best French brandy, 'fore 'e done the deed,
 No rum for Shorty Sloane when 'e set out for 'eaven, like—
 And you know what, sir? Didn't do no good ... that fine clipper,
 Strong as they make 'em, plied the sea with perfect pitch, regal like,
 Should've seen 'er, sir—and ran before the wind, straight
 Into an open shore—some said it were the skipper at that
 Fine French brandy—but that weren't no comfort to poor Shorty—
 ... Now your rope, sir, 'awser-laid ... 'emp, sir, sisal or coir?

'The way it fell, like a stricken beast'; 'great gushing gouts, they said',
 'Not a story for the young' — 'and cries', 'More a bellow, in *my* version'
 'A wounded roar, *I* heard, like a dragon stabbed' — 'Then the stalks broke'
 Telling tales ...
 'It had a name, they saw, in gilt upon its head'; — 'S.S. Fri—l—' — 'It wore
 Away in time, a shadow of a name'; the fritillaries gather round wormholes
 In the weathered wood; a faint fragrance still there about the worn-out ribs,
 Telling tales ...

Note: I had in mind the ‘Queen of the Falklands’ fritillary (*Issoria cytheris cytheris*) which has dark brown and tan wings edged with white.

AS IT WERE—A LIGHTHOUSE

Turn, flash, reflect and flash again; a light above—
My eyes are salt sore, filmed. I see, I *think* I see—
My mouth cracks and whispers, flares red at the corners,
My skin, like tunny-scales, reflects the agony of solitude—
With manic force, the great iron hooves
Strike at the beams and struts of lonely stable walls
Rear and curl and fight in life-denying fury
Then break free—

A thousand nights with lowering light
By my elbow; and dark imps plucking at my
Other side; in solitude they expand and grow;
Escape a life’s conditioning; hard round the highway curves
Lean in to their great creaking collars; monstrous beasts
Midnight black; with threaded hames a-jangle,
Uneasy shafts ride up on rock-hollow sides
Eyes blinded—

A leaping carriage meanly clothed in draper’s black
Its souls contained within, unsighted, sway and slide,
The faint whistling curlew cry of the devil’s legion
In crevices of life; the beacon captures one pallid face
As the curtains shift and part, their tassels dragging wearily—
And still the great hooves thunder on;
The lash and crack of well-thonged whip, keening
High and fierce—

A cloak and mantle flung about; “a wild
Night,” the Keeper says, by faint firelight, “and cold”;
I have a fire, the Tempter says, great glowing boilers down below;
A quick leap—a soft-cushioned leap; do not stop to query—
It will come, I remonstrate, the quarter’s ship; bringing oil,
Hard rations for the souls who warn the lost
Of great-maned beasts hereabouts—
Letters stamped ...

... Books in black bindings, yet untouched, and
New sou’westers, still with the smell of people caught within
Their folds; and thick grey jerseys knit by warm and loving hands;
Light dextrous hands ... The foam from tugging leaden bit

And striving flanks, the only glimmer in the funeral dark;
And the horses—oh, the horses, stamp and toss and steam;
Three months, their stance declaims, is but a minute
In a dream—

THE SEA EAGLE'S FEATHER

And when I die, ragged and blowsy by the tide,
The wind will blow and sough (in eternal sorrow)
Maat, goddess with unseen scales, may she chide
A nesting eagle, one feather let me borrow
For this poor soul ... unprepared ...

No mourners here to build a tomb, set a stone,
The sand will sigh and fly (in eternal motion)
My soul, set free, at first listless, sullen, lone,
Weigh me, this shrivelled thing, its only notion
To find home ... remembered haven ...

Hymn of the gale, now sweet as temple-flutes, sings,
The sea will sate and break (in eternal sibilance)
And I will feel my lightness, grow great wings,
Lift me to that eyrie, nestle in soft down, by chance
I may hatch in other dreams ...

GIFT OF THE SHORE

Jane, with childish steps, ran from servant-hood,
of scooping sand and fetching sea in red beach buckets—
moulding *their* castle, *their* grand plans; but here were pebbles
speckled as plovers' eggs, here was sand and seaweed piled up high,
with tiny fat tan bladders she tried to pop, balloons beneath her feet.
She hummed Little Jack Horner, Sat in a Corner; she saw a roly-poly
boy with a fine sweet plum, *not* his brother, *not* his sister—let them build
their castles! The pale sun, still veiled, glossed the sand, where tiny
streams braided round storm-heaped stones, went this way and that,
shining spit-and-polish, giving the scene an unbearable sheen; she
lowered her eyes, took up a twig, drew stick birds with perfect curves ...
and did not see she had company, half-hidden in the dunes ... this world
briefly hers where the windrowed weed, like meadow hay piled in fields
they'd glimpsed from the train; where daisies and dandelions, loosestrife
and nesting quail, fell alike to the fine firm stamp of great feathered feet
... absorbed in sand, sleek brown sand, and the lines she drew ... "I see you
are an artist too" ... Old and faintly querulous, this disembodied voice.

Jane sprang up, her stick like her father's Malacca cane, fierce and fending off (questions, never asked, never answered; he felt them) ...

Where was everyone, how could she have walked so far, never thinking—one little Persephone-step after another ... walked into an old man's world ... an old man with dusty dimmish hair, fluttering white about his jaw, flesh, spiritless ... "I'm *not* an artist!" Not *not* an artist. "I'm not!" (Artists, she knew, had beards.) "Don't be afraid, child, I'm ... " What? What am I? If 'artist' cannot reassure one waylaid child. Or lost? "I make pictures. I love the shore, the sand, the birds, the way the sea rolls, such bright billows (I can't quite catch their hue), like ... like the wind in harvest fields—did you ever see the grass bending low—Aeolus, god of the wind, passing—Don't be afraid—" "There's only one God. His name is God." Jane stood strong in catechism; Papa never noticed fears or fantasies, Papa never noticed ... "But he has many parts, your God, hot and cold, strong and tender, meek, ... good and bad," but he said that to himself. "He is the God of sparkling streams, uncurled ferns, breezy days and perfect calm—the God of mud and slime and crocodiles—" She had thought to run away, her small feet across the dunes, calling Mumma! Mumma!—and now she stayed, undecided. What would this strange old man with bird's nest hair say next?

"Let me show you," he said, "not my painting. I put that aside for the joy of sketching you ... " He handed her a book. She shifted her stick from hand to hand, not quite trusting adult assertions. But one peep. A mermaid on a rock, a mermaid with her face, her hair not in short curls tied up in pink tussore bows; a mermaid whose tresses tumbled to her waist, a mermaid who wore about her neck a band of perfect pearls, shining, and little whelks, strung on plaited kelp; her tail curled round a rock and starfish with devoted doggy eyes genuflecting—"I'm not a mermaid, I can't swim"—"But would you not like to frolic in the waves? Ride on a dolphin's back? Dive down to the deepest ocean where strange creatures have lamps for eyes—" "I would get water up my nose." "Practical child! So you would—unless—" Still unbearably small, but braver now: "Show me what you painted, please." He turned his easel, modestly. "A ship." "But there's no ship out there, none at all!" "I fear not, not today." Not this ship of souls. What a funny old man, thinking there could be a sailing ship at the seaside—all mixed in with bathing-machines and the naughty boys she'd been warned steal beach balls, Putch-n-Judy, donkey rides—

"Then tell me—what do *you* see out there?" She thought there'd be birds. Gulls, she knew, everyone knew, her brother said so, all-knowing. This minute John was being a powerful lord; satrap, liege and lion.

John knew these things.

He drew seagulls above the waves just before they cast themselves, imploring, upon the beach—then withdrew, humbled briefly. “Now you see them.” She looked about. (Where had all the seagulls gone?) “No. Not just now.” “We can imagine them,” he said; there was a little eye that lived in people’s minds ... “And it sees what we want to see ... and, sometimes,” he went on, suddenly faint and cold, “it sees fearful things that are not there” (and I have no shutters for its fearsome glare) then he smiled, a sweet sad smile, that said such an eye was his and his alone. With it, you might see your gulls, you might make sanderlings run to and fro, guillemots, gannets, barn-ackle geese ... and with the ear that’s also in your mind, you could make the birds sing, sing and whistle (pee-ep pee-ep) auk-auk-auk—“Then—can it see, a little rowing boat—with my Papa in it?” “If you like.” She tried to describe the man to sit in it, a bowler hat, whiskers. But he visited her, this absent father; this great black loss Of a father at the oars, gone beyond the shores; too far to shout

She might be the mermaid there, the splash and frolic that sets the sea a-foam; for one moment, swam far out ... “I think I’ll go home now.” He insisted, this old man with paints and easel, in walking with her (perhaps he craved a moment more with innocence); this failure, this man seasoned to hard-turned heads, whispers (not quite nice) whose head heard voices flung about like cabins in a storm; like wings, beating wings ... A mother hurrying to meet them, her guilt and shame tossed out—“Where have you been? Naughty girl! To go like that!” (I aged ten years in a moment, my baby, with a tramp! Dirty creature—did he touch her!) Jane walked unharmed (my baby! my baby!) Alexandra came too, curious, finished; her lovely words strung about a make-believe castle, like bright bunting in their street— Mafeking is relieved! She’d decorated one thousand rooms; ‘damask’, she knew, ‘brocade’, ‘watered silk’, ‘linen-fold’ and ‘architrave’ ... ‘Kashmir shawl’ and ‘antimacassar’, all from her store of precious words; words unsaid in that house called home, where the air was chill with absence and recriminations hid behind the doors; her words, her lovely words, saved her till Jane should be old enough for tea-parties with her precious rosebud set ... Next year, Nanny said, before she was told to pack and go

They looked him up and down; neglect of body, if not soul, smells rank, not seeing the hidden pain that sent him out to paint, every day, ships that were not there; fine gallant vessels, afloat on sunny seas, gilt and ebony painted neatly on carved prows; prows of sweet serenity and everlasting hair; seamed and cracked (if you would look minutely), a body soft and sinuous as thought—a ship with mahogany rails—a ship with cargoes full and redolent ... Of course there was a market for ‘Pretty Bathers on a Beach’. Mothers like this one, not rich, but sharp with secret fears, turned inward,

who would put their children in nice poses and draw them to notice—
(See, Miss Sanders, she might say, see his children—would you hurt them—
would you—would you—) “Was he dear?” they would ask, those erstwhile
friends, those fleeting fluted aunts. She stood and watched Jane admire
the castle, watched this helpless man who said “I am an artist” (were there not
many arts, some black) ... just for a second there, she thought she caught
a memory ... was it the way he turned his head (his profile), looked out to sea,
absently, the everlasting sea, the sea they’d come especially, with trunks, boxes,
buckets, baskets, best hats, to see—When I was young, Jane’s age, a little more,
Papa, Mama, firm as rocks, beacons, bulwarks ... there was a man who spoke,

who walked so jauntily, going to (I never knew)—and they said, *someone* said,
(the words that float past children’s heads) “Imagine!” and “he saw the world”
but “these things happen” ... and “wrecked” ... not quite a sorrow, a hush,
an empty street ... “Tell me,” she said suddenly, “tell us—did you sail—”

THE PICKELHAUBE MOUSE (Part One)

In the debris of a war—canisters: musty, jerrycans: empty, wire: barged,
Trenches: lost—in the mud and flood and abandoned mortars—are helmets.
“See here,” “Listen: ta-rat-ta-rat-a-rat!” “wouldn’t want to sit on *that*,”
“No wonder they look such clowns,” then set down, passed on. Left. Thrown.
As boys throw awkward balls and sounds, “pickelhaube, pickle, pickle, pick-ill,
Can’t see what the pickle is, could make a soup inside!” “ha, ha,” relieved,
Laughed. A moment’s quiet. With the guns fallen dumb. (Or are we deaf?)
But the shells, the shells, still whistle in our heads. Lovely in the night, bursting
Flowers, roman candles, eerie sparkling rain. Then flung wide about us, the scream,
The scream, mantles, muffles, mutes minds, writhing ... then quiet, thank God.

Left it there, between sandbags, a fit abode for the homeless, a welcome in, propped
Up, roomy, a fine country place, is it not, furnished with fresh straw; small creature,
Skepped about with *súgán*, that it may not hurt your little head, the thud and ringing,
Not vermin now, or pest, but passer-by in some disarray. The bridge between Worlds—
things made, steel, iron, leather, passing, but not to build on frail bridges. This world
between lives; before birth, after death, a boy’s life, a man’s life.
If men were mice, wee *luiche*, the sun would shine and sunflowers nod,
We would smell of must and corn; we would scamper soft and weak, born blind and
Pink, with pointed teeth and fraught pink ears ... *my ears ring* ... fine rooms you
Have, ventilated, snug, space to turn and sing and sleep, banquets, biding time—

THE IRISH SOLDIER

I dreamed, or was it real, a fairy woman came to me
Showed me the way up winding barrow stair.
I said, *I think I said*, not that! Your fairy rath I'll see,
But not the dead man's way, the stony lair,
I need more time—but she only shrieked "Beware!"

I followed—what else could I do with a *bean sidhe*—
Afraid I was, of tramping on her goldy gown,
With mucky boots, and so I stepped, obediently,
With care, trying not to scatter trench mud on fairy ground;
She swirled her sea-green hair; I saw her frown—

But then she shrugged and hurried on, the stairway bending,
And I went after, sadly, where she led.
Must I follow the dim dank way her tiny feet were tending,
Should I listen to the silver words she said,
Must I go on up with surly tread—

—To follow, that was my question, or turn back—
I wrestled with the melancholy thought,
Behind me war, before me death; such was my rack—
Is my fate thus written in that fairy court,
Set forever in that ancient stone-bound fort?

And if I cry out loud, not yet, not yet!
A youth am I, barely bearded, unlived life,
Without a woman, not a whore, sweet love unmet,
This girl I'm meant to take as wife,
Image I carry there in Flanders mud and strife ...

Will you, fairy woman, turn back, toward the entrance go,
Allow me to descend, heavy-hearted, those stairs?
Will you light candles in the narrow niches down below,
Escort me back to waiting shells and flares,
Grant me, one wish, "Be gone, nightmares"?

EZEKIEL'S TREE

One last tree, stark, gashed,
burned, black and jagged.
I looked and saw it's heart pain limned,
and knew that I should pray, "Lord, will you

bring back life, life we mortals took away?"
But His back, I think, was turned
from us, from that embattled ridge. Discrowned,
its leaves whined past in the shelled-out fray,
so I cried instead to the wind,
"*We* sinned, not this tree, not birds,
nor any creeping thing."

And He forbore and let it sprout anew—
when peace was signed.

OUT ON THE VERANDAH

In a cane-chair out on the verandah;
With failing eyes; how hot the sun today on the plains.
A wasted life? (Never had a family, dear)
Don't know about brothers, sisters,
No, my dear, there's no letter for you,
Not today.
Trees across the yard, dark sentinels,
And dreams, green against brown;
A little dust today.

I said I'd come. Did she remember seventy years ago?
Oh, I know, you were a girl—
Do you remember him.
(She doesn't remember very much; don't be disappointed)
Oh yes, she says, he came out in 1912.
I remember that!
And went away again, only three years later.
(Shall I ask? Were there promises? Does it matter now?)
She looked back.
Past closed doors, dull windows, dark shutters,
The heavy curtains that dimmed our rooms.

The sun shone the day he set down there at Miowera.
The train came through, we were waiting there.
At the Siding. So curious.
I remember him.
The way he scrambled down,
The way he spoke ...

Ballinlough, he said, softly in his throat, how I loved his voice ...
Loved ... She smiles, a wistful smile, drifts away.

THE PICKELHAUBE MOUSE (Part Two)

Cornfields, barley, wheat; ploughing, planting, threshing, milling, bread;
Green pastures filled with Joseph's kine, fine and fat, and sheep;
Big plodding horses, white-feathered, Conquets and Brabançons ... Swallows
In the barn-eaves, a fertile earth, with groves and hedges, poplar colonnades,
Church towers to ring the angelus, grass bending to the choirs of God.
They came, they passed, trampled down the life of fields, churned with boots,
Spent brick-dust on the air, burned good wood and sacred shapes, ploughed
And sowed with boards and bags, vandal hordes, camp-followers, flies, rats.

In and out, out and in, biscuit crumbs, a last seed-head, a dying beetle,
Lark's eggs crushed, a shrew dead, discarded tins yielding bully beef.
The smells, the smells, a hand abandoned; busy, busy, to and fro, a moment
Of content in swift-passing life; a bridge between life and decay; then sit awhile,
Sit awhile upon my palm, still your restless darting ... *your house is safe*.
It will not decay, not yet, but when you're gone, *when we are gone*, and life roots
Here again, remember me, man without child, without tomorrow, remember me,
Small mouse, as you fill this world—like dragonflies above forgotten craters—
and your generations
without number—

Notes:

Súgán: a plaited straw-rope. *Luiche*: mouse. *Bean sídhe*: fairy woman (banshee)

TOO MUCH RAIN

Clouds riven, late sun catching
Bare branches.
Rain drops, lustre-bright,
Neatly spaced.
People in the space that's self;
People neatly ranged about the fire,
Charged with intimations.
Conversing.
A question tossed around the semi-circle:
What is God's greatest gift?
I never say God, says one, but gift, hmmm ...
This, another says, friends gathered,
While it storms outside.
A sense of sharing, offered,

But fearing the sound of sentiment.
 The senses, a man says.
 Someone rises, throws on another log,
 Pokes up a stream of sparks.
 Beauty, he adds. Fun. Laughter. Hope and
 Kindness. The way they overlap and underlie.
 No, says an older woman.
 The greatest gift is Evil.
 The lightness of this time evaporates,
 Leaves a sense of combat.
 We can do without evil, we've got
 Anger, doubt, frustration,
 Boredom, folly—isn't that enough?
 But—don't you see?
 Good without Evil is meaningless.
 Those things are Evil gathering up
 Its troops, hardening into place,
 Preparing for the ultimate.
 She rises swiftly,
 Goes to the window.
 See the rain along the bough?
 Each drop neat and hung apart.
 Let the sun go in, more rain fall,
 Each drop will gather till its weight
 Makes it fall, tells us what it is.
 Good feeds on little things:
 A moment of kindness,
 A generous thought. Tenderness.
 She pulls the curtains closed.
 Blots out a luminescent dusk.
 Feed things. They grow. Starve them.
 Saintly forbearance, someone nods,
 If there was nothing to forbear—
 The fire spits; wet wood sizzling.
 —no saints, no vision of a better world.
 And in reaching—each step takes us closer ...
 But it's easy here, warm, well-fed, content.
 They look around the room.
 Yes, it's easy, sitting here,
 To talk of Evil. A concept, not a presence.
 But, don't you see, she warms her hands,
 Evil makes us choose, drives us forward,
 Shows us; heightens each sense,
 Each step, makes us choose.
 'Resist not evil'? And what of promises
 Of victory: good over evil, final nirvana;

Repentance? They look above the mantel;
The figure with its lantern.
When Good has won hasn't meaning
Lost its meaning? In your theory.
Grown, certainly, in love and wisdom.
But back where you began. A deeper sense of good,
I grant, when you love your enemies;
A grander concept of living life but still ...
No, she gropes, 'you too can be perfect'
We dismiss too easily, say 'that's not us' ...
But perfect is the moment when we cease
To behave, we cease to need to choose,
We *know* ... we've touched God,
Good and Evil cease to war within us,
Because we simply *are*,
We've become a part of eternal love,
Not struggling with the idea, the hope,
The comfort, the belief ...
She looked into the glowing caverns of the fire,
New rain beat against the roof.
We've come home.
The others who'd been honing arguments
Feel something gather,
Relieve them of a need
To loose those lustrous fattened drops
Upon the rocks below the bough.

THE INTERSECTED THOUGHT

Those old movies
of cars, but a pianist runs hard up
and down the keys. And those cars at an
intersection, filmed from above, look like boxing
biscuit tins, shaving inches ...
Nary a sign "I will turn now!"
"I won't turn yet but keep you guessing!"
Swerving, veering, twirling, careering in black and white.
I love those old movie clips and the piano
thunders on. No crunch.

Afternoon cars echo beyond the walls of houses,
sound a hollow loneliness—
Winds between the leaves of different bending trees
make an orchestra—
The sounds of eternity I think might be
the unheard saying to the solitary 'Know'—

The thought between the shafts
as hooves trot up and down the stony roads,
the steaming flanks and weary heads,
the sound of urging on and slowing down.
Old movies with the carts and drays
passing close in that wider space, the gallop
on the keys and the heightened clip-clop of trading down.
They take up too much space as they slow and turn,
a horse's space, a carriage space, if we could turn about
in half that length; an engine that throbs
between our knees and vibrates under feet
with steam and power and mindless energy—
A thought that took the thinking feeling horse away
and kept him safe for reconditioned cabs and
gleaming runs of costume drama ...

Thought knows no barriers in its endless journey;
lead shields, paah! locked doors, faah!
Mind and mind half a world apart,
can send a message, see a red round ball pictured
with the letter A inscribed in white—
The mystery of such waves not measurable,
waves unstoppable, waves from out and inner space—
I was hit by a thought, a thought struck me ...
I caught an unknown person's thought
in motion and wondered whence it came ...

Will our future comprehend thought,
not as thought that saw a need and sat, head in hand,
with pen and paper or da Vinci doodling
to intrigue a later world; will a thousand generations
from now know thought to be the building block
of matter; not held and propped as if to merely open
doors, but held as image of what should in perfection be,
and in the holding, thought is thought is power
that made the moving image real.

KEPT

Games. Boards. Things in crates. Children's rooms.
And the users grow and fashions change; the games we played were
fast enough, grand enough, fearful enough, fraught enough.

And there they sit in crates, 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 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 demure 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, books of annuals with cracked spines and someone's
gone wild with crayon halfway through.

But every mother hesitates.
They're out of fashion. Yes, of course.
Been overtaken by space, and robots, by laser weapons, and eerie boards.
But in their innocence there too is something of the children who played
before they discovered 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, is contained in these crates and boxes
with dust curls gathering round their corners under beds?
Mine? Or theirs?

LEAVES

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

Who saw in their soft colours, their fading creamy-browns something
Of the sense of fading years; of leaves piled outside, 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 has a sense of things covered, lost, hidden,
In long winding chimneys? Or caught about the mud-brick fire.

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

The very word contains everything from infancy and 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 time 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 doesn’t matter all that much. Leaves have been leaves primeval,
Long before leaves became a medium for the message.

THE SOUNDS of LITTLE GROWING THINGS

It got too hot for spermatozoa.

People warned the human race would give way again
to protozoa.

It didn’t matter what the warnings were.

People rushed on. Regardless.

People pushing people.

People killing people.

People advising people.

People enticing people.

People hurting people.

Some wiser heads warned repeatedly: the crunch is coming.

But others treated it with the contempt they felt
for the croakings of a grinch, a grunch, a grouch,
a modern pessimist.

Growth, the cry rises from a million million throats.
Just taking time out to cough and wipe their streaming eyes.
Progress. Advance. Development. The catch-words drift slowly
through the warming ether. Sluggish now, and turning red and raw.

Their wax wings melted. They fell to earth.
So much death all through the streets and highways.
People dying in high-speed lifts.
People wanting more babies to fuel the growth
and getting less. Men wore 'cooling pouches'
but the family jewels crumbled and were found to be mere paste.

Hopeful couples entered low-temp retreats and walked gently
in the gardens of late evening and sat amid the shade trees
and talked of what might still be,
but wondered if it was fair to children ...

Like other things that have been and gone:
Passenger pigeons.
Frogs.
White rhinos.
Old-fashioned walking.
Old-fashioned sweaters.
Old-fashioned mores.
Whales.
Devils.
A belief in god.
A belief in the future.
A belief in the power of wealth.
A belief in common-sense and too much of a good thing.

There were neutral observers to these many scenes.
Flies on a sweating back.
Ravens too replete to fly.
Ants in dim corners.
Weeds that took their regular dose of herbicide
but showed a daring quality of never-say-die,
Things too small for the naked eye that grew in dying turbid dams.
Blue-green algae in powerful mats.

And some things *grew*.
Council by-laws allowing the resumption of land for lawn cemeteries.
(Passed without demur.)
Though lawn, the dwindling numbers of council employees thought,
was a misnomer. Dust has connotations.
They were often called 'good earth resting places' ...

Lots of charming realty left untenanted. Domain by domain.
A mass movement of people into once ice-clad places, now prime real estate.
Crowding hurt. An argument in a street over the last ice-maker saw twenty dead.
Fights over the coolest unit in a hasty block left blood pooling in the foyer.

Beach umbrellas were much desired but deadly weapons all the same.
A sense of despondency that might have cooled a different ardour.
But death like growth was exponential.

... and then the last car revving,
the last factory whistle,
the final bell in parliament,
the last newspaper,
the pump left pumping unattended,
the monorail suspended in its last timetable,
the failure to repaint and repair, restore and redesign,
the little cracks, the grey powder sifting in the wind,
the vessels bumping up against deserted docks,
the bright flags fading, tattered now,
the tanks that died en route,
the missile bunkers crumbling in,
the windmills turning turning in an empty land ...

a spread of bindweed along the railway lines,
the blowing thistle seeds,
the heartiness of ivy roots in brick,
the grass seeds in rafts upon a growing gutter,
the gorse crackling fiercely in a 'managed forest',
the falling rain on puddle dams and waterholes,
the over-flowing tanks.

... each and every one offered up a tiny sound.
A sound of little things growing.

Water lapped around the streets. Dust blew across the empty plough.
Brand-new homes (never used) looked out on breaking waves.
Seeds caught and grew in a million million pot-holes, once roads.

Evolution, they might have said, if they were au fait with concepts,
is a marvellous thing.
Evolution never gets it wrong.
Evolution has its inner wisdom.
Evolution gives each and every one
a moment in the sun.

Plants grew larger, stronger, in the deepening gloom of sewerage ponds.
Clones and things of strange mixed parentage struggled in the wild.
No lab walls, no mono fields, no precious people to pamper them.
Plants crossed and crossed again with things they never would have known
in a world of managed scenes.
Insects boasted of the nature of new appetites.

Cells changed.

And everywhere the sound of green.

A little whistling whoop. A faint rasping noise. A sighing in the dusk.
A bending in the dawn. A rubbing up against unyielding walls.
The sound of water running where water never ran before.

The music of castles crashing, a drum roll in a storm.
The way rubble harbours life and catches rain in every tiny fleeting dip.
The melting of dust. The rotting of wood. The rusting of rails.
The way plastic turns wet and green.

And all about, songs that were never heard before,
songs that got drowned out by artificial noise.

Little songs of growing arms and tapping feet.
Little songs of space again and room to move.
Little songs of a dying age and a new world dawning.
And no folk anywhere about to hear its friendly rhythm.

GOD BLESS THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF—

God Bless—it sings so often in our ears—
And then the booming comes so pat—America!
Bells and whistles on, prancing palomino ponies,
Marching girls and stepping majorette—all that jazz—God Bless!

You never hear—well, God Bless the Democratic Republic of—
The Hermit or the Hashemite Kingdom of—the Unitary Nation—
The People's Republic of—if you've heard, I haven't, and I wonder why.
Are they blessed already and know full-well that blessing's theirs?

I sometimes think, as I sit and listen to the nightly news,
That sorrow stalks undiminished by the size or wealth of any
Nation state; uncaring which side of the border run those faults,
Or where and when a flood expands, in our map of life and death.

But tragedy's better nursed where GDP is high, rescinded, filed
And pigeon-holed in the richest states, praise God for our SES;
We laud and hand out medals; it may be gallant firemen or bronzed
Life-savers, ambulance and nursing staff on high alert; those who care ...

They're *there*—if we've paid our taxes, found the funds, insisted
Each time the government hefted a budgetary axe; a little trim, men

In sombre suits say over pâté foie ... but don't dare bite down hard
On hard mints in case *their* insurance cover's not quite abreast ...

But my blessing, as I sit, this evening's lazing audience,
But not unmoved, comes, I hope, full-fold. God Bless. I speak my
Heart's fullness ... as burdened women flee lava flows, naked
Children distend, look up to large cameramen; dull-eyed, bereft ...

God bless them one and all, save and heal in hope and love,
Give them lives with laughter filling them and times of plenitude;
Slip between the shadows of despair, deflect the worst that life can bring,
In places noticed only when their blessing's patently unsung. God Bless!

A HISTORY of ARMENIA CRAMMED into EIGHTY-THREE LINES

*Jumbled up in dreams, tags for stripling trees, selected cultivars,
with many-layered meaning; prunus overlaps punica, dulcis, armenica,
regia confused with ficus wild and tame, creeping hermit-habits or unbridled
heights not seen in glossy catalogues (with pruning notes) ...*

Myth walks before the plough.
Shem emerging from the grounded ship, fallow mud, bending to plant
a slip of ark, for love and lust, hope, with sweet infolding flowers,
with wasp-stung lips. 'I thought,' he said, 'and touched the love
that fashioned spring and *qari* fields across the thyme-drenched hills.'
He whittled yokes from soft pale wood, slips matured.
Time slipped, when the snows hemmed in the dark cave mouths,
and wild boar lurked. Talk like campfire smoke, the way it twists and turns,
while the *lahvash* crackles on the flames, makes its nature felt,
imprints hyperbole. Rudimentary fields
nurse a nascent royalty, become tribute ...

Kings cloaked in nourished minor power ... Artaxiad, bow down Tigranes;
Subjects spread like seeking roots, shorter-lived ... tree by spreading tree, *t'uz*,
tree of life, entwining this, ever-present love, regret ... love for the golden queen,
Anahit, her sacrifice of young white heifers heaped on latticed twigs ...

*Spades and picks unloaded and the potted saplings set down with care.
'I'll mark the boundaries to form the cross, the fig'll go this end,
needs a good deep hole, they root down well, can be hard on drains ...'
Testy green of new leaves springs rough against my passing touch ...*

Legend overgrows myth.
The tug between king and saint; Parthian son, illuminator, soul-maker,
evangelist, but the king's diviners won, or seemed to win, with Gregory

captive in his mythic pit; a boar's form for Tiridates; coarse-tusked fury,
before resignation, then, 'I believe,' he said, 'and my people.'
And doused the sacred flame in a hundred Mazdaic shrines.
The brilliant orange fire found instead in pomegranate buds,
fruit of pledge, of youthful love; the troth, the token, enshrined and blessed ...
simple altars, warm hearthfire. But towers flocked and grew above the sacraments;
My only son, the chant, my only-begotten, so have I loved my world
and all who dwell, build and bind.

Carve stone upon stone, mystic branches interlaced with birds and beasts,
humble ploughs, harvest heaven, life and death on each carved cross *khachkar*,
a name, a life, unique, stood out on wild hillsides, stone chipped from stone
to show the tree of love, *nur*, the fiery flower and fruit of young sung love ...

***The fig looks unexpectedly bare when well-heeled-in; its limbs slim and long
and stripped; 'that's the pomegranate in the terracotta pot, it's leafed out
very well, I started it from seed.' We all think back, can't help ourselves ...
fruiting myths, swallowed seeds; the space between, the sap asleep ...***

Worship spans a wider world.
Each village creating, patterning within the space where faith ends or culture begins,
or 'it is us and we are it,' said while threshing grain, making cheese, stirring herbs
and mutton, wild juniper grants the tang, hives hide in hollow trees. But the tillers
mock, '*Asdeus* gave us goodly crops of stone, white, pink, grim and grey, heap
and spread, our *horovels* take on a weary undertone, recumbent fruitfulness prays
that deeper stones will sleep eternally, forgive us, Father, that we forsake our motherland,
take our *garavans*; barter kermiz silk for Cochin pearls, mead for tropic fruits, beasts for
coin; we know the brigand-passes, *tev* with seven heads,
druzhe, *v'oqi* in human form; (it was one of us forged the mighty zamzamah)
but Indian cities tempt us on ... '

Brisk and busy. Quake and storm. The way the fury grew and burst against the walls
and broke the glowing tufa trees, tree of sorrow re-birthing, tree of loss, each petal
bleeding pink into its mother milk, its virgin cloth, spreading, paling, falling,
the bitter tree, *nush*, nullity, like ashes scattered, like driven snow ...

***The sun is on my back as I begin our third hole; it's hard work digging,
ground's harder than we thought, spades-full of crisp tan gravel clattering;
The pit deepens. For one dizzy moment the hole grows dark and fearful,
then I straighten. We debated: should we plant the bitter almond or the sweet ...***

'The fish,' they say, 'in high alkali lakes like Van, grow soft bones,
there where winds whistle through ruins cupped to the moorland sky. No one there.
Ghostly voices may hold the over-arching chant, *khaz*, one final note. An echo.
The streams still race, jade and dim, down the holy mountain, still run defiled, pool
about the fallen stones; an inscription water-washed, once-common names;

a panniered ass carved beneath a lavish tree. It isn't wise to plough too deep.
 The bones of little children lie entangled; sun-parched columns fell, lay desecrated;
 if a voice should speak through char-pocked roofs, invading *zampur*' there's no waiting
 ear, no mind attuned, a heart's pain, a mind's loss ... the kernel
 the ancients chose for disordered wits ... beyond sorrow madness
 sometimes lurks ... but wits for when naught else was saved.

The last tree will overshadow; the walnut, *t'nguyz*, safe and slow, its heartwood sweet;
 each tree to weave our cross like the carpets deftly done in glowing colours;
 The play of light and shade, of sun and earth half-seen; each leaf shifts and shivers,
 an emerald light then a softer tone for rest, now the sound of branch touching branch,
 an ancient lyre with new-born note; now a flash of brilliant sun on
 night-strung webs, a golden thread attached, linking each to each ...

*'It's grown well', 'I'll give it a good soaking', 'it won't be long before it's
 throwing shade' ... odd that the walnut won't allow its children close, prefers
 their antuni, their exile songs, beyond the ring of browning grass, a space where
 hangs suspended all its future; life spirit, as if the mother tree is condemned to wait
 and watch, to hope that's laughter borne back upon the wind ...*

Notes:

Fig: *figus moriceae*, *t'uz*.

Pomegranate: *punica granatum*, *nur*'

Almond: *prunus dulcis*, *nush*.

Walnut: *juglans regia*, *t'nguyz*.

Qari — barley, *lahvash* — a thin flat bread, *Asdeus* — God,
khachkars — gravestones similar to Irish high crosses, *zampur*' — thyme,
khaz — each note holds a syllable in a chanting style, *horovels* — ploughing songs,
antuni — exile songs, *Zamzama* — the huge cannon, mentioned in Kipling's 'Kim',
 its inscription reads 'a gun terrible as a dragon, and huge as a mountain'.
Tev, *v'oqi*, and *druzhe* — evil spirits. *Garavan* — caravan.

THREE VIEWS ON DERELICTION

EYESORES

'Bloody eyesore if you ask me! They should—'
 'Course they should!' And then eyesores diverge;
 was a bustling place once but industry moved on,
 got sent offshore, got changed, got automated, got ...
 and the shape of factories changed. This one rearing
 over heavy ruts and piled scrap, its girders rust-red

against the sky, its roofing collapsed inward, junked.
They should. Course they should. But who should,
whose world depends on change, who should pay
and for what, when industry's gone somewhere else,
somewhere far away ...

Weeds with heavy seedheads thrive in spring with
run-off and ruts as mini dams, and birds nesting in
safe angles where struts meet. Butterflies drift
across the open space and make no judgement
on human failure. And moths at night. A line of ants
going ... where, unmolested, and a watching beetle,
iridescent. A stray cat finding shelter behind
a tank empty of ... empty of ... But none of these
small denizens record the slow demise, the final
shabby agreement, the last men out the gates,
none divined this peace ...

Concerted clamouring concerned neighbours,
fairly close neighbours—'it's dangerous, might
lure kids in there, just little curious eyes, just
wanting to explore or a quick vape out of sight,
and if the company won't clean up—guess it's us,
guess it's money best spent and can be offset by—
if they won't come to the table, a forced sale, it can
be done, don't hide behind council rules, is it so hard
to turn abandonment into something, anything,
even just a decent fence and padlocks on the gates,
course it can be done ...

THE UNWANTED

Slam the gate with tortured logo and look around.
Fine big sign still bright. Potential. Great word to use and use.
Awful sight. Look north and south. Rust and more rust.
But ... potential. Everything has potential. Just ...

From small bustling sheds it grew, it grew,
peaked and failed and died, in grease-filled pain, yet foreswore
death and waited for blame-laying ... oh, public pickiness,
offshore offers, all of that, fads, frights, fickleness ...

Boys sneaking in, that wide expanse waiting, inviting,
for skateboarding, never mind the cracks and wiry weeds,
and signs for absent security firms. So—who cares?

set a fire, throw a rock, those pointless pressed-on dares.

Call upon the eternal, if someone, no one, somewhere
turns a back, when council men come by to check and note,
to watch streaming rain, stained brown at first and then
oily rainbow shades, can't pass it safe and well, those men.

Tempted naturally. Be done with. Sell off. But a ghostly
finger taps on corporate unconcern, that space, take care, lawyers
have hungers. The un-divine, as wind rattles sheets of holy tin,
and cautious sparrows brave raftered webs, chicks ushered in.

A feral cat seeking sanctuary somewhere there,
avoiding grease and toxic smells, stepping daintily where once
a bottle blonde, handed out with dainty nails, men's pay
and smiled and watched them sign their health away.

The sound of uncanny feet trudging through empty sheds,
loading bays, backing forklifts, raucous noise, against machinery
through caverns of unwantedness. Tap and thump, think back,
not how it was but how it will be; the developer's knack ...

Return to a light bright office space, with sites galore,
waiting, the right option, the package deal, the price depressed,
a place re-defined, not for birds and strays, slaters, sliding things,
but the massaged hope, honed, air-brushed, selling, sings.

And then the seeping sadness intervenes, even bored kids
go elsewhere. This portion of once good earth slinks away unsold
and the cheery bonus-driven staff park and stretch and hesitate,
words on their lips falter, die. Let nature intervene. We'll wait ...

MESS

Do we love the land that's suffered,
the land that shows the scars, that lies
gouged and sick. Or do we turn away.

'What a mess!'

Not quite shame, we didn't do ...
but, somehow, indirectly, we did ...
we wanted, we asked, we assumed.

'We? Speak for yourself!'

Yes, we. And my question hangs—
the pits of oily water, the stinking,
toxic mess no one wants, that sees

the baton passed.
Our baton, your baton, you will reach out?
You won't? No, I didn't think—always
the other, out there, carting, making, selling ...
you sought, bought—you—*and me*—

Can we love the land left behind? Find
in a pebble, a rainbow slick, a blade of tiny
green ... can we love or have we left it
beyond loving?
Can we go past the contamination,
the soiled sadness, to ask of it, pardon,
pity, and lay over it rest and waiting time,
hoping that by a little loving we'll heal?

UNDERWORLD

Barley-bitten wind
Makes fine silvery waves to
Stroke its velvet nap.
 A season's passage;
 Soft rustlings, sighings, whispers,
 Secrets shared and gone.
Busy by junctions,
Loud to sharp ears just under
That brisk canopy.
 Brown mice, nesting birds,
 Flitting through that intricate
 Close-mapped urban spread.
A city that's built
In haste, soon sprawling over
Deep dark sown earth.
 The world above, bends,
 Ripening heads dip lower,
 Web-woven banquets.
Rich pickings, sun-bright,
Sap-filled stems turning brittle;
A change presaging ...
 Warnings underfoot,
 Calm dawn and the first quiver;
 A clang of foreboding.
The aftermath, crushed,
Bruised, in a straw-tossed whirlwind
Across a ruined map.

THE SIREN SONG of LITTLE COUNTRY CREEKS

She always said: Put on your boots.
Not—take care, don't forget the time,
Don't go too far—
Just boots. She knew—the compulsion.
When it rains, to follow, to pursue, unheeding,
The beginnings of gullies, long dry, years-long,
Becoming trickles, now streams, now rushing ...

The way they turn jumbled stone into waterfalls,
An incline to a gorge, then race away bending
Dry white grass so it seems to float on the rising tide,
Seed heads, streaming; swirling, making ripples ...
The way banks cave and fall where cows have
Walked indian file. Small tributaries joining in,
Clods melting away, great black cracks across the paddocks
Expanding, filling, a secret underworld glued now and gone.

The landscape changed within an hour of that first roll of thunder;
A landscape we thought we knew; and now we must re-acquaint—
These whirlpools, those wild daisies uprooted and forming dams
To hold water beetles and softened twigs; and with a shaft
Of sun again there's dragonflies. Branches collect along
The fence lines, catch in barbed-wire, gather in nameless clots.

And the sound of boots sucking, squelching, sighing, drowning,
And squeals: Did you see that! Hey! Look at this! Wow, see
The way it bubbles in the bends! And old ironbark roots
Are left bare by the water's swirl. Little creeks, child-size creeks.
Places where the magic lingers; the metamorphosis of world
Into world ... and back again. A few pools lingering in gullies.
Worth another traipse or not? ... *Put on your boots.*

EPITAPH FOR A TIPSTER

What to put on a man's headstone in these pared-back days,
What to engrave that says all that needs to be said,
What to carve that respects his life, his habits, his ways,
What is true to him as a man, does justice to the life he led?

He wasn't a church-goer so he wouldn't expect a scripture verse,
He was always a man who argued firmly against fuss,
So how should we express our love now he's in that dark hearse,
This husband and father now passed and gone, to ashes, to dust ...

But he was a gambler lifelong from the hairs of his head,
All the way right down to his fingers and toes;
He'd like to be remembered in such a way, he'd like it said:
His tips did us proud, his thought and care in his bets still shows

In those little extras round our home; the things he did for us all;
We want to remember him for his love and his knowledge
But would he fancy the clichés that spring to mind and fill each racecall:
'past the post' or 'daylight second' or 'he's driving a wedge—'

'flying in the straight', 'out of the ruck', or 'he's sprouted wings',
'coming from the clouds'—they would've rolled off his tongue—
If we'd thought to ask what his favourite was, which phrase for him sings,
He would only have laughed and said: my binoculars—I've hung

'em up now, run my last race, kept my appointment with life's final
Judge, made my way into the winner's circle, gone for a spell,
Put out to grass—but it's been a good life, you've risked your change time
And again on my pick, cheered me on and wished me well,

So it no longer needs words; I've ringed them, rated each with a critical eye,
Year in, year out, weighed them and dreamed them, tried to discern ...
And now I've set them aside and gone down to that ultimate gate, ready
To jump in my farewell race ... leaving you, who made life good, wide
on the turn.

NOMENCLATURE

Humboldt Bay. Did Humboldt really come this way, divert, say,
a thousand ships might lie at anchor here. (In German, as he gazed.)

Fak Fak, take care in how you say it, think, ack ack, and guns,
guns, incomers like guns, say they beat spears, arrows, native cunning.

A friend gave me a map, titled Irian Jaya (was Irian Barat then renamed,
makes for confusion), a thoughtful gift, but said with a laconic tap,

might come in handy. I went over it. Dutch names, Java names, but hardly,
tidak, niets, nothing, almost, going beyond what truly belonged; Hollandia

became Sukarnopura became Jayapura, what's next, but what about forty,
fifty thousand years of what came before. My finger walks and asks:

Lake Sentani, suggests Italian lakes but azure turned reddish-brown and grabbed
the word 'polluted'. Biak, Mokmer, chambered ghosts, and the incomers never knew—

an Allied swarm, a Battle of the Caves! And Colonel Kuzume knelt, pulled a knife,
disemboweled himself. Incoming generals don't surrender, run rife, wax fat.

That's life, or is it? Noemfoor became Numfoor and lost a sense of rhythm,
lost its place in the stirring claim 'I will return', the leapfrog north, tossed aside

by incomers who don't want, don't know its past. Sukarno, Suharto, dipped a head,
bent a knee, cast their lot with the Rising Sun. But ghosts aren't free to say 'we forgot'.

Timika. I knew a Tamika, pretty girl, long ago, but what's that got to do
with a great grim grey hole, to swallow the grandest peak, a people's sacred past,

broader than states, bigger than nations, with its slimy slipping waste, sliding
south, seen from space, till it weaves its way through tropic seas to share

one part per million, ten, a million, though best ignored, that vested percentile;
ignorance is bliss, risk is as risk does, (and the sea up there has not invited

the test-tube brigade). I wouldn't buy a prawn, nor want fish to try and spawn,
along that coast. (Most customers don't ask.) A world now endowed with

secrets, dirty big secrets first to wash the Casuarina coast then set sail
for Frederik Hendrik newly baptised Yos Sudarso from a dubious font;

then touch on Merauke, once a jungle-scented place, half asleep,
neat and nice and Dutchy, till war came, with radars, and rollers, and

flattened land, canteens and bedrolls and patrols, takeoffs and landings.
Now with black dots everywhere, transmigrasi plots, to beat back the echo

of world war; incomers don't know, don't care, for this is now where they
can gain granted land, push back any talk of people there before who loved

trees. Trees! (We don't want trees. Look what we've done to Borneo;
just neat palms in neater rows and burn the rest; now we'll burn you up too.)

Carstensz, mountains, high and higher, surely beyond human wants, but
we'll change to Peak Jaya, can't have things to remember queens, be gone

monarchs, tribal chiefs, snow, and it's a chore, turning Vogelkop to Doberai;
give us time and you won't know the place, won't know who lived here, won't bore,

won't cry tears for those who went before, we sent, yes, we made sure ...
An awkward little poem to nail an awkward little tale, a tale so frail,

the world has not noticed it hangs by a thread, its dead unmentioned,
forgive us that we all went by on the other side; a name or two, said aloud,

(but what's in a name?) and didn't notice how close its pain, maimed, framed,
its fears unheeded, till its smoke grows too thick, too black, and chokes back tears.

SEENFROMATRAIN

Straight through! A whistle. A place that offers no reason to stop.
Just a dusty straggle, houses, sheds, tin, brick, board ...
the sun on rusting roofs ...
Children running on the road. Ragged children.
The parallel road, a track, twin ruts.
Waving children. Ragged children.
Then our speed increases—

The homes the low hill the dull dry brown earth.
The terrible nothingness of it all.
A place seen ... and forgotten again.
A nothing place.
'I'm so glad I don't live ...' My eyes turn to smeared
windows. So glad. Thank God.

And the children's little legs, bare, brown,
running, reaching, being left behind, with our speed,
slicing through their lives ... until the next train ...
And then I doze.

The grass, the earth, the spinning world,
that contains all ephemera, all experience, going nowhere
but daily sees ... a train ...

The miracle of the train which says: other people, other lives.

I dream I live—there. I dream my life is circumscribed.
I feel this awful aching in my breast that might be dust
and closed windows rattling and might be the fear of being nothing
in other lives ...

THE LEVEL CROSSING

The family at the siding. Mum, Dad, little Gwen. And the men working there, loading wheat. Bags in those days and Gwennie could never decide whether the bags were finished off with lambs' ears, or cats'; with donkey ears or rats' ... that swift way the men sewed each bag as it filled, their big bag needles, the swift twirl to make the ears, the way they tossed each bag up and over the shoulder, the way they made them mountains, the way they loaded them at the siding when harvest was done.

Not much of a life for a child it might be said but Gwennie loved every bit; of some children it can be said, regardless of the day they were born, they are children of the Sabbath day, bonnie and blithe, good and gay; to them have been given more than genes and traits; a finger has touched them and set them apart and they can't but help find the world a kindly place; and in their turn they change the lives around them with their smiles, the way they look, the joy they find in little things, the times their little hearts are broken by a dying flower along the drying gravel verge.

Words can't quite catch something that defies the way a personality is fenced around and explained; the way some natures press home a potential that's more than good and touches to the heart of something more; a child who laughs a lot but never treats the little moments that ask something more as mere fun; a child of questions; a child who knows when to sit in silence and dream of other worlds. And this child went off to school down long bare country roads and found a gift of friendship to add to the store of childish wisdom already put aside in six happy years.

This child came home those long and tiring roads and looked out with unabated joy to see her father out to shut the crossing gates and the train far in the distance; all tiredness dropped. The train! The train! The waves, the smiles of men who knew little Gwennie was the shining starry light on a long bare track across the miraged plains; they would not have accelerated but invariably their spirits lifted. Some children are granted that special gift. But the house itself changed in those months; another baby on the way; Not as simple to explain as a coming train.

She loved her little brother when he was a thing in a cot, a thing chuckling on the rug and clenching tiny fists and jumbling up a settled life; she found room for new questions, about babies, about baby boys, about growing curls and teeth and funny little sounds ... and she didn't understand why her mother never shared her joy. Her father said the proper things to everyone who asked. Her father frowned when he sat at home at night. Her father's life went on but her mother's life was dead and dark and no one in the crowded cottage by the country siding understood what a baby brother meant ... or why his mother

rarely slept and grew afraid of dreams.

*

A baby is a baby. Gwennie could not wait to tell the world about a baby's funny little habits. But a mother's a mother and sometimes something else; fierce, angry, withdrawn, blank-eyed, dangerous ... sometimes a mother isn't what's best for baby. There in that home beside the siding the world turned up-side-down and little Gwen sometimes sat and puzzled over what it meant. But she did as her father asked: washed more, cared more, cooked more, fed the chooks more. Wiped the dull neglected baby boy as wisely as a mother many times a mother. Spoke softly when her mother held her head; laughed and sang when the day seemed nearly normal; but her little arms and legs grew tired; her spirit faded.

No one took the time to notice. Teachers in a little country school; it's a hard life for country children, farm work, house work, homework, keeping cool-and-clean work in the long drought times; big families, sibling rivalries, other children with their worries and their tirednesses and their never-spoken-of childish fears, of snakes, of poverty, or giant cracks in the wide black earth, of big bullies and whining little brothers, of tired fathers and ponies that won't be caught; of mouse plagues and dive-bombing nesting birds. A father who didn't know what to do in his simple routine of trains and level crossing gates; of fierce sun and fettling gangs wanting a bite between the hours of work, of loading wheat from long open sheds and new talk of augers and silos; of a way to change the way the trains would cart.

Worry over work and pay, worry over mother and child, worry, worry, worry. And no one noticed Gwennie eating less and sleeping like a log, when her aching limbs at last allowed her sleep. No one noticed her growing sharp and pale and suddenly bursting out with a sudden push and slap. The doctor said to the father ... the mother rarely spoke ... 'another bub, that'll do the trick, I've seen it fix a woman in that state, shifts her away from one to the next; you try it.' And he did. That fading country house, with the creaking heated roof and little rooms and ringer over washing tubs, that place with peeling paint and high back steps down to the siding platform, that place with washing lines strung out with nappies every day no longer heard a child.

The new baby could not be fitted in to the mind of a woman who's lost her hold on the everyday, who's ceased to understand what maternity can be and retreats into the dark with blinds drawn and sweat and milk and dirt around her. But 'there's Gwennie,' the father said, 'Gwennie's old for her years, and understands the kiddies better than many a mum I've seen.' The men loading bags at the siding, the driver, the guard, they all were sorry they rarely saw their cheerful 'little mate' between tasks and heaving. 'Gwennie's busy,' her Dad said, 'it's not easy now.' Nobody thought to ask more and Gwennie grew old and cantankerous and hurt her little brother in a sudden spasm that was

meant to remind him she couldn't meet his needs while the new baby screamed in its cot. And the little boy fell backwards down the stairs.

*

To come back in forty years; to see the house boarded up, the siding closed; to say 'this was home' and wasn't. Because the world stepped in and took us away. My little sister and I, when my head was healed again, and farmed us out to distant relatives and our father never spoke of Gwennie again and our mother never spoke—and lived, if lived's the word I want, in care till she died as forgotten as she'd lived; and we grew up apart and we only knew life had been hard on us. Now, to walk up and down, the wild turnip flowering bright along the sagging fence behind the empty sheds, to see the old wash house with its copper and its tubs, the thrusting thistles where wheat once made brown baggy mountains ... and feel the place again ...

I had a sister and the world loved her in her childhood years and she loved it and all was well; and then she pushed me down the stairs and saw the blood of a toddler lying deathly still and pale; and then she knew the sun was covered over and there'd never be another day when life was carefree, careless. God, she thought, had turned away. The little cramped house with the black stove still there, the warped cupboards, the rank and musty smell ... and dead beyond recall some gum blossom in an old jam jar. All around me. Gwennie who was asked too much; my forgotten sister who grew old before her time, who was mother and sister and nurse and help and cook and washerwoman when she was only seven. And no one noticed.

The level crossing gates are gone. The highway sweeps on by. The line's been superseded. But I can stand where the gates once were and picture it. The way the train was coming. The way Gwennie closed the gates and stood and the engine driver thought 'there's Gwennie, waiting to wave to me' and he was slowing, one arm resting on his cabin frame, the siding just beyond. Waiting. And then it happened before he knew what was what. The little girl leaping out. Hit. Crushed. The screech of brakes. I'm not sure I want to think about it even now. And they called it 'Accidental Death'. They thought ... they said, 'she must've thought the other gate wasn't properly closed and ran—'

The alternative. That little family at the siding. Mother, father, little brother, little sister, and no one prepared to say 'Gwennie wanted death', 'Gwennie thought she'd killed her little brother and went out and killed herself' ... no one wanted to look that extra horror in the face ... so they all dissembled. I know this. I walk up and down. Such a neglected place. Its ghost too tired to laugh. The engine driver told me all he remembered and his hands shook still from the emotion in it all. Decades later. The westerly is getting stronger. Dust blows along the platform and the falling iron creaks to and fro. Tap. Bang. The late sun casting shadows from what is left of lives lived here. There must be words to enclose it all,

but I can't find them. Little Gwennie. My little mother.
I wish I could have
heard you
laugh

A DAY at the INTERNATIONAL PALM RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The bus leans, dips, shakes, shudders, far from new; more hills.
Twenty of us on tour. We'd seen the re-built capital. Been shown
Around, memorials, monuments, exhibitions and places of significance.
We'd enjoyed the evening breeze off the shallow bay.

Our histories were different, but converging, and we spoke the same
Language, the words and acronyms which had come to spell
Liberation and solemn newness. The faces, we knew of course,
From the long struggle, could name many martyrs.

Here, winding south, huts rebuilt, lives cobbled together again.
And peace as the morning mist rises over children off to school,
And goats and chickens, a lone buffalo; smiling, we wave,
Say something, in different mingling tongues; a thanks.

The wide-open gate ushers us in, the bus labouring and brakes weak.
Not a Greyhound, an American says. And "I remember," someone
Remarks (sighing), "that wild roses grew along these mountain
Roads when I was last here. Thirty years ago. Pink roses."

It's unimpressive at first; sheds and thatched huts and rows and rows
Of small green fronds; labels, signs, a man digging with a heavy hoe.
The sun is hotter. "I suppose I'd know a coconut," a woman laughs.
"Areca nuts", "lontar", "fan-palms", "cabbage and pony palms" ...

Solidarity in ignorance. "Dates? They'd have dates—ivory nut?"
"Oil palms?" We share around. "Toddy. Tuak." Isn't that the blessed sap?
We know more of UN resolutions, excuses, tribunals. We fail on palms.
But there's a woman waiting; welcome, she says in three languages.

A chance to drink tart juice from sliced nuts, and eat the shredded
Flesh. We assemble neatly, put on hats, take out cameras, clipboards.
(There'll be groups at home waiting to hear.) We follow her.
The ground is rough and dry, the hills fading, faint haze forming.

"The people," our guide says, "when I was young, each had a special
Tree. When a baby was born, a tree was planted near the village, so
People knew their ages, not Christian births in books, they counted out
The bole-rings." Someone whispers, "How good her English is."

“What useful things!” We are convinced by halfway through.
All the world needs is palms. Food or drink, shelter, building sheets,
Roofs, medicines, mats, cooking oil, buttons. “Who would’ve thought?”
We want them to hasten upwards, motley lot we are, brave new forests.

And here, where the valleys clutch the last green flush and dip away to
Oil-rich seas, there are named trees, some well grown, some mere babes,
Thousands, hundreds of thousands, marching down. (We didn’t count.)
Not new hybrids. “A palm,” says our guide, “for each unknown grave.”

“Bless them,” says an Irishman behind me. “May they know no gale.”
A man about to photograph re-slings his camera. “But sun and rain,
Fertile earth.” Give bread of life, and fermented juice. In memoriam.
And fronds laid in the path of gentle passing ghosts. Our hosts.

PROMISE

Promise Me You Will—

Bring me back a rose, a red red rose,
Bring back a rose, if not for me then for the past we shared;
Bring me back a single rose, crush it in your luggage,
Press it down between the pages of your diary,
Stain the words that euphemised your freedom;
Bring me just one bud, for when we see each other;
Bring a rose, the perfumed crimson rose called happiness,
A rose, a rose, soft in relief, that holds the past in curling sepals,
A rose that still is perfect youth christened with
The dewdrops of a springtime dawn;
And if the plucking comes with danger,
Put aside my plea, go your way unhindered by my words;
And when you’ve gone to the limits of the world and turn back—
When you ask yourself ‘now, what did I promise?’—

*Come on Home, and if you forgot my Rose—
You are perfect Recompense.*

THE END

Notes: Poems came from booklets, *Seashores* (1999; and also in *The Chalk Man* at jlherrera.com), *The Pickelhaube Mouse* (2001) and *Old Car Bodies* (2003). Poems from *Clutter* and *Space* are on the blog-site. 'The Sea Eagle's Feather' and 'Fritillary' were published in *The Famous Reporter* and read on ABC Radio's 'Drive Time', also in FAWN anthologies, along with 'Three Views on Dereliction' and 'The Siren Song of Little Country Creeks'. 'Ezekiel's Tree' was published in *The Australian Friend* and 'Seen From a Train' in the Q'ld FAW newsletter.