

Poems from a
High Walled Garden

Don Ledingham

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ISBN: 978-1494449278

For Gill

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Don Ledingham won the 1993 and 1994 BP/Leopard Magazine national poetry prizes with 'Johnnie Wilson's Day' and 'The Smith' respectively.

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Poems in a high walled garden

She sips her lemon tea
Within a high walled garden,
Beneath a perfect square of sky
Broken only by erratic clouds, and sliding gulls,
While her roses,
Sacrifice themselves upon the walls,
Reaching up towards their freedom
Until they lose their grip,,
Their blood-red bodies falling back,
Spread-eagled on the wire,
As shadows steal,
Across the flagstones,
Shrinking, squeezing,
Pressing out the flowers from her space,
And throughout,
Despite the darkness carving out the light,
She makes the most of every hue,
Of every scent, of every sense,
As single lines are drawn up,
From deep within a hidden well,
And linked together in endless chains,
To lift her far beyond this place,
She raises sonnets from a page,
Holding them gently in her hands,
Before releasing them,
To fly and soar beyond her sight,
These pictures grow and fill the void,
Her garden never dies,
Never falls to winter,
The high walled garden becomes her paradise,
A refuge, where her four score years and four
Give way to the reality of her mind,
Where roams a woman,
In the height of summer.

Inspiration

Where lifetime's hopes and dreams like tinder lie,
Our thoughts constrained between two narrow lines,
Ambition pressed beneath a weighted sky,
We find our fragile confidence declines,

Yet find that moment where daylight breaks,
That single spark with which to conjure light,
Where darkness flees and weary self awakes,
Our spirits lift, and mind and soul unite,

For inspiration has at its heart a fact,
That where our truthful words and deeds connect
Where we, renewed, do promise and then act,
We free ourselves to live without regret:

So come, stir your embers, ignite our fire,
And with a single honest spark, inspire.

Trust

Trust is like an echo
It returns to whence it came
And if you dare not speak it
You will never hear its name

A map is not the territory

I have a map
Tucked into the back of my mind
Which tells me where I am,
Placing me securely
In my own land,
Allowing me to fly
High above
The undulating ground,
Sweep over mountains,
Leap raging rivers,
Hover over forests
And jump the highest cliffs,
But this map
Is not your map,
For we each carry our own,
Aligned to different poles,
Our choice of scale
Changing everything,
Yet walk with others
Come into contact
With the earth,
Smell the woodland pine,
The damp morning air
By a highland loch,
Walk barefoot together
On flat silvered beaches,
Listen to the curlew's
Plaintive cry,
And come to understand
That we are fellow travellers,
With no certainty
Of our place,
Or where we go,
So think only this,
There are more maps,
Of our country,
Than the one we carry
Tucked into the back
Of our minds.

Beautiful mistakes

We made a mistake
A beautiful mistake
A simple inadvertence
Which confirmed
Our humanity
Yet what a liberation
To revel in our imperfection
Let us shout it out aloud
“We tried and failed”
But together we learned
And with such confidence
We renew our vows
To change our world
With smiles upon our faces
And our hearts
Upon our sleeves

A marching band, walking

I saw a Marching band, walking
Walking across St Andrew's Square
Heads bowed into the North Sea wind
Instruments sheathed and protected
Drums dragged behind on reluctant wheels
Save for the Sousaphone
Which wrapped its vibrant coils around
A fat man with no hiding place.
Up front the conductor led the way
His umbrella holding a high note
The bedraggled ensemble breaking into step
Following his direction - if not his enthusiasm.
Yet strip off the dull jackets
Release the brass and drums
Let them join in lines of hope
Break out the uniforms
Keep time,
Share their music
Let the trumpets call

But meantime,
Just let them safely cross the road
Without losing the fat man
And his Sousaphone.

Black tie

Amongst the silks and paisley patterns
The dicky bows and shepherd's tartans
The checks and asymmetric lines
The emblems of forgotten times.
There lurks a dark oppressive presence.

It beat me to the finish of this poem.

Returned to the back of the wardrobe
I catch the occasional glimpse in the morning
And hope it bides its time.

Evening restoration

Buttressed walls support a vaulted sky
Frescoed with the Milky Way
Orion, Jupiter and Mars.
As lace-draped moon
Unfolds its velvet mantle
Embracing shadows
With its spectred kiss.

Beneath gigantic gables
The nave falls silent
Blinded by the dark
And passing years
Where time is measured by the lifetimes
Of an acorn planted
By fathers for their sons.

Yet freed from careless feet
It comes once more to life
As tumbled walls rebuild

And altars rise
From plunder and neglect.
Restored to three dimensions
By a star specked night.

Monica

You celebrated your 40th birthday last week
So I heard
At home with your mother
She brings you breakfast in bed
And sets your clothes out on a chair
Jerked out of the groove at 19
By a corner that came too soon.

The bus collects you every morning
And you wave goodbye as you step aboard
Wiping mist from the glass
But seeing only with your eyes
Your journey stopped long ago
Dreams and ambitions
Replaced by three metal plates.

Leaderfoot viaduct

I watched her through December trees
Her straight lines and perfect curves
Entwined with nature's random pattern
Lifting her skirt well clear
She dipped her toes
In the cool black water
Her amber stones softened in the sun
Melting into their reflection
Leaving her pathway in the sky
To wither on the vine.

Beached

Rising up from cinnamon sand
The keel slips
From cinnabar
To flush vermillion
Then ochre, oxide red and umber
Its alabaster waterline
Sets off the cobalt glaze
The garter-blue and sapphire
Rising into
Amethyst, lavender and lilac
A livery ignited
By a phosphorous sun

Forth Rail Bridge

His eye travelled as the crow flies
Stretching from one shore to the next
Fusing the gap within his mind
Short-circuiting the distances
By reaching out his arms
And gifting us the time.
Insatiable, we stuff our pockets
Hoardings it, storing it
Shaping it, shaving it
Squeezing three days into one
Stockpiling the seconds
Higher and higher.
And yet it always wins
By yielding us no interest
And never being cashed.

Elegy for a farmer

The two diggers wait patiently,
Sharing a smoke between their labours,
Grateful for an hours rest,
While the sods lie neatly stacked,
And a green cloth covers their toil.
Friends, file dutifully into the Church,
Or stand outside,
Staring at their thoughts.
Aware of their own mortality,
They bow their heads,
Or clasp a heavy hand behind their backs.
The speakers crackle into silence,
Before the minister's words carry across the valley,
Coming to rest on the distant hillface.
"Our first hymn" hangs in the air.
Breaking into life only at the familiar refrain.
The minister avoids the expected,
And gives us a sermon for the man.
No filling in the gaps here!
"A man with more friends than acquaintances"
He might have left it at that.
Memories are triggered in four hundred heads,
As the man is resurrected by our thoughts.
Who said there's not an after life?
The image breaks as another hymn is sacrificed,
While the minister sings only the notes he can reach.
I watch you carried from the Church.
A last exposure to soft summer air.
The bearers' heels leave their imprint on the grass,
As your life left its on ours,
Trapped now in the past.
Laid down on boards above your slot,
The last rituals are played out.
Lowered hand over hand,
You come to rest,
At peace in your beloved ground.

Integrity

Such a fragile thread
In which to place
Our lifetime's trust,
A tenuous cord, which can,
Without attention,
Fray and wear
Through our neglect,
And indiscretions,
Yet see it break,
Hear its elemental snap,
For us to fall to earth,
That no witness
Need observe,
For public laws and rules,
Are weak compared
To our reproach,
Which holds us upright
In our ascent,
And upon which,
Too late to notice,
Only we,
Rely.

Homecoming

Whilst seven slept in ragged splendour
I stepped beyond the door
To steal the skylarked dawn
And tread the world underfoot,
But turning back
I found them gone,
Surrendered to the years,
Where wormed beams

Had crashed the sky
Upon the fetid floor.
A rusted nail,
Above the frozen range,
Alone within the empty shell,
Gave life to distant times.
And then I heard them call
Within the chimney breast,
“Who’s there?”
And stepped beyond the door
A second time,
To see them sit and stare
In wide-eyed solemn wisdom,
Before they disappeared
With gentle wings.

The letter carver

Edges, serif and sans serif,
The small flourishes that emanate
From the tails of letters
Betray his love of detail,
Working the stone,
Working his memory,
A word is not a word,
It is a lifetime,
An expression of the person,
The careful spacing,
The precise formality,
Does it spill into his life,
Or vice versa?
Where,
Perhaps,
He lies,

On the edge
Of being uncomfortably
Precise.

Half-ploughed field

Have you ever seen
A half-ploughed field,
One half open,
The other half sealed,
One half with its guts exposed,
The other silent,
Secret,
Closed.

Kitchen's clock

For Gill's fortieth
I bought us an old wall clock.
Keeps perfect time
Yet has one erratic chime.
At four strikes nine
At ten rings seven.
Then, Six, Three, One,
Five, Four, Eleven.
Just as a I think I've cracked the code
It switches to another mode.
A woman's clock
After all

Lambing 2013

Disgorged to mother's nithered earth
His comfort bursts and splits
The oozing form ripped by
Wind's abrasive edge
As soil reaches up to claim its own

Tempting him to sleep, to yield
To take the comfort of the corpse
As frenzied nails fix him to the coffin ground.
And just as howling peace descends
He rudely flies and swings across
The field, cheated from his end
By roughened, caring, careless hands,
Which dress him in a perished skin
And set him on a stamping mother
To live again in Easter's Resurrection

Friendly fire

When setting out
To praise,
To celebrate,
Or glorify,
Take heed, that
From the moment
Words depart your lips,
That they will detonate
On friendly ground,
Unseen, and
Unintentioned,
Leaving casualties
In their wake.

DL + GL 82-07

You found our letters
Cut deep, bottomless,
Felt them smooth against the rough bark,
Traced your finger over our years
Closed your eyes and followed the lines.
Imagining these people, us people
Who etched our mark here, momentarily,
Strangers, intruding upon your space
Reaching forwards to ask our question
Our uncomfortable truth

Whose lovers vow, proclaimed here
In boastful anonymity
Carves itself upon your mind.

Inheritance

He clings to your back
Working his thin fingers deep under your skin
Waiting 'round every corner
Ready to shame you with you're luck.
It might have been him.

Visits to the hospital.
Adult conversations cut off.
Mid-sentence.
“Be quiet girl. He needs his sleep”.
No-one heard your screams.

He just faded away
But only in life.
In death he lived on even stronger
Never mentioned.
His place reserved.

You would show them
Just see if you didn't.
Doing the work of two men
They never saw you.
Too busy with their loss.

And now, trapped by the habits
Of a lifetime.
Proving, proving, proving.
We look on in wonder.
And they loved you all the time.

She only saw the light

She lived in a contented world
Always seeing the best,
Drawing people to her smile,
To her innocence,
But time took its toll,
The crocodile's ticking clock
Eventually catches us all,
Yet laughter, love and happiness
Drowned out the ticks,
For a woman,
Who only ever,
Saw the light.

Don't scare the pigeons

With echoes of
Kings Cross,
Ladybank,
And Cardenden
Hanging in the air,
Two boys make statues
At a pigeon,
Which stands its ground
Staring back, tilting its head,
They throw another shape,
It tilts again,
Before it turns,
And claps itself
Into the travellers' vaulted space,
A moment of childhood,

Departing, without even an
Announcement.

The doctor

Not many swear an oath and keep their word
Yet you held it through a lifetime
And stretched it to a way of life.

Funeral stockings

She closed the door
On her grieving friend,
But only for an instant,
Before returning,
With a pair
Of threadbare stockings,
Removed without
A second thought,
To save a widow's shame,
And here we are,
Eighty years on,
Recalling a selfless act,
Whilst the ladies
Of the town,
Who bought their silks,
Have long departed,
In the grasping anonymity,
That comes to those,
Who never gave
Their last.

Feeding the ducks

The North Atlantic swallowed them whole
Covering their tracks with freezing fog
Whilst deep beneath the waterline he prayed
Shoveling coal to push them home.

They felt the presence of the wolves
And huddled close as if for warmth
Whilst terrorred eyes scanned the careless sea
And still he shoveled his inferno.

They saw the wake too late
And screamed their pointless warning.
It broke in two,
21,000 tonnes and 600 men.

And every Sunday afternoon
He comes here to feed the ducks
And shovel memories
To the back of his mind

Candour

Candour slides both ways,
Drifting between the cruelty
And purity of Truth,
The weapon of choice,
For those who only
See through selfish eyes,
Or a mirror

On one's life
Which never lies
And keeps us true
To whom we wish to be.

Crow trap

Abandoned to its savage task
The fleshless carcass,
A skeleton of death,
Awaits in shamed seclusion,
Its tortured beams
Treat gravity and symmetry
As twin imposters
And build false shelter
Deep within the moor,
Drawing eccentric wing-beats
To its vortex
With stench of rotting flesh
And envy at another's fortune,
An ironic perch,
Bathed in fleeting sunshine,
Gives little hint
Of terrors held within,
As black whirlwinds
Thrash against the wire
In frenzied replay,
Tempted by the free horizon
And a towering sky,
Until released by man
Who throws its neck
Without a thought
And drops it to the ground.
Free at last.

I know she saw him too

An apologetic knock on our front door
Revealed the lady – shorn of her man
Left alone with a broken wheel
So we called the garage but no one came

I drove her back to the farm
Empty now save house and barn
But empty all the same
Bereft of manhood

I think I saw him 'round a corner
Just a glimpse, but he was too quick for me
I know she saw him too
"Perhaps they're in Jimmy's shed"

"I've no been in there since Jimmy.... "
She faded away
She left me to myself
Waiting between the doorjamb

The lights flickered into dullness
And there – squatting in the middle of the floor
Sat his vibrant red tractor
Almost warm to the touch

His tools lay on the bench
Just where he'd left them
Ready for his return any day now
I was intruding on private ground

This was not my space, and

Closing the door behind me I thought
I heard him call her name,
I know she heard it too

Don't grow up - it's a trap!

Scrawled across a wall
On Union Street, Aberdeen
He had scribed
“Don’t grow up - it’s a trap”.
He was wrong,
There’s nothing the matter
With growing up,
What he must avoid
Is ‘closing down’.
Yet see the boy,
Forty years from now
‘Grown up’,
And trapped,
His mind
Full of certainties,
His cynic’s heart,
Choked with his bile
And resentment.
So I say to him,
Welcome the years,
Open your soul,
Cherish your breath,
And one day,
Find yourself,
Scrawling upon a wall,
“I grew up – it’s a joy!”

Grandfather's clock

Tick.....tock.....
Tick.....tock.....
Verses.....echo.....
Up.....stairs.....
Searchingout
Every.....room.....
Found.....me.....
Feigning.....sleep.....
And wormed.....into.....
My.....brain.....
The tock.....boomed.....
From its cavernous.....chest.....
And the tick.....followed.....
At its.....leisure.....
Seconds.....stretched.....
In measured.....silence.....
As my feet.....slapped.....
On the cold.....floor.....
I stood.....above.....
The moonlit.....lobby.....
Your form.....Pressed.....
Against.....the wall.....
I stepped.....warilyDown.....the steps.....
And paused.....again.....
To gather.....strength.....
Your heartbeat.....stopped.....
As Iwent by.....
As chains.....and springs
And cogs.....released.....
The hour.....Struck.....

And before.....it finished
Iwas back.....
Between.....the sheets.....
Tick.....tock
Tick.....tock.....

Assault on Smailholm Tower

Cold shadows grow their silhouette
Against a waking sky
As monochrome surrenders to the dawn
And sandstone embers flicker into life
Flat sunbeams scream across the ground
To sacrifice themselves
Against the stubborn walls
Their orange fire exploding on the eye
Leaving imprints on the mind
Long after walls have turned back to stone
And daylight's cutting edge departs.

Milestones

Your joy is difficult to comprehend
For those of us who measure ambition
Through university degrees,
Employment, marriage, homes,
The trappings of a future life,
Everything facing forwards,
A uniform certainty of hope.
Yet in your orbit
That same future presents
A darkened horizon,
Better avoided,
And so you take pleasure
From his presence,
From his very being,
Freed from the milestones
That mark others' journeys.
You accept the moment,

Accept your difference,
But we carry on
With our obsession,
Locked into the future,
Ticking off the boxes,
The place names
On our children's route march,
Too busy to notice
That you can simply enjoy
The person as they are,
Their perfect imperfection,
Living in the here and now,
Enhancing life by living,
By being simply who they are,
Not what they will become.

Beech walk

Tread softly on summers past
Where glorious days return to earth
To lay their pile carpet for our dreams
That twist and turn
Between the sleeping giants
Of our mind.
The snow-shackled spring
Suppressed and frustrated
By winter's stubborn grip
Gathers up its life force
Squeezing through the stranglehold
Seeping from every open pore.
The black beech, dark and wet
Flex and break the chains
Connected by their green fuse
They ignite in unison
A neon translucence
Fired by a shafting morning sun.
Freshening the eye
Lightening the heart
Opening the mind for times to come
Until, they too
Must find their place

Earth to earth.
Amongst the mouldering corpses
Of summers' brethren
That cushion
The tread,
Of our own
Beech Walk.

December milking

Shackled to his rock
He orbits round his chosen hours,
Yet it chose him,
Picked him from the crib
And left him here without a place to go.

Yet his ladies wait their turn
And heave their heavy bags
Between their spindled legs,
Suspending from a scaffold frame
Their precious loads,
Which bulge against their swing.

Escaping from the gloom,
Their well-chewed breaths
Rise above the biting cold,
And white trickles from a teat
Tracing lazy lines and circles
Amongst the shit slapped floor.

He locks into his ritual
And readies for the dance,
Pacing round his pulpit,
Gently laying hands
And tracing daughters back
Some thirty years.

A meeting of machines,
One bred, one made,
Each built to fit the other,
Turning green to white,

As pulsing beat of stainless steel
Sucks its greedy fill.

He takes his pride from here,
Measuring against the past,
Driven on by need
To prove himself, against himself,
To make his mark upon the land.
And yet, not far from here
It lies in sterile lines,
Loss leader for the giants,
Who squeeze pennies from the tit,
And slowly close their careless fingers
Around a way of life.

Occupying the same space

We occupied the same space
This morning, outside 19 Bellevue Place,
You leaving for school,
A full family behind,
And me, walking to work,
And here we meet,
Bumping into each other,
Forty years apart,
That boy, and this man,
I recognise you,
Although you never see me,
Too wrapped up in the moment,
Don't worry,
Things turn out fine,
But wait a moment,
I think you catch my eye,
A fleeting recognition,
And there it is,
We are, and were, the same,
Time travelling,
Enjoy yourself,
I whisper.

Cynic

Beware!
Bitterness,
Can foul your soul.
Its brackish taste
Lending acrid flavour
To the sweetest dish.
Twisting smile to sneer
To feed off
Blame and scorn,
As envy and contempt,
Infecting with their bile,
Give jaundiced eyes their proof,
Until,
It turns on itself,
And eats us from within.

That it had come to this

I followed him through the house,
Following his shameful trail,
Until I found him,
Lost outside his room,
Where I helped him in,
And we sat on the bed,
Holding each other,
With tears in our eyes.
That it had come to this.
Reversing our roles,
Stripping him of his dignity,
I undressed him
And led him to the shower

Where he stood, patiently,
Waiting for his time,
While I washed his bones,
Washed, and washed,
Until our tears dried,
And we lost ourselves,
In a remembered moment.

An inconvenient truth

Turn away,
Turn inside,
Stay within your world,
Ignoring,
Removing from your presence
The inconvenient truth,
Which magnifies your lie,
Intruding upon your comfort,
Waking you,
In the middle
Of the black, black night,
Breaching your walls.
So you sleep
And lie,
Waking and sleeping,
Simultaneously,
Choosing to trust
In a more
Convenient ‘truth’,
And blaming those,
Who dare to share
The dark reality,
Upon which you wish
To draw a shroud.

Dictionary

Words,
Parked passively
In ordered ranks.
Bombs without warheads.
Needing only
Juxtaposition
To give them life

Doorway on the past

There is a door in our house.
I stripped it bare,
One wet Sunday afternoon.

Written, up-side down,
In the bottom left hand corner,
Was a message.

“Remember to feed the horses”
It’s still there,
Under ‘Sunburst Yellow Satin Gloss’

Whatever normal Is?

Forget convention and routine,
Escape from commonplace,
For none of us are standard
And average leaves no trace,
We each are an exception,
We are different and unique,
There is no blueprint to us,
We each have our mystique,
So fight back against temptation
To regress towards the crowd,
Stand up for who we are,
And shout it out aloud,
And if we fear rejection,
We must remember this,
That none of us are normal,
Whatever normal is?

Winter union

The white tide cuts across the hill
And marks a different world
Which freezes to the touch,
A sky which sharpens to a point,
A surface scraped by bitter blast,
And there,
Ignoring with a wary eye,
Stands the frost-backed beast.

His burnished chest,
Reflects against the glare
And makes meaning,
Of magnificent,
With shoulders bursting
Through their hide,
He lugs his heavy burden
Towards his chosen one.

A red-roan seven-seasoned mother,
Who thrives where others perish
Has stood the test of time
And readies for her chore.
To take his weight,
To take his seed,
To take his life.

Flying scotsman

Standing in a row
Over Portobello shunting yard.
Fingers pushed through the wire.

Duffel coats and gloves,
Socks 'round ankles.
Black,
Everything black.
Pot bellied trains
Spitting steam
Pushing and pulling
Hissing,
Fighting?
Fighting against the tide.
All come to a standstill
As the Flying Scotsman
Flashes under the bridge
And disappears from view
But not from sight.

Seeing for ourselves

We ought never forget
The feelings of the many, who
Only judge by the chill
Upon their collars, Nor should we
Stand too close to the edge, when warm
Hands are placed behind our backs, or
Forget to listen to those who never speak, but
Who shake their heads, when
Others leave the room, alternatively,
Forget them all, and
Have faith in our inner child, who
Sees things as they really are.

The pointer

His speed dances to a stop
As he zeroes on the scent.
Yet his stillness has more power
Than his flight.
And just as shade shows up the light,
As winter makes the spring,

His frozen stride
Holds us,
And our imaginations,
For a brief,
Exquisite,
Moment,
And we forget ourselves.

A book of remembrance

Sandwiched between
Ledgerwood-Walker. B.G.
And Lee. A.T.
Is Ledingham. D. J.

So many unknown people
Sharing the same space.
A regiment of L's
Waiting by their phones.

Walking hand in hand

I saw her walking,
Less than half-a-step behind,
A fraction of a step even,
But just enough to catch my eye.
He held her hand,
Or, better, led her hand,
Securely, no pride, no affection,
No love apparent in the grasp
No softness in the touch,
She belonged to him,
His reluctant property,

To do with as he pleased,
Worth no more thought,
Than the half-smoked cigarette,
He carelessly
Dropped
At his
Feet.

The boy with the 'attitude'

Watch the young man with his burden
They say that he's sullen and rude
And the fact that he pays no attention
Is marked down to his poor attitude.
And so they prepare for his entrance
By building their own hidden traps
And as he walks in with his burden
They spring their surprise and he snaps
But of course it must be expected
For one with a poor attitude
He clearly cannot be trusted
Or given the same latitude
Yet can this boy be the same person
Who walks into a neighbouring room
And suddenly not be the version
Of whom we have come to assume
Where he responds to the care and attention
Of a teacher who sees more than a troublesome boy
Who lights a spark deep inside him
And he responds with unfettered joy
Then suddenly all comes into focus
For attitude is not set in stone
And if we wish to unlock it
We must first reflect on our own.

Black pearled sky

Let me roll
My line upon
A black pearled sky

To catch my passage
From timeless depths.
And let me
Cast my mind
To float upon
The gold,
Tempting memories to bite,
To take them,
Taste them,
Just once more,
Before,
Returning them,
Unharmed,
To a weighting sky.

Exposure

Have you ever stood on deck
And tried to shelter from anxiety's biting wind,
Broken from routine's comfort
And felt the stinging spray of isolation?
Or stepped out all but naked
And heard ridicule's distant thunder,
And lost your way
Forced to walk,
Bent forwards,
Into the gathering storm?
Or weighed anchor
Thinking danger's squall had passed,
To find yourself alone
As falling pressure banks the fog?
I have stood there,
Stand there,
Times.
Amidst jeopardy's shifting ice pack.
Confidence floating just above the waves
Self-doubt,
Lurking,
Just below the water line.

Visit to the 'Rangoon' Strand Hotel

Our taxi dropped us outside the Customs House,
My new American friend and I,
In search of The Secretariat,
A brick and colonnaded edifice
Of colonial times.
Failing in our navigation,
We stumbled across The Strand,
And like two imperial officers,
In a musty drawing room,
Evoking 'glories' of the past
We took afternoon tea and scones,
Followed by Strand Sours.
Over-tipping, we took our leave
And retracing our steps,
We paused to cross the road.
An over-crowded bus barred our way
And hanging from a window
A dark and tattooed youth
Challenged my eye,
I smiled, he didn't,
Staring right through me,
To our shameful past.

A place to start walking from

A place to start walking from
Can never be a destination on its own

But must settle for being a setting off point
Within easy reach of somewhere more interesting
Just like the man who has many friends
But never receives a visitor
Or the woman who has much to tell
But never features in conversations.
Perhaps a place to start walking from
Is not such a bad place after all?

Piper's farewell

I heard them call the numbers from the crowd
And each stepped forwards to the edge
To take a plaited, tasseled cord
And lay me gently in my grave.
I'd stood too often in the past
And watched this scene
And watched the soil tossed upon a polished box,
And then, from far above my head
I heard the pipes begin to play
And slowly lift me from this place.
And standing upright once again
I threw my drones across my shoulder
And matched him note for note.
We walked together, happy now
To leave that rotten, rotting body
To feel the joy of freedom
To feel the ground beneath my feet
To feel the wind against my face
To feel the air within my lungs.
We marched a slow march
My kilt swung upon my hips
My fingers caressing every note
He stopped; I didn't; I couldn't; I wouldn't.
Marching on and on
Free to march upon my hill

World without adjectives

Bare,
Bones,
Monochromed,
Stripped lines,
Which only come alive
Within the mind,
Growing there,
Like seeds,
Which flourish
Despite neglect,
And stony ground

Who did you plan to be?

Who did you plan to be?
Did you fall far from your tree
Of hope and expectation?
Were you carried off
Swept out to sea, or
Blown far by a cruel wind?
Were you cast adrift
Struggling against the tides?
Or did you take advantage
Of the updrafts?
Did you catch a fair wind,
Fill your sails,
And plane across the surface,
The spray on your cheeks,
And sun on your back?
Yet unexpected destinations
Await us all.
For some,
These rot us from within,
Until our very presence
Becomes unwelcomed,
Whilst others smile
Happy to be on the journey,
Making the most,
Of tides and prevailing winds,
Turning life to advantage,
And turning it,
To gold.

Hayfield

I found a map.
A map where
Rivers never run,
Where tides will never turn.
A map where
Mountains never rise,
Where valleys never fall,
Or cities sprawl.
A map where
Trees will never grow,
Where streams
Will never flow,
But where,
For seven days,
Green waves,
Will break upon a yellow sun.

Hilltop people

Do not pass the hillside road worth climbing
Despite temptations of the valley floor
For level journeys seem so forgiving
When faced with what appears a half-shut door
But see it as a welcome chance, well found
And make your start towards that hidden place
To leave behind the safe yet shaded ground
Where live those timid souls who leave no trace
Then feel your pounding heart and muscles burn
And question, surely, such a reckless act

But soon you pass that point of no return
Where such quiet ambition becomes a fact
To stand and gaze upon a wondrous land
A view that only hilltop people understand

Johnnie Wilson's day

My body shakes with unseen trembles,
Fixed eyes stare without relief,
Don't just stand there any longer
Let's be off away from here,
Over grass and weed and thistle
Stretch and coil, stretch and coil,
What a feeling, freedom, life.

"Keep weel wide!"
I'm mindin' fine
Steady man, I know the way.
Down.
There, here no bother.
Prodding forwards, gently does it
Lifted well and altogether
Johnnie Wilson, you'll be pleased as hell.

Help me now, I cannot see
The straightest path from here to there.
A course old one turns, thinks better of it
And pushes back to find the front.
Steady pace, it's as you taught me,
Working one side then the other.
Your silent words ring in my head

We reach the circle without mishap
You stand, I wait,
They graze.
Bide my time,
Slowly, slowly
A gap appears, it's all we need.

I'm in it never had a chance.

Push on now towards the finish.
Why does it always have to end?
Do your part now, a final flourish
Just be steady with that stick!
But they are broken, howked and humbled
And any soul could close a gate.

We've won or so you tell me,
I'm never just sure what that means
You reach down and stroke centuries of preparation.
But let's be off away from here,
Over grass and weed and thistle,
Stretch and coil, stretch and coil
What a feeling, freedom, life.

Peripherique

Chaotic precision
With a single mind
Trusting beyond hope
That all belong
Our single tribe,
Flying we are,
Fleeing time
Placing our lives,
Our faith,
In fellow travellers,
Strangers in motion,
Joined at the hip,
In fearful conjunction,
Regardless of the
Snarling horns,
We are as one,
Almost touching,
Travelling in hope,
Travelling,
Travelling,
But never
Seeming to arrive.

Leap of faith

A long legged hare
Running in the sun
Stopped and smiled
Twitched its ears
And in an easy bound
Leapt the stone built wall.

Forty feet down
Prostrate on the concrete floor
It lay
As if transfixed
Mid-Jump
Staining the dried bed
With its afterglow

Darkness fills the void

Black jagged stars
Burst the leaded glass
As pigeons stain the pews
And darkness fills the void.

Shattered Slates
Expose the blackened beams
Growing grass at fifty feet
And darkness fills the void

Graffiti screams
Its thoughtless filth
Whilst litter dances at the door
And darkness fills the void

All for the convenience
Of a faith without a home
A faith without a fee
And darkness fills the void

Cotswold stone

Honeyed
Smooth
Perfection
But churchyard
Names
Dissolve
Before your eyes
A surface -
Reclaimed

Last of the blackies

Gently tilt a hillside,
And pour its vintage at our feet.
Shake free the stubborn drops,
Which try to hold their place
Amongst their own,
But gather speed
And bunch and rush
The narrowed neck,
To spill upon the floor,
Leaving us to smash
The empty bottle
On stony ground.

Scott's view

Stared out. Abused by casual eyes
Which flick through pages
With coffee table minds.
We taste but never swallow
Spitting snapshots
In long to be forgotten
Books. Ticking lists
And moving on before we stop.

Here, from where before his grave
Two horses held his gaze
In patient pause, to recollect
The man where dreams of legend
Came alive. Before they felt time's whip
And left to pull his shell
On, and into, history

And so we follow,
Passing time in shallow worship
Wearing out the land
With reckless gape
Taking comfort that we share
A place with him
Before our horses come.

Scree walk

Between climb and walk
We scramble,
All fours.
Animals, without the grace,

Searching for firm ground.
As leader's debris
gently shifts us,
And our steps,
Back down the hill.
Next time,
I'll stay at home.

Scales of imagination

Brass they were,
Elegantly precise,
Engineered from another age
With a pendulum balanced
On a knife edge of reason
And there,
Without catching my eye,
She placed a single fact
In a flat-bottomed dish
And a single dream in the other,
And after a moment's,
Hesitation,
The balance tipped
To the dream.

My father's voice

Fifteen years,
Yesterday,
Tumbleweed memories
Blowing through
The wilderness of my mind,
Prompting the past,
The words of comfort
The laughter and the sadness,
The Latin lexicons
Of gardener and physician
Interchange with
Language from the land
The Doric tongue
The poetry and song,
Occupying the room
Entertaining, inspiring,
Being,
Yet now, here and now
Forcing myself back,
I no longer
Hear that voice,
It's gone, worn away
By the ebbing tide of years
Leaving me
With a silent father,
Goodbye,
Old man.

The cow and the photographer

Beddit in ma comfy grund
Chowin' on ma dreams
I spied ye wi ma half shut ee
An' heard yer pechs and groans.
As on ye struggl't up ma hill
An' heft up oan yer back
A monster wi three legs or mair
Came climbin' oot yer sack.
A many splintered whirligig
It danced upon the rocks
Until ye got the better o' it
An' tied it doon wi blocks
The horny-goloch wisnae beat
Its legs it push'd an' sprouted
An' afore I even kent ma'sel
I had hupped and shouted.
But as the sun began to rise
It clutched ye tae its breest
Despite ma warnings and ma cries
It wis aboot tae feast.
So up I stotted tae yer aid
I couldnae tak nae mair
An' looked the beastie in the eye
An' gied ma cauldest stare.
But whit a stramash did ye stir
Ye shouted, screamed and cried
An' then ye picked a muckle stane
An' at ma heid ye shied.
Weel patience din I charged ye baith
It folded wi' a shunt
An' you ye graceless donnert man

Went fleein' wi a dunt.
An' galloped aff wi scittered shanks
Yer breek arse at yer ankles
Wi'oot a single word o' thanks
As the monster lay in fankles.

Remembering the future

Think forwards,
Remember that time
When your dreams
Come true, and eternal
Hopes have sprung,
Recall the very moment
When tomorrow
Becomes today,
As you travel
Through time,
Backwards and forwards,
Forwards and backwards,
In transitory thoughts
Of who you were,
And what you might yet
Become,
For now is always
Destined to be the
Past,
And, with that in mind,
Throw off
The shackles of the
Present,
And fulfil your
Obligation,
For tomorrow,
Today.

Shetland women

Growing out of the Shetland rock
Windswept, soaked through,
Standing high against the breaking Atlantic surf
As the tide came in and the tide went out
As the seasons fell upon the treeless ground
Livings scraped from under-nourished soil
Left alone while men were thrown to the seven seas.
Untroubled by adversity
They raised their young
Clung to their land
Through the 'simmer dim'
And the black winter day
But a song was in their heart
The soft music of their words
Turning hardship to advantage
Tempering souls,
As mothers to an island race.
See them now
One generation from the croft
The Shetland rock still
Running to their core
And their velvet soft voices
Remaining calm
As the wind lifts and the waves break
As the howling wind scars across the land
As the crops rot in the fields
Never complaining
Or as the Shetland woman said:
"Niver greet for onything at canna greet for you."

Startling to the eyes

Remarkable,
That a man should
Call his wife,
After all these years,
“Startling to the eyes”
Not taking her for granted,
Cherishing his luck,
And through his voice
I saw her clearly,
In four startling words,
And felt her
Beauty in the room,
Long after he had gone.

Sentinel

Each November the Fieldfares come
And take up residence in our old apple tree
And each year the apples hold their place
Against the frost and slicing Northern winds
Incongruous inhabitants of a winter scene

Come January the birds have gone, save two
Who hunt each other round the tree
Ignoring rare abundance
They have no time to feed
As senseless rivalry provides no respite

Then one morning a single bird remains
Still chasing it's departed foe
Whilst clinging remnants of a summer past

Lose patience and throw themselves to earth
To lie beside the rival's lifeless form.

Scratches on his hands

Age could not hide his strength,
A mind running deep,
Quietly muscled
Patiently powerful,
Comfortable in his own space
And there, as he pinned fence posts
To the bottomless peat,
And tensioned the wired barbs,
His sands ran out,
Tumbling him to his
Beloved ground
"Open the doors
Let Sandra see him"
The doctor ordered.
And there he lay,
Unable to respond.
This man, this special man
A lifetime near its end ,
Just shy of four score years
Yet, whilst others slip away
Between sterile sheets,
With tissued skin,
He could lift his head,
Happy that he could leave ,
With callused palms, and
Scratches on his hands.

Picture book mind

On a cold, wet Sunday afternoon
He travelled thousands of miles and hundreds of years.
Flitting through time and space as boredom dictated,
Taking on existences as he pleased,
While his eyes never betrayed the truth.

His bed could change, chameleon-like,
From a starship to a stage-coach,
From a bus to a battle-cruiser.
And each time he would play his part
Under the directions of his picture book mind.

He could kill with a smile on his face,
Or crumple on the floor,
Clutching his bloody chest with a silent scream.
While his brother conjured his own backdrop to every scene,
Switching from ally to foe without suggestion,
Happy to die with a peanut butter sandwich in his hand.

How I envy them their freedom,
Their untutored ability,
To step beyond the narrow boundaries of reality.
Untroubled by the false dignity of common sense.
Enjoy it while you can my sons,
Education,
Is lying in wait.

Obliquity

We learn to walk
One step following another,
And so we see this
As the way to reach
Our destinations,
In straight lines
From here to there,
Following our compass,
Connecting the dots
In logical linearity,
Yet in our heart of hearts
We know the folly
Of straight lines,
For successful journeys
Rarely follow
Well trodden routes,
Instead remember
The unintended arrival
At that special place
Which opens out in front of us,
Surprising us with our luck,
So break free from
The tyranny of rational roads,
Of safety's small-minded steps,
And jump instead,
From stone to stone,
Leap chasms,
Navigate the swamps,
Swim the rapids,
Take a chance
By closing your eyes

And following that eye,
Which lurks,
Deep within your mind.

Summers's day in February

The rain bounced on the hay shed roof,
Drumming tunes on the corrugated iron,
Before it filled the folds,
And dropped to the ground in an ragged curtain.

I listened to the rain music,
And watched the sky sit heavy on its hunkers.
Holding down the distant hills.
Sucking contrast from the fields.

My hand closed on the warm hay.
And twisting a spiral round my fingers,
I pulled it from its bed.
Last year's summer crackled.

And framed between its course and faded stems,
Was held a blood red poppy,
Which crumbled to the touch.
And the rain bounced on the hay shed roof.

Sunday fox

Distant memories of Sunday kirk
Where you watched my prayers with a knowing smirk.
While proudly draped round a widow's neck
Your glass eye fixed me without a break.
Alone you knew I was a fraud
Ma thoughts had never strayed to God.
A wisdom that I came to fear.
That,

And your crooked,
Sleekit,
Leer.

Surface diving

Diving deep and plunging
Perpendicular to the present
Sliding down through versions of myself
Identikit recognitions fleetingly glimpsed
This boy, this youth, this man
Standing beyond, detached, not me
Living in their worlds
Deeper and darker
Reaching out beyond the light
Where self no longer
Has a place.

A farmer's daughter

And from her first breath
She pulled in the air of the land,
And the land pulled her to it,
Allowing her,
To set down roots,
Deep and strong,
Anchoring her to the soil,
Grounding her against
Prevailing winds,
And winter storms,

Yet such a bond provides
Unexpected freedom
To be her honest self,
Ready to fearlessly fly,
For she is a woman of the earth,
And sharing this she smiles,
The smile of a tireless woman,
Ready to live with all the confidence
Of those who know themselves,
And so we welcome her to adulthood,
This strange place, supposedly
Beyond our youth,
Yet, fear not,
For this is a woman
Who will stay true to who
She has always been,
And to who she will
Always be.

Swilken burn bridge

Where Old Tom Morris stood and took a line of sight
Towards an unimagined time, stands a bridge
Which spans the years and dreams of man.

Its keystone bears the weight of echoes
And binds them to the stones,
Which gently rise above the tended calm.

Until it comes once more to life.
And takes its rightful place
As a passage from mortality,

Lifting those who float across its sweep,
In joyful pandemonium,
To taste fame's momentary nectar.

Or those, like Nicklaus, the Golden Bear,
Who blessed it with his presence
And turned granite into gold.

Or Spain's magician,
A sorcerer who touched our lives
And conjured victories from an empty hand.

Or see a place where Tiger prowls
His power launched in peerless grace
Before he crushes breath from man and links alike

Yet for some a set of scaffold steps.
A gangplank which drops them from the dizzy heights
In painful public execution.

But all build memories for generations,
Scratching marks upon life's fleeting walls
But losing to a simple stone- built arch,

Which takes its comfort that its gateway
Between two different worlds,
Lies beyond the wealth of man.

I am a fortress

I have a secret that sits in my dreams, squeezing out of my sleep, tempting my screams. For I have a secret that clings to my back, weighing me down like stones in a sack. Yet I am a fortress. My walls never breached. My heart is an island. My soul never reached. I stay in the present, not a glance to the past. I keep on the move and like travelling fast, avoiding reflections, or looking to deep, preferring instead to always compete. For I know I am better, than all you combined. My will is undaunted. I will leave you behind. Propelling me forwards to where I don't know. But my journey has started and to them I will show, that I have succeeded, for that is a fact. Yet the boy deep within me feels muffled and trapped. So deep in the night, when my walls they depart, and I'm no longer able to shelter my heart. My doubts and my feelings they rush to the fore, and I know that I cannot pretend anymore. So let me admit, to all who can hear. That I am no fortress, of that let's be clear. Please help me remove my walls and my fences, and let me take down my remaining

defences, and let me live life as the boy from my youth, for the journey I'm on has strayed far from the truth.

The bricklayer

Lover of straight lines,
You hate your work.
Yet, as if by magic
Lines of rough brown brick
Flow from your hands
And, imperceptibly,
Paper turns into stone,
Trapping space in small boxes.
Before you move on,
Never looking back,
Just another brick in your wall.

Stories on a train

Stuck,
With my nose against the glass,
Hemmed in by three
Fellow travellers,
Just on that bifurcation
Between single life
And married life,
Hen parties, weddings,
Christenings and work,
They filled eleven miles
Perfectly,
Sharing their allotted time,
With familiar characters,
Exchangeable names,
And before I knew it
Waverley Station
Had sucked them

Out of the carriage,
And silence returned
Leaving me,
And their empty words,
Echoing
Around the empty train,
Bound for Nowhere
In particular.

The clipping

Surrounded by the Cheviots
A soaring sun and diving Peewits
The clipper rigged his gear with a master's expert eye;
Blades sharpened with affection
Each caught a bright reflection
As perfect and as pure as a Curlew's melancholy cry.

The pace was tight and measured
As if each moment treasured
By a man who took his comfort from the magic in his hands;
His skills were years in making
Ten thousand hours back breaking
As a passion grew inside him that no layman understands.

No tricks, no ostentation
No frills, no decoration
Yet the veins upon his trunk-like arms were all but fit to
burst;
Shirt soaked with perspiration
Eyes fixed with concentration
As if imprisoned by the talent with which he had been
cursed.

He cast each fleece upon the ground
Amidst the unrelenting sound
Of dogs and sheep and buzzing shears, a noise that never
left the ears;
His arm found a rhythmic groove
Hypnotic ease to every move
As seconds passed and minutes passed from hours into
years.

The day was almost finished
Yet his art was not diminished
By the knowledge that his labours were nearly at an end;
For pride imbued his every action
He could not slacken by a fraction
Addicted to a lifestyle to which there is no mend.

"I never touched her"

Women,
Lie broken on the ground,
Confidence torn
From their hearts,
Ligatures around their self-esteem,
Confidence crushed
Beneath stamping heels,
Hopes extinguished
By tightening grips,
Strangling dreams,
Suffocating souls,
Watch how they fall,
Hollowed out,
By empty
Men.

Park Hall, Bixter, Shetland, 1914

Out of place amongst the hunkering crofts,
Its brooding, balustraded,
Black-windowed bulk,
A forbidding beauty,
Against the open-hearted landscape,
Is gradually closing itself on the
Sorrow of Dr James Cameron Bowie,
Whose first-born boys
Slipped in behind their mother's back
That fateful Hogmanay,
To find themselves in a forbidden place,
Amongst the glass stoppered bottles,
The tinctures and the oils,

The cobalt blue,
The inky black,
The iridescent green..
And in a fatal moment,
They shared a poisoned cup.
Twelve agonising days,
Separated their mortal end,
Until their father bade farewell to:
Thomas Havelock Bowie; and
William Alexander Tait Bowie,
Distinguished names for ones so young
Yet never to be matched,
By the eight who followed on,
Never to replace that gaping
Void in their father's heart,
And here, in this special place,
The sodden soil is reaching up,
Drawing in the final reminder,
Of his Hippocratic shame,
Back, to whence it came.

A valentine

Walk with me where early daffodils bloom,
And let the skylark's song release our hearts,
Amidst the heady fragrance of the hillside broom,
Where now we trace the footsteps from our past.

Come lie with me upon soft summer's grass,
To dream beneath a blue suspended sky,
Of endless light-long daylight days perhaps,
Or simply pause the shrinking hours from fleeting by.

And let our hands entwine a modest moment,
And listen as our rhythmic breaths unite,

In such a time our love remains more potent,
Than any show of love in public sight.

So let us join the joyous soaring singing lark,
Before winter brings, its eternal dark.

The heron

He was there,
Waiting,
I could feel him,
Obsequious,
As his haunted presence
Hunched over his patience.
Waiting,
In his morning tails,
Head dropped his between
His stooping shoulders,
Watching,
Slow in his shadows,
Waiting,
Letting them live their lives,
Carelessly.
Until,
Waiting over,
He fired
And left,
With a scream,
And a smile
On his face.

The headmistress

She, as if possessed by nature's gods
Can turn our very darkness into light;
And lift sagging spirits against the odds,
Where by fervent charge she leads the fight.

True to herself, her soul, like starlight shines,

To guide our lifetime's course between the rocks;
A shining light which integrity defines,
Stretching our minds beyond their narrow box.

But she would not wish our uninvited praise,
Nor expect our acclamation or reward;
Nor seek to waste remaining autumn days,
By polishing memories which others hoard.

Instead, she lives by everlasting truth,
This enchanting woman,
Of perpetual youth.

The journey

I stumbled back nearly fifty years.
As the heady mix of engine oil and leather
Threw me back into the benchseat
Alongside the old farmer.

A giant of a man
As dour as he was big
Who gripped the wheel with massive fists.
And stared out far beyond his field of view.

I knew better than disturb his practiced silence
And craned my neck to see over the polished bonnet
Lining up the silver emblem
As my Spitfire's gunsight.

My game and his peace
Were broken by a sickly crack
And in the instant that it hit the glass
I caught its screaming eye.

The old man said nothing
As we rolled to a clumsy halt
And pulled himself stiffly from his seat.
The late evening sun cast his shadow forty feet.

He stooped and lifted the tiny form

Lost in his callused hand
And a fragile tear splashed
Silently on the dusty road.

Are you the best friend that you could have?

Are you the best friend
You would want to have?
To be the one who's with you,
In good times and bad?
Would you forgive,
Would you approve?
Would you stand by you
When others would move?
Are you the person
To cover your back?
Protect you from harm
When under attack?
Would you be there
To listen to your cries?
Would you be honest
And tell you no lies?
Could you share your success
And smile when you win?
Would you forgive
If you'd fallen to sin?
Or are you the kind
Of fair-weather friend
Who cannot be trusted
To be there at the end?
Preferring instead
To come and to go,
Too locked up in yourself
To be able to show?
So would you be with you,
Through good times and bad,
And could you be the best friend,

That you'd ever have?

Reunion

See them, see us,
Familiar strangers,
Retracing our steps,
Revisiting that time
When we shared space,
Shared our lives.
Returning now,
Having gone our way,
Having lived our lives,
Separately, apart,
We shake hands,
Share our stories,
We people, we same,
But different people,
Crossing paths once more,
Before we take our leave,
Returning to become,
Those who we became.

The letter

Practiced fingers slide,
Between the steel sprung jaw,
And mark a journey's end.
The slap on the cold tile floor,
Echoes 'round the house,
But no one moves.

A draught slips easily,
Beneath the heavy door,
And as bare feet stand,
The five intruders lie,
Fanned, 'poker-style',
With no eyes to give away the truth.

A glossed and gaudy postcard,
Filled with empty lines,
A promise of unsought riches,
And two brown, windowed bills,
Highlight a small, white,
Crisp cornered envelope.
Five parallel lines,
Placed dead centre,
In a neatly sloping hand,
Betrayed its innocence,
And it lies unopened,
Behind the clock.

Crow concerto

Black minims,
Crotchets and quavers,
Eight birds to a bar,
The five line stave sags,
Heavy with their weight
As three semi tones,
And an A sharp
Change places,
Before melody takes off
Into flights of
Pandemonium.

Fear of my light going out

I have a fear,
A deep sustaining fear,
That my light goes out
That my sense of joy and wonder
Which shines upon
The darkest corners
Of my world
Goes out,
Extinguished,
Like a guttering candle
By the whistling draughts,
To leave the
Desolate darkness
Free to cast
Its blackening gloom
Upon my soul

Photo frame

Concealed amongst the artless goods
An old man caught my eye
Trapped behind the dusty glass
Too proud for such a fate.

Although heavier than it looked
I took pleasure from its weight
And turned the polished ebony
Smooth and cool to touch.

My finger caught the fragile hook
And six images fell

Face down upon the ground
I knelt and lifted each in turn.

And there, stolen from his mother's arms
Stood a kilted warrior
A volunteer for King and country
Full of innocence and hope.

The second struck a similar pose
His rifle replaced by a tiny bride
All Hollywood curls and austerity frills
But his eyes no longer smiled.

As I turned the third
A boy's face reflected his father's gaze
Brylcreemed hair and a reluctant smile
And the burden of his parents' dreams.

The same face forced a tired grin
Under mortar board and gown
With all the arrogance of those who achieve
At the expense of others.

The last of the hidden trove
Showed three tanned and handsome boys
And scribbled on the back
"Merry Christmas from us all in California".

The old man's photo had its message too
Sellotaped to the back as a yellowed cutting
Illegible now except for the words
"Bravely borne".

Walking the length Prince's Street

A river of conversations
Snatched in the passing
Tumble downstream
In a wall of broken sound
Eavesdropped from other worlds

The private and banal
The intimate and profane
The guttural grunts
The over-engineered sentences
Of Morningside ladies
The voices of the continents
The language of the streets
Shouting and whispering
Gossiping
Loving and hating
Promising
Pleading
Lying and trusting
But passing by
They fade together
To a single passage
Emptying out to that place

The river, the ghillie and the judge

Water,
Gathered in by distant hills,
Made good its escape.
Its trickle, fed and filled by kith and kin,
Had carved its trail across the land
And swept and tumbled to this spot,
To now fall silent,
As if lost in thought.
The heavy oars sipped slowly at the surface,
As the two men held their place.
And while time stood still,
The split cane cast its colours to the sun,
Before it cracked the mirror in a perfect line.
The two minds, sat in silence,
Converging on the sliding flow,
United by an ancient bond,
That had long since withered empty words.
And there, the river and the men,
Fell into rhythmic harmony.
Respect, shared equally amongst the three,
Took no account of rank or high position,

For each had made their mark in different ways.
And, protected by that confidence that comes with age,
They had a comfort in themselves,
And found no need to rush to journey's end,
When it would find,
It's way to them.

To see ourselves

We only see our gaps
Our defects and deformities
Our slightest flaws
Amplified by the dark
Morning hours
Which break like waves
Across our dreams
Pulling us back
Towards the depths.
But step back
Look out instead from
Watching eyes who
See our wonder
The magic in our hands
That special touch
Which others notice
But escapes our eye
Too busy digging
Our defences
To see ourselves,
As others see us.

Tugging at a loosened thread

Feel the tug,
At the loosened thread,
Pulling you back,
To that place,
That place you
Fought so long to escape,
That feeling of entrapment,
Security and safety,
It's very smallness
Of mind and space,
Its traditions,
Its knowingness,
The very things,
Which clawed at your neck,
Closing their fingers,
Taking your breath,
Pushing you away,
Now call out your name,
Tugging at the loosened
Thread, And you come,
Unable to explain,
And all the while,
The thread,
Tightens,
Holding you,
Man and boy,
Forever.

A child's hand

Take your child by the hand
And hold the future there.
Keep him upright if you can
Release him if you dare.

The smith

Wi a steady rythym ye caa'd the haunle,
Geid hotterin spirks a life o thir ain,
The fire wid licht wi a bleezin yalla,
As ye kinnled the coals wi a dragon's braith,
Wi yir een aa squintit frae the deil's blast,
Yid reach intil its scocherin moo
An wi brookit tongs yid heist the gowd,
A sicht tae quicken ony hert.
An then,
Lik a thunnerclap,
Ding dang the anvil rang!!
An yir airm flasht wi a frichtsome peelin,
As ye jouked and jinkit roon an roon.
Bool-eed ad watch ye smore ae shoe,
An hear it squalich wi the steam,
An the reek wid hing a roon yir heed,
As ye took the cuddie's weicht.
An fyles yid swear, aneth yir breath,
"G'waa ye lang-nosed bugger!!"
As a thrawn jaud wid set its girth abeen yir back.
An throwe a this the fowk wid sit,
Frae Auld Keig or Auchnagathle,
"Fit news o Pitnies' aullest loon?"
Thid speer the Smith,
An lauch, an muse, an claike aa foreneen.
An 'oors wid slipit by,
It hid aye been,
Fur a hunner and saxty year,
Faither til faither,
Until the tractor,
Sever't the navel-tow.

Glossary: Haunle; handle. Hotterin; simmering. Reevin; blazing. Deil: devil. Snocherin; heavy breathing. Brookit; soot stained. Tangs; tongs. Heist; hoist. Gowd; gold. Frichtsome; terrifying. Peelin; thrashing. Jouked; jumped. Jinkit, danced. Bool-eed; marble eyed. Smore; smother. Squallich; screaming. Cuddie; horse. Thrawn; stubborn. Loon; boy. Abeen, upon, Jaud; nag. Fyles; sometimes. Speir; ask. Claik; gossip. Foreeneen; morning. Aye; always. Navel-tow; umbilical cord.

‘Pilgrimage’ to Shwedagon Pagoda

In a single afternoon,
I became a foreigner,
Out of place, intruding,
Clumsy amongst the easy
Well-paced gait of a smiling people,
At ease in their own company,
Arms draped across shoulders,
They had been this way before,
For millennia...
As the flowing crowd slowed and narrowed
Towards the Golden Pagoda,
And the disconnected noise broke like waves
Amongst the crippled on the ground
And the shaven-headed monks,
The children came,
Waving their clear plastic bags.
I brushed them casually aside,
Ignorant of what lay ahead,
But as the steps stretched into view,
A boy, no more than twelve,
More insistent than the rest,
Blocked my path,
“Shoes, shoes” he cried,
Pointing at my feet,
Trying to teach this stupid stranger,
His rotting teeth stained with Betel juice,
“One thousand” he said,
I laughed - he smiled - I paid.
At the foot of the stairway
I removed my shoes,
Carrying them in my expensive bag,

And then, climbing up the holy route,
I met a former self,
Coming down the steps,
But careful not to catch my eye
I looked away,
Guilty at my 'luck'.

Better to be roughly right

It took an economist of all people
To point out the folly of precision
Our desire to pin things down
To a singularity
A statement of truth
A distilled certainty
From our confusions
So we spend our time
Constantly flicking
To the back of the book
Searching out the answer
For that imprecise precision
Choosing to ignore
That it is
Better to be
Roughly right
Than precisely
Wrong.

Dreamers

With no-one watching,
It shouldered through
The grudging ground.
Thrusting up from deep
Within the Earth
An instant spire,
Which pierced the sky
At perfect angles,
And disappeared

Above the clouds.
To dream,
As dreamers often do,
Of breaking free
From comfort's chains,
To stride upon a fragile soil
Leaving footprints in its wake

Address book

Looking for a number
Amongst the couples.
All neatly stacked,
In alphabetical order,
I saw some names,
Some single names.
Cut off from their partners
By a bold black line.
Gone, just like that,
One by one,
Picked off by the years.

Driving through France

Driving through France,
Three farmers and me,
Speeding past a fleeting landscape,
Mile after mile of green monotony,
Tedious uniformity,
Mind-numbing dullness,
But not for them,
Through their open eyes,
The fields took on a life,
The illuminating signs,
Of nurture, or neglect,
Of wisdom, or folly,
Of toil, or sloth,
And sitting there,
Listening, absorbing,
Despite my best efforts,
My own eyes opened.

The straightness of a sown line,
A pasture's vigour,
The richness of the hue,
Its tone, its pitch,
And suddenly, there he was,
I saw him clearly,
Just as they did,
The man behind the grass.

Wordsmith

He loved his work, caring for words
Turning them out from his heavy sack
Where they tumbled on his oiled bench
A treasure to behold,
And there,
He'd take a master's pause,
Immersed in that moment
Of Eucharistic worship
Before committing to his choice
To gently lift the singled word
And place it on the scales,
Defining its dimensions with the finest calipers.
Then set between two kissing jaws
He'd ease a tempered file between
Each crevice, curve and corner
Careful of the joins, the unseen links
That only such an eye could see,
Carefully working through
Elongated adjectives,
Square nouns, round verbs,
The passive and perfective,
The common and bizarre,
Pairs and prepositions,
Elegant adverbs,
Languid words that poured
As liquid honey,
Were each an object of devotion
But one,
An empty, black and hollowed word
Refused his touch,
Defiled his eye,

And cast its spectre
To perforate his sack,
In thoughtless treachery,
Spilling all before it.

Wood for the trees

The Ash grows where it drops
Unwanted and unyielding
But in reality an innocent
Which is always last to enter
And the first to leave,
Collapsing to the ground
On morning's first chill breath,
Whilst the Alder sets its feet in water
A pioneer of forlorn ground
Only to be pushed out and forgotten
When all its work is done,
But the fragile Willow
Filled with its facade of grace and delicacy
Takes us in with pleasing eye
Whilst slowly stretching underground
And crushing all within its iron grip.

Unexpected moment

Through my own reflection
I saw you standing there
An unexpected moment
I couldn't help but stare
For in those fleeting seconds
I saw not a mother or a wife
Not a partner nor a lover
But the heartbeat of my life

I loved that simple moment
And have locked it in my mind
A treasure to be cherished
With others of its kind
Just to see you out of context
To escape from background noise
To be free from daily clutter
To see your smile and your poise.

So why does such a moment
Give rise to such a shock
Is it just that very closeness
Which can build a mental block?
Or has it more to do with living
Just keeping everything on track
The frantic bustle for survival
Makes it a problem stepping back?

So let me step inside that window
And take you by the hand
Let me catch that unexpected moment
And block the falling sand

And in those captured seconds
Hold not a mother or a wife
A partner nor a lover
But the heartbeat of my life

Black water flat

Black water flat
Slowly speeding
Bends its back
And silvers. Bursting to break free
To fly alone,
To fall,
To float,
In soundless flight,
And land in gentle whispers,
Which join hands,
And shout their name
Against the silence
Of the wood.

Waves against the wind

We are waves against the wind
And have two ways to reach the shore
By keeping low we hide behind
The crashing waves that lead the blind
But those who dare to rise and fight
And lead the charge in selfless flight
Can bear their chests against the storm
Their silver manes give god-like form
They shout and roar their battle cry
Whilst lifting up their pennants high
Of danger they need take no heed
And live their lives at reckless speed
On reaching shallows stand their height
Before they drop their heads mid-flight

And crash and die and live no more
Amidst those of us who slide ashore.

Winter assassin

November sun
Knifes
With murderous ease.
Its horizontal blade
Slides,
Between the standing stones
Felling giants
With a smile.

Button Jar

There they found it,
Where she'd left it,
Tucked behind the tins and jars.
A lifetime held within a moment,
A secret trove,
They dare not open.
Buttons cut from every garment,
He had worn throughout their union,
Simple shirts to army greatcoats,
Brass and bone and wood and leather,
Each one held a magic measure,
Provided her a priceless treasure.
Now she's gone,
They've lost their lustre.
The thread is broken,
Disconnected,
Partial stories,
Recollected,
Cannot fill the button jar.

Notes on poems:

Poems in a high walled garden p11

Dedicated to Kathleen Noble, St Andrew's, who exemplified a passion for poetry. Enthusiasm for a passion can sustain us through difficult times.

Inspiration p12

People often confuse the capacity to inspire with charisma or an extrovert personality, whereas it's much more to do with authentic individuals who can encourage others to reach beyond their grasp.

Trust p12

A chief executive now has this poem on his wall after he realised that he couldn't expect people to trust him unless he trusted them.

A map is not the territory p13

The phrase "the map is not the territory" was coined in the 1920s by Alfred Korzybski, the Polish philosopher. The essence of Korzybski's thought is that we interpret the world through abstractions, abstractions that should not be confused with "the world as it really is". There are many different possible maps of the same territory, each useful for specific purposes – and the only completely realistic map, one that exactly reproduces the whole territory, is of no practical value at all (a theme developed in Jorge Luis Borges' essay, "On Exactitude in Science").

Beautiful mistakes p14

People are hard wired to avoid making mistakes yet without risking failure we achieve nothing.

A marching band, walking p14

Groups of people can be bound together by a common activity in a way that they wouldn't otherwise come together.

Evening restoration p14

Melrose Abbey at midnight. Things can be made to look complete when viewed in a different light.

Monica p16

Monica Lawson was one of the most beautiful girls I ever met but she tragically crashed her car on her nineteenth birthday and suffered massive brain damage.

Forth Rail Bridge p17

We do so much to save time but do we put that saved time to good use?

Elegy for a farmer p18

Tommy Hogg farmed at Headshaw Farm, Ashkirk, and his funeral was held in the same church in which he was christened, and married.

Integrity p19

The Scottish Bard Robbie Burns once wrote: "*Thine own reproach alone dost fear*" in his Inscription for an 'Altar of

Independence'. This line was a self-defining quotation used by Burns' fellow countryman Andrew Carnegie, one of the world's wealthiest industrialists and philanthropists.

Homecoming p19

This poem is about Ladhope Moor Cottage which has lain empty and abandoned since 1949. The last family to live there had six children who all lived in a single room. A pair of Barn Owls sets up residence in the chimney breast and rears a family of chicks every spring.

The Letter Carver p20

Dedicated to Alan Forrest who took up letter carving after surviving a liver transplant. He is 'very' precise but great company! We don't all have to be the same to be able to get on together.

Half Ploughed Field p21

I have a love of contrasts.

Lambing 14th March 2013 p21

Dedicated to Alison and Rob Tinto, Colmsliehill Farm. Farmers care – and so much more than appears at first glance. Never judge by appearances.

Friendly Fire p22

I once singled out a colleague for praise at a full staff meeting but upset some of her colleagues who had been doing exactly the same kind of work.

DL + GL 82-07 p21

Initials on trees have always fascinated me. What will people make of those I carved on the Beech tree in Langshaw to mark our 25th anniversary? We leave lots of legacies – but not always the ones we think.

Inheritance p23

Nancy Hunter is one of my best friends. Her brother died in childhood from Leukemia. She went on to farm Headshaw when her father Tommy Hogg died – See (Elegy for a Farmer, p17)

She only saw the light p23

For my Mother Barrie Ledingham (nee Gibson) who was named after J.M.Barrie who wrote Peter Pan.

The Doctor p25

Dedicated to my father Dr. Jimmy Ledingham who taught me everything I know about duty, service and professionalism.

Funeral Stockings p25

Jen Forrest 1900 – 1975, was Gill's grandmother. She was “poor in money, but rich in friends”, which was all was that concerned her. In the 1930's her husband Andrew was employed as mill worker on a three-day week such was the impact of the depression. This poem recounts a time when Jen took a pair of stockings off her own legs to give to friend to allow her to attend her own husband's funeral.

Feeding the ducks p26

Older people carry memories with them which we cannot possibly imagine.

Candour p26

People go on about having courageous conversations with others but it's a fine line between honesty and bullying.

Crow trap p27

Walking out on the Lammermuir Hills one summer's day I came across a crow trap. It consisted of a rough box shape made of chicken wire and roughly shaped sticks. At the top of the trap a funnel shape had been created. Inside the trap were rabbit carcasses, and a trapped crow – a fearful contraption.

Don't grow up - it's a trap! P29

Enjoy every year you have and don't think that it has to get worse as you get older.

Grandfather's clock p30

This clock terrified me during the night whenever we visited my grandparents in Findorn, Morayshire.

Assault on Smailholm Tower p31

Dawn breaks over the ancestral home of Sir Walter Scott.

Milestones p31

This poem was prompted by a conversation with a friend who has a 14 year old son who is happens to be autistic. He brings joy to her life.

Beech walk p32

Gullet Wood, Wooplaw Community Woods, one of the most beautiful walks in the Scottish Borders.

December milking p32

Written for my good friend Eck Wilson, who farms with his wife Ruth at Clackmae, Earlston. He lives to farm.

Occupying the same space p34

One of those moments when you meet your former self.

Cynic p35

Written for a former colleague – who devoured himself from within. I wrote the poem, framed it, and placed above the chair he sat in every week when he came to complain about things! He never noticed.

That it had come to this p35

Written the morning after a conversation in a pub with Gordon Sutherland who told me about this incident, which had proved to be one of the most significant moments in his relationship with his father.

An Inconvenient truth p36

I wrote this following a conversation with a very senior executive who bemoaned the fact that colleagues didn't want to hear the truth if it didn't match with their own view of the world – regardless of how dangerous that might prove to be.

Dictionary p35

I've always been attracted to dictionaries.

Doorway on the past p36

I really did find this on one of our doors.

Whatever normal is? P37

So much of our life is spent trying to conform to a notion of

what being ‘normal’ is.

Winter union p37

Bob Moffat farms at Wooplaw farm, and breeds Luing cattle. Luings are outwintered (they stay outside throughout the winter). Xanadu was one of his best ever bulls. The progeny live on.

Flying scotsman p38

I attended a nursery school in Joppa, Edinburgh. One of my earliest memories was going down to watch the Flying Scotsman pass under the bridge. Memories can live on long after the event.

Seeing for ourselves p39

As we get older we seem to be influenced too much by what others think and feel.

The pointer p39

As already stated, I love contrasts. This poem was written about Wilson Young’s champion field trial pointer.

A book of remembrance p40

I was sitting in our kitchen one evening and wondered if I could write a poem about a telephone book.

Walking hand in hand p40

Flashing past this couple when driving along Easter Road in Edinburgh, the picture stuck in my mind.

The boy with the attitude p40

We seem to think that people are stuck with an ‘attitude’ for life. But it is simply a predisposition towards a particular form of behaviour which is conditioned by environment.

Attitude is never fixed.

Black pearléd sky p40

Fishing on Headshaw Loch underneath a fantastic Borders evening sky.

Exposure p42

I think I wrote this one evening after a particularly challenging day at work when someone had said they didn't know how I had managed to remain so calm – they didn't see what was going on under the surface.

Visit To The 'Rangoon' Strand Hotel p43

This happened during a trip to Myanmar (Burma) – I've never felt imperial guilt before.

A Place to Start Walking From p43

Your destination is not always the most important thing on a journey.

Piper's farewell p44

Dedicated to David Knox, Piper.

World without adjectives p45

We have choice over the adjectives we select to describe an object, person or thing. They can have negative or positive associations – which side of the line do you fall?

Who did you plan to be? p46

This came from a very simple question which was put to me. Surely it's about making the best of what comes your way – rather than bemoaning your bad luck.

Hayfield p47

Looking at the swirling lines of cut hay lying in a field I couldn't get the picture of a contoured map out of my mind.

Hilltop people p47

Taking the effort to climb the hill really is worth it.

Johnnie Wilson's Day p48

This was only the second poem I wrote as an adult. It was written to accompany a painting of a Border Collie. Johnnie Wilson was the British Sheepdog Trial Champion. The poem was written from the dog's perspective and won first prize in the 1993 BP/Leopard Magazine National Poetry competition which was at the time the biggest prize for single poem in Scotland.

Peripherique p49

The Peripherique runs through and around Paris. It's a roller coaster of a drive.

Leap of faith p50

I looked over a bridge and saw a hare lying below. It had obviously jumped over the wall.

Darkness fills the void p50

A derelict church in Selkirk.

Cotswold Stone p51

Visiting a cemetery in the Cotswold's and not being able to read any of the inscriptions on the local stones.

Last of the blackies p51

Black-faced sheep used to be amongst the most profitable breeds in Scotland. Times are changing and what was once popular can become unpopular.

Scott's view p52

Sir Walter Scott was buried at Dryburgh Abbey. On the way to his burial his horses carrying his body stopped (as they always had done) at Scott's View (named after him and his favorite vista), which is now one the most popular visiting places in the Scottish Borders.

Scree walk p52

Leaders often cause more damage than they imagine and make it impossible for people to follow their tracks.

Scales of imagination p53

I was listening to two speakers debating an issue and the picture of Lady Justice popped into my mind.

My father's voice p54

I suddenly realised on day that I could no longer hear the voice of my late father.

The cow and Photographer p55

My good friend Gordon Hunter gave me a photograph of an old cow which he'd taken using a tripod on a beautiful summer's morning. This was my interpretation of the occasion from the cow's perspective. What one person thinks they are doing can often be misinterpreted by others.

Remembering the future p56

The title of this poem went around in my head for a few weeks before I wrote this poem.

Shetland women p57

I was working in Shetland and kept coming across strong Shetland Women. The poem came together in a single day when I heard someone say that they were only one generation from the croft and read about the saying quoted at the end of the poem.

Sentinel p58

Our bedroom window overlooks this apple tree. Don't waste your time competing with others when there are an abundance of rewards available for all.

Scratches on his hands p59

Dedicated to Sandra Laurenson. A strong Shetland woman.

Picture book mind p60

Written for my boys one wet Sunday afternoon. I'm glad to report that they have never lost their imagination – although education did its best to squeeze it out.

Obliquity p61

The concept of 'obliquity' (the state or condition of being oblique) was first proposed by another famous Scottish medical figure in the form of the Nobel Prize winner Sir James Black, which he defined as follows: "In business as in science, it seems that you are often most successful in achieving something when you are trying to do something else. I think of it as the principle of 'obliquity'."

Obliquity has been further developed by Scottish economist John Kay, who argues that often the best way of achieving

our goals, especially those which are particularly complex, is to do so indirectly. “Strange as it may seem, overcoming geographic obstacles, winning decisive battles or meeting global business targets are the type of goals often best achieved when pursued indirectly. This is the idea of Obliquity. Oblique approaches are most effective in difficult terrain, or where outcomes depend on interactions with other people.” John Kay 2004

Summers's day in February p62

True story. The rain really did fall in curtains. Memory can be triggered by the smallest things.

Surface diving p63

I'm fascinated by the different versions there have been of me over the years. The core has been the same but it's important to recognise that we all change over time – and that this change can be enjoyed.

Swilken Burn Bridge p58

Money can't buy you everything!

A farmer's daughter p63

They really are a breed apart.

The bricklayer p65

I used to be bricklayer's labourer. The bricklayer I worked for seemed to get himself into a groove and the hours just evaporated. He used to read 'The Scotsman' and 'The Morning Star' every morning just to make sure he gained a balanced view of the world. From him I learned to appreciate the wisdom of a true craftsman, and also learned not judge people too quickly.

The clipping p67

I spent a day with sheep shearers Angus Dickson and Geordie Bain (former World Champion sheep shearer) high up in the Cheviot Hills. Angus was shearing sheep ten years later above the Arctic circle in Norway when he came across a copy of the poem framed and hanging on a wall! The Norwegian farmer refused to believe that the poem was about Angus.

"I never touched her" p68

I lived above my father's surgery for the first 12 years of my life. Weekends were often times when women used to take shelter in our house from their violent partners. Empty men right enough!

Park Hall, Bixter, Shetland, 1914 p68

Driving West from Lerwick on the A971 just through Bixter at the junction with the A9701 you come across an incredible building which seems so incongruous in comparison to anything else you'll see in Shetland.

Park Hall was built using a poured concrete construction method in the early 1900s by Dr James Cameron Bowie who had come to Shetland after a time as an ophthalmic surgeon in Aberdeen. As a much loved and respected general practitioner he married Mary Nicholson, a Shetland Woman, in 1908 – he was 41 she was 20. Their first child Thomas was born in 1909 and their second child, William in 1911. According to a disputed local legend they died from drinking poison which they found in their father's surgery. William died on the 2nd January 1914, and Thomas on the 14th January 1914. Their death certificates, signed by their father, stated that their cause of death had been influenza. James and Mary went onto have another eight children, of whom Stanley (1917) was to become a world authority on uranium geology and leader in the field of geochemistry and mineralogy. Dr James Cameron Bowie died in 1932 aged 65. Mary died in 1974 aged 86.

The heron p70

I dug a pond and filled it full of fish. A heron took it upon himself to empty the pond – one by one!

The headmistress p70

Dedicated to Dr Judith McClure CBE, headmistress, St George's School for Girls, Edinburgh

The journey p71

My father told me this story about a very dour and bad-tempered, and, so it appeared, uncaring farmer who used to give him a lift back from school. One day they struck a bird. Don't judge people just on what others say about them.

Are you the best friend that you could have? P72

A women I was working with said that she could be the best friend that she could ever have. I thought it was an incredibly powerful thing to say about yourself.

Reunion p73

I attended a reunion for the first time in 33 years. We were the same but different.

Crow concerto p74

I only wish I was able to read music, for these crows really did create a score on the telephone wires.

Fear of my light going out p75

I wrote this after someone actually said this to me.

Photo frame p75

This is based upon a memory from school when I was tasked with helping to tidy out the library – I think it might have been a punishment. I found a box which had obviously been handed in from a former pupil’s family. It traced the man through his school days, his military service, his distinguished career as an Edinburgh Lawyer, and his role in civic society, the last piece of paper I turned over was his obituary notice from ‘The Scotsman’. The poem was triggered when I found a picture frame in an antique shop with a series of photographs from the same family, one behind the other.

The river, the ghillie and the judge p77

One my dearest friends was the late Dougie Laing. He was a Ghillie (fishing guide) on the River Tweed. He treated everyone equally, regardless of position.

Tugging at a loosened thread p78

Written in response to a friend of a friend telling me that her husband was being drawn back to his Scottish Border’s town as if he was attached by a thread.

A Child's hand p78

I used to love holding the hands of my sons. I wrote this poem before they were old enough to refuse my hand any more. It is intended to sum up what I believe parenthood to be about. I recently came across the saying from Goethe, which has much the same meaning, “Children only need two things from their parents: roots and wings.” I think much the same things goes from what people want from a great leader.

The smith p79

Dedicated to my Grandfather, Jimmy Ledingham, who I watched shoe his last horse. He had been the last in a line of six generations of blacksmith’s in Aberdeenshire. He was

universally known as 'The Smith' – even by his wife! This poem is written in the Doric – the Aberdeenshire dialect. The poem won the 1994 BP/Leopard Magazine National Poetry Competition.

'Pilgrimage' to Shwedagon Pagoda p81

My work took me to Burma (Myanmar). I was impressed by the people and especially by the Buddhist monks. Sometimes it does us good to remind ourselves what it's like to be an outsider.

Better to be roughly right p82

"Better to be roughly right than precisely wrong" John Maynard Keynes

Driving through France P83

We need to see the world through other people's eyes to fully comprehend it, especially through the eyes of people with expertise.

Wordsmith p84

My perfect job.

Wood for the trees p85

Don't judge things or people on their appearances.

Unexpected moment p86

I unexpectedly came across Gill (my wife) in a coffee shop in Melrose.

Waves Against the Wind p83

Do you just slide ashore?

Winter Assassin p84

Sunset, Ring of Brodgar, Orkey Islands.

Button jar p85

Dedicated to Frank and Mabel Aitkenhead. Mabel kept a jar containing a button from every piece of clothing Frank had ever worn.