

Some of these poems are long, some are very short -  
they won't all be right for all ages or tastes  
but you'll have to sort that out for yourselves

Most of them have only appeared before in anthologies,  
which is why this collection is called

# **A BIG BUNCH**

## **of poems by**

# **Dave Calder**

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## Action Men

I was beating up an armchair with the tele on full blast,  
I was firing off my laser toy, I was feeling mighty tough,  
I was shouting at my sister, I wanted to play rough.

Suddenly the tele shattered and out of the screen came  
a dozen hulking men with guns - one said, " We like this game.  
Hi." Then he knocked out my teeth and bongoed on my brain.  
Somehow, after that,  
the game wasn't the same.

They splattered the cat all over the mat  
they shattered and tattered and clattered and battered  
WOW ZAP SPLAT  
they flattened the flat.

They mummified mum and deadified dad,  
they broke up my brother, he looked really bad.  
They wrangled and tangled and strangled my sister  
and mangled her angles in a cement mixer.  
A grenade got gran, I caught her hand  
but her head fell bright red in the strawberry jam.  
They disabled the table, smashed in the doors,  
exploded the road, thrashed on the floor:  
blew up and threw up, slashed up the chairs,  
torpedoed my teacup, crashed up the stairs,  
butted the budgie, pot-shot the parrot,  
bounced me on their boots till I cracked like a carrot

then they mowed the lawn, with machine gun fire  
(the dog crawled out with its paws held high),  
and I sat in the slaughter, I started to cry  
and one heavy growled with his fist in my eye  
"It's fun to meet fans  
who like violence and pain -  
since you like it so much  
we'll come back again."



## **Adding it up**

One tomato and one tomato  
make two tomatoes  
Two bananas and two bananas  
make four bananas  
Four jellies and four jellies  
make eight jellies  
Eight feet and eight feet  
make sixteen feet  
Sixteen feet in heavy boots  
stamping on  
eight jellies, four bananas and two tomatoes  
make  
a horrid mess

**advice** *after adrian mitchell*

when you're being told off  
and you feel all hope is gone  
imagine the headmaster  
wearing just a purple thong

# Africa

THE SONG  
THE BURNING SONG  
THE DEMON VULTURES  
THE HAZY TENTS THE RAW  
HORIZONS THE DRUGGED SANDS THE SCREAMIN G  
THUNDER THE RATTLING BONES THE DUSTY MOUTHS  
THE INFINITE EYES THE DREAM POWER THE CIRCLING  
SKY THE TREACHEROUS BIRDS THE SHIFTING TOWNS THE  
SNARLING GUNS THE BURNING STORM THE VAST RIVER THE  
CLAY DANCERS THE BLACK MASKS THE RICH SANDS THE HAZY  
DEMON THE SCREAMING SKIES THE VULTURES MOUTHS THE RAW  
EYES THE THUNDEROUS SONG THE SHIFTING TRACKS THE VAST  
CIRCLE THE RATTLING BIRDS THE DUSTY TENTS THE GUNS SNARL  
THE STEAMING HORIZON THE BONE FOREST THE BURNING TOWNS THE  
SAND FLOWERS THE TREACHEROUS INFINITE THE BLACK TRACKED THE  
DANCERS SCREAM THE MASKED GUNS THE THUNDERS MOUTH THE FOREST  
TOWN THE CLAY HUTS THE STORMS POWER THE DRUGGED RIVER THE  
SHIFTING SONGS THE SKYS EYE THE RATTLING DREAM THE SNARLING DUST THE  
SANDS DEMONS THE BURNING BIRDS THE CIRCLING HAZE THE RAW BONES THE  
RICH TENTS THE SCREAMING FLOWER THE STEAMING CLAY THE BLACK SAND  
THE MASKED DANCE THE TREACHEROUS HORIZON THE STORMS TRACK  
THE RIVER THUNDER THE SHIFTY VULTURES THE  
FORESTS POWER THE RAW SKY THE SCREAMING  
EYES THE DREAM SONGS THE DRUGGED HUTS  
THE HAZY TOWNS THE BURNT CIRCLE THE  
GUNS MOUTH THE SNARLING BONES THE  
INFINITE BIRDS THE DUSTY FLOWERS  
THE STORMS MASK THE THUNDERING  
DEMONS THE TENT DANCERS THE  
RICH CLAY THE SHIFTED POWER  
THE SANDY RIVER THE BURNING  
TREACHERY THE RATTLING TRACK  
THE BLACK STEAM THE POWERFULL  
DREAM THE FLOWERING SONG THE  
DRUGGED SCREAM THE DANCING EYE THE  
HORIZONTAL HUT THE MOUTHLESS SNARLS  
THE TRACKLESS SKY THE RAW FOREST  
THE TENT TOWN THE HAZY RIVER  
THE INFINITE SHIFT THE BIRD  
STORM THE TREACHEROUS DEMON  
THE BURNING DRUG THE GUN  
DANCE THE SINGING  
BONE THE MASKED  
RICH THE BLACK  
CIRCLING THE  
VAST DREAM  
SINGING

## Alexander

King Alexander, third of Scotland,  
really loved his wife a lot and  
always tried to hurry home -  
(This was long before the phone  
was thought up by another Scot  
called Alex, so the king could not  
just call to say he'd been delayed  
by work, bad weather or a plague)

So, one night in 1286, the king  
(who'd got stuck in a council meeting  
in Edinburgh) got on his horse  
and, with a few friends of course  
for kings are never left alone,  
set off to ride back to his home  
to have his dinner with his wife  
across the Firth of Forth in Fife.

A storm was rising. In the rain  
they crossed the river. No train  
was due for some six hundred years  
so a boat took them (the ferry piers  
are still there) and on the other shore  
remounted and rode on once more -  
travel in those days wasn't easy,  
I'm sure that they were sore and queasy.

But Alex wouldn't hesitate:  
he'd been king since he was eight,  
survived rebellions and plots,  
defeated invaders and got  
back the Western Isles - he was not  
going to let bad weather stop  
him getting home in time for tea.  
So on he galloped, recklessly.

It's not so far to Aberdour,  
perhaps it took them half an hour,  
but after that the darkness fell  
and soon none of the men could tell  
where they were. But the horses knew  
and so they stumbled on. Just a few  
miles before the castle at Kinghorn,  
his queen, his dinner, a warm  
fire and dry clothes, the king's good luck  
ran out. In the dark fate struck.

His horse went the wrong way, and with him on it, tumbled off a cliff.

Both dead. And in that moment history changed completely. That one wrong turn led to war, to Wallace, Bannockburn, the Bruce, the Stewarts, all that came to be. And Alexander never got his tea.

## **All the way**

all the way to the hospital  
for my twentieth transfusion  
I thought of you, darling,  
and your funny lovebites

## Alphabirds

### Ys owl

```
  YYY
  YYY
 YYYYYYY
 YYYYYYY
 Y  YYY  Y
   Y  Y
```

### Cgull

```
  CC      CCC
 C  C  CC
   CCC
```

### Pcock

```
  pppp
 pppppp
 pppppppp
 pppppppppp
  pppp
   pp
```

### Chicken wire

```
  XX
XXXXX  XXX
  XXX XXXXX
   XXXXXXXX
   XXXXXXXX
   XXXXXX
   XXXX
   X X
   X X
```

## Amazing

This is the maze that our class visited:  
as we queued to go in our teachers said  
"Please stay together, we'll be very cross  
if anyone wanders off and gets lost"

This is the gap in the prickly hedge  
that Miss Take walked into and got wedged.  
We heaved, we shoved, but without any luck  
she wouldn't leave the leaves - so we left her stuck.  
(Some hours later the fire brigade came  
and hoisted her out with a fifty-foot crane)

This is the bend Mr. Ease strode round  
and disappeared as if the ground  
had swallowed him. There was nothing there  
it seemed he'd vanished in thin air  
without a sound. It was very weird -  
all we found was a pen and bits of his beard.

This is the centre circle of grass  
where Miss Laid arrived with a few of her class  
but each path they took to leave that spot  
led them back to it again. It was not  
until a month later that rescuers reached there  
by which time the children had eaten the teacher.

This is the gate where we left the maze  
without any teachers to lead us astray  
and counted ourselves as we boarded the bus  
and went back to school with no trouble or fuss.



## **The Amorous Teacher's Sonnet to His Love**

Each morning I teach in a daze until  
the bell that lets me hurry down and queue  
with pounding heart to wait for you to fill  
my eyes with beauty and my plate with stew.  
Dear dinner lady, apple of my eye,  
I long to shout I love you through the noise  
and take your hand across the shepherd's pie  
despite the squealing girls or snickering boys.  
O let us flee together and start up  
a little cafe somewhere in the Lakes  
and serve day trippers tea in china cups  
and buttered scones on pretty patterned plates.

Alas for dreams so rudely bust in two -  
some clumsy child's spilt custard on my shoe.

## **And for my next trick**

Out of his hat he pulled a hen  
that laid a shining egg, and when  
he broke the egg with his white-tipped wand  
it became an eye in the palm of his hand.

And when this eye had looked around  
he swallowed it without a sound.

At which, the hen, with a polite  
bow, put on the hat, and exited stage right.

And everyone clapped - though my sister said  
she wished it had been a duck -  
for the magician stood there in the spotlight  
all feathers and beaky head  
going  
cluck  
cluck  
cluck

## Arithmetic

She takes ten and divides it by three:  
it breaks, hard-edged, echoing.

She divides a wet sky by a high window,  
she wants to add a radio, take away the teacher.  
The day isn't working out right.

She's given up caring about correct answers.  
That makes the sums easy. So easy it bores her.

She measures the drawn-out length of the lesson  
against the chipped edge of the desk - and still  
finds it's too long till the bell.

She counts up her friends and subtracts  
her enemies. Now that's interesting

but difficult, difficult.

## The Ascent of Vinicombe

He took his bag off his back and strapped it to his chest. I think this is the start of an adventure, he declared, and so it was. With great care we roped ourselves together, then slowly, cautiously, we fought our way up the ice-cliff, He led, of course, shouting warnings and encouragement as he sprang from boulder to boulder, dodging avalanches. It was hard going. There was no shelter from the bitter wind and only one lamppost strong enough to bear our weight. We paused a moment then pressed on, any delay was dangerous. Without warning the pavement would split, opening horrid pits, crevasses crammed with writhing snakes or hairy mammoths. Despite it all, we struggled upwards, risking a traverse of the slippery railings, until we hauled each other, wild-eyed and wind-beaten, across the glacier of Kersland Street. It was then that, with amazing speed, he slipped his coat off and hung it cape-like from his head, announced his possession of super-powers and flew, arms outstretched, up the lane towards his school.

## Assembly

I don't want to see any racing in the corridor.  
a gentle glide's what we expect in here;  
not that I mind a little heavy-handed fear  
but you high spirits must slow down.

And I've had complaints that some of you  
slip out at playtime. Let it be quite clear  
that you stay in the graveyard till you hear  
the bell. The chippy's out of bounds,  
so is the sweetshop and your other favourite haunts.  
I'll stop your little fun and groans:  
there'll be a year's detention in the dungeons  
for anyone caught chewing anything but bones.

And we'll have no more silly tricks with slamming doors,  
at your age you should be walking through the walls.  
And it isn't nice to use your loose heads as footballs  
or vanish when your being spoken to.

And finally, I really must remind you  
that moans are not allowed before midnight,  
especially near the staffroom. It's impolite  
and disturbs the creatures - I mean teachers -  
resting in despair and mournful gloom.  
You there - stop wriggling in your coffin, I can't  
bear to see a scruffy ghost -  
put your face back where it was this instant  
or you won't get to go howling at the moon.

Class Three, instead of double Shrieking  
you'll do Terminal Disease with Dr. Cyst;  
Class Two stays here for Creepy Sneaking.  
The rest of you can go. School dismissed.

## At the zoo

The lions have dug deep burrows,  
the snakes have coiled up in despair,  
the crocodile has lost his smile,  
the rhino is running scared.

The hippos are wearing crash helmets,  
the camels have clumped off to grump,  
the leopard is looking rather sick  
his spots have changed to goosebumps.

The panther's turned pale with fear,  
as white as the arctic fox,  
the elephants are trying hard  
to disguise themselves as rocks.

The turtles are sheltering in their shells,  
the seals have submerged out of sight  
the giraffes are giggling nervously  
the tigers tremble with fright

The birds of prey are praying today  
they've disappeared to the last feather,  
all you can hear from the herd of red deer  
is knobbly knees knocking together

The keepers are locked in their office,  
only one brave cockatoo  
shrieks out a final warning:  
4b have arrived at the zoo!

## Australia and New Zealand

TO  
SKIES FOR  
WALLS & VAST  
LAND AS CELL FLOOR  
A HARD COLD NATION SENT  
A HUGE CITY OF ITS VICTIMS  
TO EXORCISE SOME CRUELTY FROM  
ITS CONSCIENCE, AND LEFT THEM IN  
THAT SMALL PART THAT MOST APPEARED  
LIKE HOME: TO BECOME MORE THAN EXILES  
LESS THAN EXPLORERS, DROWNED IN MEMORIES  
OF WATER WHILST ALL THE ISLANDS ENORMOUS  
HEART CRIES FOR THE DESERT POWERS, DREAM  
TIME, STRONG KINDNESS, A KANGEROO SKILL,  
THE ABORIGINAL MAGIC, A SURVIVORS  
WONDER TO TEACH SENSE  
FORGOT BY THOSE  
THAT EXILED

THE  
M

&  
T  
R O  
E  
N  
E W  
ZEA  
L?

**back 2 44 bc**

HSJGSQ AYCQYP KYBC RFGQ AMBC  
FC RFMSEFR GR UYQ HSQR EPCYR  
FGQ CLCKGCQ UCPC LMR GKNPCQQCB  
YLB QYZZCB FGK GL RFC QCLYRC

[uses Julius Caesar's own code]

[solution -  
CODES CAN CONCEAL BUT I'M AFRAID  
THEY'RE NOT MUCH HELP AGAINST A BLADE



## **Bacteria**

There are tens of thousands  
on each one of us -  
tinier than the tiniest fly,  
so light we can't feel them.  
Yet there they are -  
like plump cows or sheep,  
the colour of thin milk,  
wandering across the broad fields of our skin  
between the huge reeds of our hair,  
nibbling.

And I like to think of them there  
so calmly browsing, cleaning me up.  
It makes me feel like a farmer, or more,  
strangely, like the land itself, a world,  
to have so many creatures  
keeping alive on me,  
so many creatures  
that think of me as home.

## **The ball talks in its changing room**

I'm the star really. I'm the one  
the crowds have come to watch.  
I don't let it worry me. Before the match  
they check me carefully, make sure  
I'm really fit. After all  
I have to take more pressure  
than the rest of them. And then  
it's the usual jokes about  
there being more hot air in  
the commentators than in me,  
and the ref puts his arm around  
my shoulders and says he hopes  
I'll have a good game, no need  
for a substitute, and off we go  
to lead the players out. No time  
for second thoughts once we start:  
I'm in the middle of it all the way  
with everybody shouting for me,  
cheering as I dodge around the tackles,  
or slide out of reach of players  
who just want to put the boot in.  
The crowd is all for me, willing me on,  
praying that I'll reach the net,  
and when I do, roaring with delight.  
I take it as my due. The lads are alright  
but, when all's said and done, Desmond,  
they'd be nothing without me.

## The Bap

The house was turning upside down,  
the sky was turning outside in;  
through the shut window swam a Bap  
grinding his teeth like a thunderclap  
with his eyes knotted up in a frown.

He said, "My brain's stuck on the shelf,  
brown and sliced in the bread bin,  
but in double time, I have to find  
what's ninety nine thousand, nine hundred and nine -  
ty nine, multiplied by itself."

I sucked upon my inky thumb,  
I buttered his fat round face,  
I said, as I slapped red chilli on,  
"Nine billion, nine hundred and ninety nine million  
eight hundred thousand, and one."

And then I tried to take a bite  
but the frenzied Bap had gone.

## Bess's Bath

With pails of hot water the ladies in waiting  
run up the stairs.  
The courtiers sniff at their scented pomanders,  
the ambassadors laugh  
they think it so weird: for the third time this year  
Elizabeth Tudor is taking a bath.

In the royal bedchamber the queen sits in state  
in her steamy tub,  
she's removed her red wig to rub her head better  
with ring-crusted fingers  
and scrubbed the white powder from her face to reveal  
care-worn wrinkles and smallpox scars.

Through teeth blackened by sugar she starts to whistle  
and says in her heart:  
I may not have Mary Stewart's looks (or her neck),  
but she never sees soap,  
and Philip of Spain may be filthy rich, but today  
I'm the cleanest monarch in Europe.

## Blow out

I just knew there was bound to be trouble  
when the teacher came into the room  
for his nose pushed in before him  
as big as a bouncy balloon,  
so red and raw  
so swollen and sore,  
as ready to burst as a bubble.

He'd a huge hanky clenched in his fist,  
as wet as a teatowel; no, wetter,  
and he sniffled into it a little  
but it didn't make anything better.  
"Chuldun," he said,  
"I'b ah code id by hed."  
We told him it couldn't be missed.

You could tell that he wasn't well pleased.  
Then he opened his mouth, but what  
he meant to say never came out  
for his face twisted up in a knot  
and he snuffled and snorted  
he struggled and fought it  
but he just couldn't stop it, and sneezed.

We watched as if caught in a dream  
as the vast twitching lump of his nose  
swung back and blasted straight at us  
with the roar of twenty tornadoes:  
he blew out with a boom  
that rocked the whole room -  
I could hardly hear myself scream.

It was all in the papers next day:  
NOSE EXPLODES - DISASTER STRIKES SCHOOL  
KILLER SNEEZE WIPES TEACHER OUT  
FIVE STILL IN HOSPITAL  
and a photo showed  
our desks in the road  
and the hole where the wall blew away.

But they never said one word about  
what I remember most - the snot

splattered all over the ceiling  
and dripping and slipping in clots  
as thick and sticky as cream,  
but yellowey-brown or green;  
that fell in great gungey blots  
in hair, down necks, on faces,  
soft, slimey, squelchy and hot  
gobs of slobberey goo  
that set hard like glue  
so clarty and tough  
it took a whole month to scrub off -

I wonder why they left that out?

## The bluebottle pantoum

The bluebottle is buzzing round the bathroom  
as angry and irritated as I am  
listening to its crazy one-note tune.  
The window's open. Go on, scram!

As angry and as irritated as I am,  
I'm trying to be helpful - look here, fly,  
the window's open. Go on, scram!  
Stop droning on and use your eyes.

I'm trying to be helpful - look here, fly  
a little to the left, then up. And please  
stop droning on and use your eyes.  
Do I have to beg you on my knees?

A little left, then up and out. Please.  
I'm getting close to a murder most foul.  
Do I have to beg you? On my knees  
my hands are clenched upon a heavy towel.

I'm getting close to a murder most foul  
listening to its crazy one-note tune.  
My hands are clenched upon a heavy towel.  
The bluebottle is buzzing round the bathroom.

## Broken

That vase with the flowers: she dropped it  
in the kitchen. We heard the surprisingly  
small crash and then that word also  
slipped, or leapt from her lips, and broke  
her rule, smashed on our ears. As we turned  
she was standing stiff, shocked at the mess  
made by the word splattered around her room.  
At first she could not lift her eyes but when she did  
they met ours burning helplessly  
and then the tears burst

fragments  
of glass, of water,  
of memory, of heart



## The Boozle of Bam

Up in the attic the Boozle of Bam  
is trying as hard as a boozle can  
to discover why someone, wherever he goes,  
sticks out a tongue or wrinkles a nose  
or turns away with a pointed look  
or hides their head in a boring book.

Up in the attic, on his throne of blood and dirt,  
the Boozle is feeling terribly hurt -  
he swaffles and snaffles and scoffs till he's sick  
but nothing he does can do the trick -  
for boozles may bam and boozles may bong  
but they never ever admit they're wrong.

He scratches his ear with a rusty fork  
and mutters and putters and sneers and snorts.  
He yells, "Boozles Rule!" and "Boozle is Boss!"  
but inside he's feeling lonely and lost  
and his angry wee eyes keep jerking around,  
terrified of the tiniest sound.

Up in the attic on his throne of dirt and blood  
the Boozle is washing his hands in mud;  
and spitting out gobs of half-chewed money  
he snarls to himself, "Something's up, something's funny,  
not ha-ha but odd - and why this should be  
really bamboozles a boozle like me

for dark-suited gnomes in bowler hats,  
fat-faced cream-covered company cats,  
toads who're seen in extremely high places  
and rats with suspicious violin cases  
all shove fat envelopes under my door  
that rustle of fivers as they slide on the floor,

and they all say `We're doing fine, Boss'  
so why are these others getting so cross?"  
And he fell asleep with his mouth wide open.  
A spider, crawling spidery cross his chin,  
startled by the sudden snoring din,  
flipped, lost its balance, fell right in.

Up in the attic, in his slobber-stained coat  
with a spider weaving a web in his throat  
and his smelly fat feet in a bucket of slime,

the Boozle is happily dreaming of crime -  
while the damp dust shudders on his sacks of gold  
he snores like an elephant with a bad cold.

But down in the cellar where the poor make the sweat  
that the Boozle uses to keep his hair wet,  
and out on the street where they stand and wait  
for the leftover pennies that fall from his plate,  
there are grumbles and rumbles and even shouts  
about how much he eats while they go without ...

But each of us has a bit of greed  
and greed is all that a Boozle needs -  
for though some say they'd like to knock his house down  
and others, that they'd run him out of town,  
too many want what the Boozle's got -  
the golden grime, the silver snot

and would really like to get greasy palms  
and play with power, never mind who they harm,  
and stick their snouts in the honeypots  
and mess with money while everything rots  
and deny others bread, so long as they've jam:  
that's why no-one's got rid of the Boozle of Bam.

## **Butterfly, Trinidad**

The old butterfly had been around the house  
for days, sucking sugar and bumping into walls,

but now she has reached the garden and her huge  
body straddles a cracked orange in the grass.

Her turtleshell wings are erect, even in dusk  
the sharp black eye mocks its watcher,

but she is too rigid: there is no flicker  
of interest or fear as we approach

and quietly leave, not being relatives,  
before her actual collapse and wake

which will happen in its own world  
in the moonlight under the orange tree

when the butterflies come, blue as death,  
to hover gleaming at the jungle's rim.

## **cabbages**

the young girls are cutting the cabbages  
green leaves closed over white hearts

they are cutting with knives that gleam  
like moonlight, like rings, like tears

the young girls are stripping the cabbage beds  
their flesh is the warm brown of fertile earth

what will open their green leaves  
or pierce their white hearts?

knives or moonlight  
rings or tears

## Canal

All day he sat at the side of the canal,  
like a closed dockyard, his rod  
motionless above the dirty water.  
All day, and nothing came. He pretended to ignore  
the cyclists, the shouting children;  
his eyes watched only the water.  
He thought - the fish are so large, so well-fed  
they ignore my bait. He thought - the fish  
are so few, so tiny, they can't swallow the hook.

As evening came, he imagined a fish as large as himself  
connected by the line, a thread, but balanced; nothing moved.  
He imagined it gape-mouthed, impassive,  
its slack mouth and fixed eyes the mirror of his own.  
Curious, wanting to confirm his vision, he leant  
forward - and with a deft flick  
the fish hooked him and he was pulled  
in a smooth curve to the suffocating water.

## Cat

I have walked on the wall  
and  
have put my eye on the world  
and  
it had better behave itself.

I have slouched under the bushes  
and have made the lumps of feather-covered cat-meat  
jump up and down  
waving their uneatable bits and squeaking stupidly

I have found slow wriggly things in my earth  
and have pulled them with my claws  
but they are not much fun  
and they are not good cat-meat

I have sat on the flowers, to watch  
the big animal that brings me cat-meat  
dig holes in my earth  
but it was not looking for the wriggly slimy  
things that are not cat-meat

It is not as intelligent as a cat,  
it does not use it's claws to dig  
and has nothing to put into the hole  
except a stalk of something.

Then it goes. I smell the stalks  
and since they are not cat-meat  
I stand on them, and dig in my earth  
to make it more as I like it

and the big animal is back.  
It is jumping up and down  
like the feather-covered cat-meat  
and waving its uneatable bits  
and squeaking stupidly

It is more useless than I'd thought -  
for all the jumping and waving it has not managed  
to leave the ground and float to the tip of a tree

if it did not bring me cat-meat  
I should certainly eat it.

## Chance

I kept an eye on the main chance  
and when it turned its back  
I grabbed a slim chance with both hands  
and hid it in my sack

now when I teeter on the edge  
or stumble in the rough  
I put my head in the sack and ask: any chance?  
and it purrs back: enough

## Change

For months he taught us, stiff-faced.  
His old tweed jacket closely buttoned up,  
his gestures careful and deliberate.

We didn't understand what he was teaching us.  
It was as if a veil, a gauzy bandage, got between  
what he was showing us and what we thought we saw.

He had the air of a gardener, fussily protective  
of young seedlings, but we couldn't tell  
if he was hiding something or we simply couldn't see it.

At first we noticed there were often scraps of leaves  
on the floor where he had stood. Later, thin wisps  
of thread like spider's web fell from his jacket.

Finally we grew to understand the work. And on that day  
he opened his jacket, which to our surprise  
seemed lined with patterned fabric of many shimmering hues.

Then he smiled and sighed. And with this movement  
the lining rippled and instantly the room was filled  
with a flickering storm of swirling butterflies.



## Choices

She doesn't choose where she lives  
or the school, the uniform  
but she can choose small things:

which bus to miss, how to hang about  
for the moment to slip down corridors and stairs

to try to become invisible, not there,  
to dodge sneers and shoves, taunts, threats,  
the torment of the toilets, the playground.

She doesn't tell her parents, she chooses  
not to tell her teachers. Why?

Come on, we all know why. Think of when  
you were afraid and powerless. Think  
what you chose. She chooses silence

and the cuts and pills, later,  
she will choose them as well.

## Classroom

classrooms are creatures  
a kind of pet  
some are naturally sunny  
others a bit gloomy  
but it's how we look after them  
that makes the difference in how they feel

day after day, week after week  
we leave the print of our presence  
without scratching names in wood  
or a scribble of felt-tip pens  
the room absorbs  
the touch of our hands, elbows, feet  
the smell of our fear, the sound of our laughter,  
marks the cleaners cannot remove  
the ghost stains of growing lives  
built up class after class year after year

it is because of this  
that a classroom with no-one in it  
is emptier than other empty rooms  
it waits with the sad uncertain manner of a dog  
left in a car or tied outside a shop -  
when we go in at a weekend or worse on holidays  
when the chairs stand on the desks  
and the dust rests calmly, unafraid of cleaners,  
the room seems in a troubled sleep, a fretful hibernation,  
as if it remembers it has a purpose but  
has forgotten who it is without its children

## The Claw

                  this is the  
                  shape of the  
                  monster's claw  
                  glinting on its  
                  massive paw  
                  which quietly  
                  opened the  
bedroom door  
and swung up  
with one  
terrible roar  
over the bed  
in the moon-  
light before  
it stabbed  
into the  
sleeper  
to sil-  
ence  
                  his  
                  sno  
                  re  
                  !

                  blood

                  d  
                  r  
                  i  
                  p  
                  p  
                  e  
                  d

                  down on the floor

## **Cinquains**

Cinquain  
sounds medieval:  
a casket to contain  
besieged castles, jousts, knights both good  
and evil.

### **1263 cinquain**

Vikings  
in dragon ships,  
Hakon's hard horrid guards:  
Scots and storms smash them on the shore  
by Largs.

### **1349 cinquain**

Rats, fleas,  
boils and black spots:  
Death scythes through the country,  
no walls are strong enough to stop  
disease.

### **1388 cinquain** (found poem)

"Raise my  
banner, call my  
war-cry, let neither friend  
nor foe know that I am fallen" -  
Douglas!

### **1415 cinquain**

Arrows  
darken the sky.  
As if maddened by flies  
the horses throw their armoured knights  
to die.

## **Citizen of the world**

when you are very small  
maybe not quite born  
your parents move  
for some reason you may never understand they move  
from their own town  
from their own land  
and you grow up in a place  
that is never quite your home

and all your childhood people  
with a smile or a fist say  
you're not from here are you  
and part of you says fiercely yes I am  
and part of you feels no I'm not  
I belong where my parents belonged

but when you go to their town, their country  
people there also say  
you're not from here are you  
and part of you says no I'm not  
and part of you feels fiercely yes I am

and so you grow up both and neither  
and belong everywhere and nowhere much the same  
both stronger and weaker for the lack of ground  
able to fly but not to rest

and all over the world, though you feel alone  
are millions like you, like a great flock of swallows  
soaring or falling exhausted, wings beating the rhythm  
of the wind that laughs at fences or frontiers,  
whose home is itself, and the whole world it moves over.

## Clanky Franky

In Clanky Franky's garden  
flowers clatter in the breeze  
and rusty leaves come rattling down  
from aluminium trees.  
But it's a quiet garden,  
he oils it every day  
and greases the hinged branches so  
they don't creak when they sway.  
He dabbles with a high-speed drill  
in beds of polished metal  
to plant bright stalks of stainless steel  
then screws on every petal.  
He solders on brassberries,  
he tightens up each nut,  
his grass is green - but copper  
so it never needs a cut.  
No dirt, no weeds, no nibbling bugs -  
it's so easy to maintain,  
but like any other gardener  
Franky loves to complain  
of the rubber cats  
and plastic gnats  
and most of all  
the rain

## Colosseum Comprehensive

They learn  
subtraction of limbs, division of guts,  
the practical geometry of sword stabs and cuts;

they study  
the argument of thrust, science of net and spear,  
the handicraft of killing, philosophy of force and fear;

on each public holiday the class exam arrives  
and afterwards  
the janitors  
sweep up the fallen, waste of lives

## Comicosaurus

Here's a jolly dinosaur,  
he likes to tickle you,  
and tickle, tickle, tickle till  
your face turns red and blue.

His laugh is loud and merry,  
even if his breath smells bad,  
but he keeps it up for hours and hours  
and drives you deaf and mad.

Then he pulls your leg a bit  
(he likes his little joke)  
and snaps it off above the knee  
and shoves it down his throat.

So even though it laughs a lot  
and has a charming smile,  
you'd be mad as a hatter  
to stop to chatter  
with a massive flesh-eating reptile.



## Corridor

I'm standing in the corridor  
with my back against the wall  
just outside the classroom door,  
I don't like being here at all,  
shuffling, muttering it isn't fair  
all I did  
was pull Lily's hair

It's lonely out here, it's boring  
away from my pal's silly grin,  
and I want to hear the story -  
perhaps I could sneak back in  
and anyway, it isn't fair  
all I did  
was push John off his chair

How long is this going to last?  
What are they laughing at now?  
What if the head should come past  
and give me an awful row?  
I keep telling myself I don't care  
it's not right, it isn't fair  
all I did  
was throw a rubber at Claire  
push John off his chair  
pull Lily's hair  
and swear

## creature

I am the  
crazy crater  
creature,  
I creep across the  
crater 's cracks  
and crunch the  
crimson crystals  
that cringe in  
crooked cul-de-sacs.  
Once a crumbling spacecraft crashed -  
an ancient cosmonaut crawled clear.  
Across the crinkled crust I chased her  
and chortling with churlish cheer  
caught the granny  
in a cranny  
of the crater  
and ate her

## Desk

It was stuffy in the classroom.  
He put his hand inside his desk,  
feeling for a pencil. It was cool in there,  
he let his hand swing aimlessly around.  
The space within seemed vast, and when  
he reached in further he found  
nothing, could feel no books, no ruler.  
His hand floated as if in a bath of shadows,  
airy and refreshing, not at all  
the same place that the rest of him was in.

He put both hands in, let them drift  
deeper, this way and that. It was more than empty,  
the inside had no sides. His hands  
never reappeared through some unexpected hole.  
He lifted the lid quietly a little more. A waft  
of soft air cooled his face, the same  
as on summer nights or under leafy trees.

He bent his head down to the gap. He looked inside.  
Dark as deep water, deep as a clear night sky.  
He smiled. He put his head inside.  
"What are you doing?", asked the teacher. But he didn't hear.  
He slid his shoulders in, and then  
before anyone could reach to stop him,  
he bent from the waist, kicking his chair back,  
and with a muffled cry of pleasure  
dived. For a split second,  
as the room filled with fresh air,  
we watched his legs slide slowly down into the desk  
and disappear. And then the lid fell back,  
shut, with a soft thud.

## Doggerel

See me free dog  
strutting down the street  
nosing in the bins  
for a takeaway to eat -  
got myself a bad name  
messing up the back lane  
can't keep my nose clean  
sniffing out the rude scene.

House dogs have their leads  
yard dogs have their chains.  
I'd rather be a free dog  
and run hungry in the rain.

See me rough stuff  
bag of skin and bone  
call no one master  
call no where home -  
grubby paws, sharp bite,  
dodge the law, start fight,  
I don't care what man says  
this dog will have his days.

House dogs beg and whimper  
yard dogs cry all night.  
I'd rather be a free dog  
and live the way I like.

## **Dr Dastardly Doom and the Modish Mirror**

Know, O Disciple of Doom, that villains are not as vain  
as the glitter-suited Goodies who spoil our fun  
and so I have invented this most interesting glass  
which can be fitted in shop-windows, phone-boxes -  
wherever a satin spangly superhero may appear  
and needs to quickly check his costume is correct.  
One sideways glance will be enough to turn them into  
victims of fashion -  
their shiny swimsuits will sprout frills,  
their tights will wrinkle and sag, their feet  
will wobble on suddenly stacked heels and platform soles -

The fools will stare at it like this and ...  
Aargh!!

## Dr. Frankenstein Explains

All the way through school it was the same:  
"Don't be such a cissy, Frankenstein,  
you're a big boy now ..."

And so they'd pull me, coaxing, mocking,  
from the only  
games that gave me any pleasure.

Boys, I was told, make machines, are inventors  
especially of things that fight and kill;  
girls get first the dolls and then the babies  
to hold and watch with love and wonder.

So they pushed me into science - You're a boy.  
learn how things tick, be logical, ambitious,  
no more cissy games: if you become a man  
you can be anything you want.

I thought about this. I became  
a great scientist. I thought about this.  
I wanted to sit in a quiet corner with a child  
I wanted to feel the warmth of life continuing.

My labour has finished, or just begun.  
I have, in man's way, become a mother.  
Here is my child: isn't he beautiful?

## Dragon

The dragon's face is wrinkled and the deep lines shape a mad grin  
It bobs up and down on poles outside the door of the Ma Bo cafe  
The great red and golden head nods and shakes towards the pressing  
crowd of people like a bull tossing away annoying flies,  
his tail ripples and sways above the knobby mass of their heads  
as if he was slithering through a bank of pebbles, a riverbed.

In the window hangs a row of red cooked chickens and at the door  
the cook and his customers lean out and yell encouragement:  
the dragon makes up his mind, lifts his head to the crowd's roar,  
rises to the bait, the dangling strings of red paper money,  
the green packets of rice parcelled neatly in leaves,  
and taking the gifts gives good luck for the next year.

So everyone cheers, and the cymbals crash louder than ever as he heaves  
and surges onward, and the curled crackers crackle in a fearful ear-  
splitting rat-tat-tat like machine-gunfire. And through the thunderous sea  
the dragon of good fortune dances forward with fierce glee.

## Drawer

Don't open Miss MacDonald's drawer  
or put your hand inside to get  
your confiscated lollipop  
catapult or cyberpet.

Behind our toys, the broken chalk,  
snapped pencils and bent paper-clips  
something strange lurks in the dark -  
we're just not sure of what it is.

We've seen Miss slip in crumbs and crusts,  
orange peel and apple cores,  
we've heard low growls, soft thumping and  
the scritch-scratch of sharp tiny claws.

But when we ask her what it is,  
Miss smiles - "It's a dinosaur:  
don't you believe me? Keep your fingers out  
- my pet likes to eat them raw"



## Dustmen

We count the days by shops and alleyways,  
each bend and length is measured by our shouts,  
and know the houses by the state of their backgates  
the people by whatever they've cast out.

Close to the end of things we heave the reeking bins  
from paving stone to shoulder with one rising turn  
and with the harsh wry humour of gravediggers  
we mock the maggots shaken from the metal urn.

In the maze of broken brick and antique slippery slabs  
where wild potatoes flower and charred tins rust  
like hunters we know creatures by their leavings  
and view them more with interest than disgust.

Into the wagon's wrecking jaws I've crammed a three-  
piece suite, a bedstead, a piano, a dead dog in two bits;  
slummy goes into the sack, but for a modest fee  
we'll crush anything to nothing and drop it in the pit.

And every week twenty more tons press on four collar bones:  
what you throw out lightly falls heavily on us  
who bear your past away and bury it; you who'll become  
worn bones and spoiling meat, old clothes, handfuls of dust.

## Elephant

is very Huge is  
ELEPHANT  
and BIG and BULKY  
and ever so even  
Ponderous:  
and he thinks he thinks  
but he doesn't know what  
he thinks he thinks  
for very Huge are  
ELEPHANT THOUGHTS  
and Weighty and Large  
but soft underneath;  
and he thinks he thinks  
it's time for hay  
but he doesn't know  
and that being so  
he squirts water over  
his big left shoulder  
and thinks of a Very Huge  
NOTHING

is Very Huge is  
ELEPHANT  
is Hugely ENORMOUS  
(and slightly gormless)

**Er**

Seen it in the toilets  
written on the wall  
who does what and how with who

but I can't believe it's all  
truthful, honest or correct -  
especially the bit on you

screaming in red felt-tip  
among the sneers and boasts -  
tried to scrub it with my sleeve.

Diagrams scratched on the door  
explain the body thing but miss  
out what worries me the most

my awkward silence when we meet  
tongue-tied in the corridor:  
no words on the walls suggest

ways to be friends - and before  
any touch of hands or lips  
it's words I'm groping for.

## Experienced

I asked them, what are your hobbies,  
what job would you like to have?  
William says he likes collecting stamps  
and he'd like to be a postman.  
John's hobby is watching trains  
he wants to be a train driver,  
Lucy's a really keen swimmer,  
she wants to train as a deep sea diver.  
Claire likes examining bugs and plants,  
she hopes to become a scientist,  
and Jack says his hobbies  
are eating sweets and fighting and he's going to be  
a dentist.

## An experiment

For this you will need a goldfish bowl,  
a ball big enough to almost fill it but also  
squashy enough to fit easily inside,  
some water,  
and, unfortunately,  
one small fish.

Now take these to the largest, emptiest room you can find,  
and placing the bowl at its centre, put in the ball.

Then add the water, carefully, to cover.

Darken the room, turn out all lights but one.

Now

slip the small fish into the bowl, so it can swim  
between the ball and glass, round and round  
the narrow water.

Does the fish hope  
that the whole room could be flooded? Does it wish  
that there was another bowl, another fish, in sight?

Round and round, round and round,  
in the dark room, under the one strong light,  
in the only water there is,  
which it hopes is clean,  
because it must have water  
and this water, trapped between  
the rough surface of the ball  
and the edge of vast waterless space,  
is where it has to live,  
whatever its dreams may be.

Now you can try this experiment. You sit down  
and watch the fish.  
And watch the fish. And imagine  
what the water means to the fish. You imagine  
the water drying up or spilling out. Imagine  
the water filthy or poisonous. You sit  
and watch, and when you feel the time is right,  
when you feel you understand  
this moving round and round  
with a small world  
in the one  
and only  
possible  
place  
you bow to the small fish  
and go outside  
and look at the sky  
and breathe in deeply. Now  
how does the air taste?

**firework**

F            F        F        F        F  
A            L        I        L        O  
N            A        Z        A        U  
T            S        Z        R        N  
A            H        E        T  
S            F        A  
T            I        I  
I        R        N  
C        E        S  
f   r i e s  
foolish  
fiddling  
fingers!

## Fishing

daybreak. they come from the houses,  
the small wooden houses, like rafts, like arks

& from a boat's dark hollow they unravel  
a mass of strings; a shawl to wrap the chill waves in,  
a hammock to rest the uneasy dreams of water,  
a tattered handkerchief to trap the silver tears  
beneath the waves eyebrow

& they drag it across the sand like a dead seal,  
they walk into the water wearing all their clothes

& now they form a semi-circle  
in which some of them are swimming,  
& now they close the circle  
& their first and last stand on the shore  
& now they all are pulling, pulling,  
pulling as if the  
whole weight of the sea is in the net  
& now they all stand in the shallows  
& the breakers below their knees  
see the with white water & flashing shiny fish

& that last heave has separated the foam from the fish  
that touching the shore twist in the dry current of the air  
becoming pearl, shell & metal shards, as helpless, as fleshy  
as ripe fruits, but without the promise of seed or stone,  
completely dead

a small boy lifts them one by one  
from the sand spread like a jeweller's counter,  
threads them together  
in giant earrings, through their mouths

into the boats' lee the fishers pull the net, pick up  
their bunched trophies, go back to the houses

palm trees caught in a net of light, the almost  
tideless sea. a faint shadow of silver  
splashed upon the sand

## Fishy Stories

There was a bright teacher from Torquay  
who went to fight sharks in the North Sea.  
When asked why he had,  
he said "'Cos I'm mad  
and it's safer than teaching 4c."

\*\*\*

An eager young teacher of boys is  
unhappy away from wild noises.  
Each Friday at five  
he drives off to dive  
into work with a school of porpoises.

\*\*\*

Each night after school, Mr. Block  
fished from an octagonal rock.  
He baited his hook  
with an oblong maths book  
and caught a triangular haddock.



## Flood

The rain fell all night, beating on roofs  
as dark and hunched as hills,  
cascading uncontained into the street  
in wind-curved waterfalls.

All night the rain fell, kept falling.  
This morning, the street's a river:  
cars founder and sink, while buses  
crawl laden as ocean liners,

raise bow-waves so swollen they break  
booming across the pavement  
where tossed at the tide's rising mark  
seaweed tangles to litter;

and under the hedges and gates  
fish shoal in the gleaming shallows,  
and further out, through the channel  
marked by wave-slapped traffic-lights,

dolphins leap lampposts, and whales  
surge and sound in the deep roads.

## Flowers

Flowers are soft, they smell of aunties,  
weeds are better - no one shouts  
if you pull off all their petals  
or stamp them flat into the ground.

Grown-ups are funny about their garden,  
they don't see it like I do -  
"Such lovely flowers", they say, when really  
it's a jungle where toy soldiers hide.

Leaves are alright, you can kick them  
and make smoke signals when they burn;  
but what I like best in a garden  
is trees to climb, fat slugs, and worms.

## Friend

It was in his pocket. He admitted it.  
But when they looked, they could see nothing.  
Turn it out - they said. He did. The pocket  
hung from his jacket like a floppy ear.  
His hands were empty too. There was fluff in his fingernails.  
Liar - they said, you don't have one, you made it up.  
They laughed like knives; but he didn't mind. What  
they couldn't find was safe, they couldn't hurt it.  
The others were also pleased; they thought  
they understood, had found out, his lie.  
When they let him go, he put his hand back in the pocket,  
and his fingers first made, then stroked  
the unknown shape of his friend.

## **A Garden for Dracula**

Beyond the gloomy hedge a thin mist  
lies as fine and sticky as cold sweat  
on disfigured statues, gaping pits,  
walls lurking in a tangled mass of cobwebbed ivy.

No wooden stakes in this garden!  
and the unpinned roses trail in the mud  
between cracked gravestones where something  
smells very rotten and the slow drip  
of dark water is menacing and sudden ...

who knows what their roots are tickling?  
their curved fangs wait for you to trip -  
be careful, be careful where you tread!  
Their flowers are like thin lips that long for blood,  
the white roses are hungry, the red have fed.

## **A Garden for the Hulk**

Green. It has to be green.  
Not the dull shade of holly and ivy  
but bright as new buds,  
powerful as young shoots, fresh grass.  
Green everywhere, not a flower,  
not a blossom, not an inch of brown soil.

And there he is hidden  
like a gigantic greenfly,  
can lie on his huge back  
and pretend to be the spring.  
His mighty green muscles  
rippling like the grass  
his fingers like sturdy shoots  
his head a small bush fanned by its own breeze.

But only for spring; in summer,  
in brown autumn and bare winter,  
he has to stay human, powerless,  
controlling the green force of his temper.

## Getting Heavy

big in his boots  
he met a weighing machine  
dressed as a punchball.

I tell your weight, it said  
and so he hit it  
with his heaviest punch.

the machine stood still and  
thought about it.  
seven stones lighter than me,  
it said at last

falling on top of him and  
crushing him  
flat.

## Giraffe

an  
almost  
ridiculously  
triangular head

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giraffes are made of dirty yel  
low plasticene and four s  
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t c  
c k  
h s

## Going to grans

I like to visit my gran  
it's always lots of fun  
but she's ever so keen  
on keeping things clean  
so there's lots of jobs to be done

we beat out the mat  
where the cats have sat  
and hoover dog hairs  
off the stairs;  
but that's just the start  
because gran likes things smart

we have to  
brush the dust off the platypus  
tidy bored toads into the wardrobe  
push the rhino off the lino  
dig the gopher out of the sofa  
put the llamas in their pyjamas  
tuck an armadillo under each pillow  
pull parakeets out of the sheets  
and give the giraffe a bath

you'd think that was enough  
but gran's an awful fuss :  
she makes  
me shake the snakes  
and iron the lion  
before we get tea and cakes.



## GNASH

All right, I've got bad teeth  
don't tell me again  
Ok so they're yellow at the edges and  
one of them is amazingly squint and  
there's an interesting collection of metal and  
the gums are wearing down and  
yes I did know they're like that thank you  
but no it wasn't eating too many sweeties did it  
when I was young we sucked rusty railings instead of lollipops  
but if you keep trying to empty the penny tray  
maybe the dentist will be able to make you a set every bit as nice  
and anyway they've been in my mouth a long long time  
twenty times longer than yours. They've chewed on life, these teeth,  
and they're still my own, still strong and sharp  
and you won't be looking at them  
when they bite into your neck

## Goodfellow

What a rogue! That day his crime  
left the police gasping - his light fingers  
had taken their breath away

and his victims: a queue  
of respectable businessmen standing at a bus-stop  
on a wet Monday morning - suddenly

shivering, shocked to see him running away  
with their trousers:  
he had stolen their dignity.

I saw it! I tried to shout: stop thief!  
I couldn't:  
he had stolen the words from my mouth

## Good morning

this is  
the teacher forecast

Mrs. Brown  
will be gloomy with occasional outbreaks of rage,  
storms are expected by mid-afternoon

Miss Green  
will be mild, although her smiles  
will probably cloud over when she finds  
the spider in her chalk box

Mr. White  
will be rather windy, especially after dinner-time,  
with poor visibility when his glasses fog over

Some drizzle is expected around Miss Red,  
she has not quite got over her cold,  
and Mrs. Blue is already gusting down the corridor  
and should reach gale force 9 when she hits the playground.

For the rest of you, it will be much as usual,  
a mixture of sunny moments and sudden heavy showers.  
Have a good day.

## The great lizards

The great lizards are gone,  
their bones are inlaid in land, or stand  
in the high halls of museums,  
gaunt and picked clean, pieced together  
for the cold winds to blow through.

They're quiet, these bones.  
No rippling scales, no huge eye swivelling,  
no rank hot stench of heavy flesh.  
Apart from these bones, we must invent them ourselves,  
monsters, dragons, creatures of our imagination.

Yet the bones do not show how they lived,  
but how they died; and these great skeletons,  
so carefully rebuilt, do not make me think of them  
striding terribly across sprawling plains  
or browsing enormous mouthfuls in steamy swamps  
in a world so long before us that it seems wholly alien

but of them running out of time,  
fleeing across a desert where earth melts  
through clouds of driven sand and ash  
under a sky of smoke and fire,  
closing in, burning and choking;  
of them howling as their feet stick  
and stumble in scorching lava  
or catch in cracks as the ground quakes and splits  
and they fall into the history  
of two-legged soft-skinned small creatures.

And the great gape of empty mouth  
asks me to imagine what  
will dig us up after another million years  
and raise our bones to stare at  
in bewildered curiosity.

## Green grocer

I went into the greengrocer's:  
the vegetables and the fruit  
were all piled neatly in their boxes  
and a large watermelon lay in the corner.

I couldn't see the greengrocer.  
The shop smelt ripe and drowsy. I put  
three bananas in a paper bag. It was  
so still and silent I felt watched.  
The mushrooms looked like knee bones.  
The watermelon lay contented in the corner.

What had happened to the greengrocer?  
I took some carrots. I stuffed  
plastic bags with spinach,  
with the long green teeth of okra,  
with courgettes like tiny truncheons.  
The watermelon lay big-bellied in the corner.

There was no sign of the greengrocer.  
I called out, I waited, then I left  
money by the till and went towards the door.  
The enormous watermelon in the corner  
snored.

## haiku/tanka

Hi coo

We're pals eh? Above  
big bloodshot eyes huge horns twitch -  
how far to the gate?

A tanka

wallows in the high  
waves and rising winds, like a  
long stick in a stream:  
when it cracks thousands of birds  
and fish will float like dead leaves.

## Hate

I took what I hated  
to a corner of the playground.  
I battered it, I bust its nose,  
I shoved it through the railings.

That didn't help. I took it  
to the road and pushed it - oops -  
underneath a bus, a steamroller, a tank.  
It was no use. I dropped it  
off a railway bridge, a cliff,  
an aeroplane. I crunched it  
with a 200 ton weight. I stuck it  
with a million pins. I tore it apart.  
I played football with the bits.

That didn't help. It was no use.  
It kept looking at me, winking disgustingly.  
I was shaking all over. I woke up.  
I was banging my own head on the wall.

## Hey You

Hey you, we're the boys at the back of the class:  
look at us, we're great cos we say we are;  
thinking's too soft when you want to scrap  
when you've got to talk big  
when you've got to be hard  
and sitting down's a kind of trap  
when you need to mess  
when you need to act:

and we know we're boss cos everything stops,  
the girls can't work, the smart play dumb,  
when we're shouting loud and kicking mad:  
for writing's boring  
fighting's fun,  
we're big because we're bad;  
we think we're great  
and we're never wrong,  
we're ace star brill the lot  
and we can't wait till the bell has rung:  
we're only here cos we had to come.



## High-hat

I put my high hat on your chair  
and underneath it hid a snare.  
Now sit on my chair if you dare.

I put my high hat on your room  
and plunged it in dark felted gloom.  
I expect you'll all be leaving soon.

I put my high hat on your house -  
out drop pigeons, fleas, a mouse,  
a constant leak of grump and grouse.

I put my high hat on your town  
and pressed between the brim and ground  
a ring of buildings crumble down.

I put my high hat on your world

## How to look after your pets

Be kind to your tarantula  
it seldom gets out very far  
so take it with you in the car.  
Your mum will be extremely pleased  
to find it crawling on her knees.

To exercise a porcupine  
whose muscles are in sad decline  
just bounce it on a trampoline.  
The animal looks most appealing  
with its spines stuck in the ceiling.

Piranhas will get stressed and fraughter  
without some time for play and slaughter  
in a deep tank of warmish water.  
Your aged auntie's bath will do.  
Please clean the bones out after use.

An overanxious alligator  
should be fed soggy prunes and dates or  
large helpings of mashed potator.  
Small hands are best to feed this diet,  
so let your little sister try it.

It is a natural mistake  
when playing with a rattlesnake  
to grab the head and give a shake.  
It's better twisted in a knot  
and hung above the baby's cot.

If hiccups worry your hyena  
cover it in semolina.  
and squeeze it like a concertina.  
Wear wellies, waterproofs and hood  
to avoid the splatter of wet pud.

If you are worried, get advice:  
a change of diet might suffice  
but it is not considered nice  
to let your pet  
eat the vet.

## **I have a hippopotamus**

I have a hippopotamus,  
I keep it in the bath.  
It is a happy hippo  
but every time it laughs  
water floods across the floor  
and mum goes on the warpath.

She tells me - Keeping hippos  
in a house is daft:  
they should be on the tele  
or in a photograph;  
why can't you keep something sensible,  
like a lion or giraffe?

## I'm for ..

I'm for the team that's fast and clean  
not dirty or mean, I'm for the team  
that doesn't stop running  
whose passes are stunning  
and the ball seems to know  
just where it should go  
to fall smooth and neat  
at the next twitching feet  
as they sweep down the pitch  
switching wings as they race  
to make space or run rings  
round an outpaced defence. I'm for  
the team whose strength is skill,  
that will twist and swerve  
with control and nerve  
as they dribble through the middle  
but don't fiddle, fight or quibble  
with the ref  
wasting time and breath. I'm  
for the team who play so well  
that my mind and heart  
are lost in their art  
so I don't scream or yell  
but gasp in delight and grin.  
(I don't care if they win).

## I'm into techno

I'm into techno  
machine mad man  
finger on the button  
never need to lift a hand  
I'm gaga for the gizmos,  
like to strike the right pose,  
fully-automated, computer-calculated,  
future-proofed, updated so it shows ...

I bake ice-cream in my oven-freezer  
I blow my nose in a solar sneezer  
I've a robot bed to service my head  
I pick my spots with a vacuum tweezer  
I dry my hair in a microwave sink  
I write my letters in electric ink  
my video-mirrors as tall as the wall  
with a screen as wide as a skating-rink

If I see a gadget I've got to get it  
to pet it or regret it or forget it or set it

I've a greasy micro-chip  
stuck to my lower lip  
and a twenty megabyte toothpick  
I've got an electronic thing  
that let's you hear plants sing  
green songs in ultra-sonic.

I don't need to think 'cos my bathroom sink  
has a brain that knows more than I do,  
it can calculate the crumbs  
in a dozen current buns  
while flushing them down the loo.  
I've a burglar alarm with so much charm  
that robbers give themselves up  
I've a magnetic mouse  
that can tidy the house  
and a highly intelligent tea cup

I've got machines that dream my dreams  
that think my thoughts  
that fear my fear  
that do my deeds  
that scheme my schemes  
I've got every machine that there's ever been  
and I don't know  
why I'm here

## Information for travellers

As you read this poem you are on a spacecraft travelling at sixty six thousand miles an hour. It spins as it flies: since you began to read it has already turned nine miles to the east. Be honest, you didn't feel a thing. You are orbiting a star, not a very big one compared to many of the ten thousand million others that go round on the same galactic wheel, and are flying at a height above its surface of some ninety three million miles. We hope to cruise at this distance for another eight thousand million years. What happens then is anybody's guess. Despite its speed and size this craft is a space-station, a satellite, not designed for interstellar flight. Its passengers rely on the comfort of a pressurised cabin to enjoy the voyage. We must advise you that, in the event of collision, loss of atmosphere, or any alteration in course which may result in overheating or extreme cold, this craft is not equipped with parachutes or emergency exits. On a brighter note, the spaceship contains an enormous variety of in-flight magazines, meals to suit every taste, and enough games, puzzles and adventures to last a lifetime. We hope you enjoy your voyage. Thank you for flying Planet Earth.

## **In my bath**

In my bath is  
a rubber duck  
a bear with one ear  
a bit of muck  
wooden lorries  
a plastic frog  
a blob of soap  
a woolly dog  
my dinner dish  
some odd red stuff  
a bobbing boat  
a ball of fluff  
a piece of cheese  
a soggy pea  
a lot of water  
a lot of water  
and  
me.

## An inspector calls

On the day before the visit  
our teachers rushed round tidying the school.  
Everyone helped. The youngest children  
were sent to hunt along the skirting-boards  
and peer under low furniture, picking up  
loose straw or feathers that the cleaning ladies  
had missed and chasing out any hidden animals.  
Mostly these were gerbils, though there was  
a worrying business with a python in the paint cupboard.  
The cats were cleared off the radiators and shooed outside  
where they sat in a grumpy line along the playground wall.  
Most of the reptiles were in tanks, which were  
easily moved into the boiler room, though a few geckos  
were still being brushed from walls late in the afternoon.  
The parrots were a problem. Some of the older boys  
wanted to spray them grey and put them outside disguised as pigeons,  
but in the end some girls covered themselves in birdseed  
and lured them down. After that it was easy to hide them in the toilets  
where their noise would not be noticed. It took the combined force  
of all the fourth year classes, the headmaster and a mouse  
to get the elephant into the janitor's room, but in the end  
it was wedged between the shelves and buckets  
and settled to eating hay and mops. It was decided  
to disguise the monkeys as second year boys - and indeed  
you couldn't see much difference, except the monkeys were quieter.  
Last of all, we herded the camels from the hall and tethered them  
in the bike-shed. Only the fishtanks and caged mice were left  
and when the inspector came next morning, the headmaster met him  
with a confident smile.  
Unfortunately, without the animals around,  
the space and silence were irresistible holes to fill -  
we started to riot, jumping and screaming, running and screeching.  
The inspector stared, grim-faced. He said  
' It's like a zoo in here.'



## Interesting

I have lots of interests -  
my lego, my train set,  
my bike, my football.  
My hobby is watching my dad  
play with them all.

## **In the cellar**

The father is sawing, slicing the wood with strong smooth strokes. The boy prods a curled shaving with a chisel.

The father is concentrating; his eyes, his shoulders, his arms, are fixed in the wood. The boy is also engrossed, with a sharp corner he has stabbed a jagged split.

The father pauses, lays the saw on its side. What will he say?  
- Now you try, hold it this way - ?, or, - does that look straight to you - ?  
No. He says - Stop fiddling. You'll spoil the chisel's point.

For what he is teaching is not woodwork, but love of making and patience and care in the work, with the tools. And the boy is learning about his father or perhaps about himself

and he puts the chisel back in its place  
and he puts his hands in his pockets  
and he tries not to lean on the wall.

## **Invasion**

When the aliens landed on earth  
their mighty battle fleet  
spread out in formation  
along the shoreline of a sea.

When the aliens landed on earth  
their commander stood on the shore  
and claimed the planet. After all,  
there was no resistance to their force.

When the aliens landed on earth  
a boy, stepping over a puddle,  
squashed them all.

## Inventor

He tells the class to read  
silently. He twiddles  
his thumbs, he invents  
a machine for marking exercise books,  
the self-cleaning board-duster,  
a sleepy gas that can instantly subdue  
a row of noisy boys.

He twists a pencil, he invents  
a robotic hand that creeps spider-like across ceilings  
and drops to tap on the desk of a dreamer; he gives it  
a flashing orange light and wailing siren, he considers  
programming it to sense the difference between  
a blank stare and deep thought,  
he decides it's impossible. He rotates  
his right foot, he invents  
a mesmeric device that compels total attention,  
he invents a telescopic arm fitted with video cameras, with radar  
to detect and jam electronic games and beeping watches, with pincers  
for confiscating annoying objects and retrieving dropped pens,  
he invents a tea-making machine that looks like a pencil-sharpener,  
cheese-flavoured rulers, a book that's really a sandwich,  
and then the bell rings. For a moment he thinks  
he's invented that too.

## Is there a ghost in this classroom ?

Before anything, don't turn around,  
ghosts are never where you expect them to be.  
Let's look for signs. Does your desk lid  
slam unexpectedly while you're carefully closing it?  
Do pens and pencils wriggle and squirm,  
slip from your fingers and dive to the floor?  
And when you look for them, they've disappeared  
and no-one can find them for weeks and weeks  
until they turn up dusty, under a radiator,  
looking much the same but not feeling quite right?  
Do the legs of your chair wobble nervously?  
Do stacks of exercise books mysteriously slither apart  
or your biro suddenly start to write in invisible ink?  
And when you're working, do you sometimes sense  
someone watching you - and it's not the teacher,  
who's looking out of the window, or your friends,  
who are watching their hands write - but  
somewhere you can't see, but can feel like heat or light,  
you know something's eyes are staring into you?  
Now tell me, do you feel  
a sudden small wind licking your ankles,  
a slow cold shiver sliding up your leg?  
Is there an icy itch prickling your neck?  
Do you hear a soft whispering, so close and quiet  
it sounds like it's inside your head?  
You do?  
Then there is a ghost in this classroom  
and it's here  
to haunt YOU.

## **It's hard being a witch**

It's hard being a witch  
all the blasted heaths have become housing estates  
and nobody sells cauldrons any more

Look, I'm reduced  
to sitting on broken bricks by a burntout car  
stirring a dented saucepan on a scrappy fire  
of mucky dogdamp wood

It's no good  
all the ponds are gone with their frogs and newts  
I can't find batswool anywhere; and as for tongue of dog  
well, would you go near those huge alsatians?

I can only rely on the rats, for the rest  
I make do with what's around me:  
greasy chip-papers, plastic bottles,  
the grey insides of sodden mattresses,  
four- week old curry, slime from concrete walls,  
mouldy carpets, smokers coughs, bits of squashed cat..

O, nasty enough, but they don't work the same:  
I tried turning children into mice  
but they all became space invaders,  
I made a towerblock vanish  
but nobody cared or noticed;  
I turned a teacher into a gibbering idiot  
but he became a TV personality

I don't see a hapless king or a benighted prince  
from one year to the next  
It's not right  
even the broomsticks have  
sticky plastic handles, nylon bristles;  
still, I must fly. It's my  
signing-on day at the dole

## Jobs

I could be  
shovelling stars into black holes  
or digging tunnels for government moles  
or the first nuclear scientist on the dole

I could be  
learning space history from intelligent slime  
teaching houseflies to clean up industrial grime  
or saving accountants from lives of petty crime

I could be  
inventing the rubberised brain-powered car  
or sailing a barge down a canal on Mars  
or writing HELP large enough to be seen from the stars

I could be  
a dentist for movie-star sharks  
or a social worker for DSS clerks  
or stopping our towns from becoming car parks  
I could be

I could be  
a survivor under ten tons of lead  
a hero (but you have to be dead)  
or perfectly happy just staying in bed  
I could be

a soldier (but not fire a shot)  
a banker (who gives what he's got)  
I could be prime minister and not lie a lot

I could be  
but I'm not

## **Jouvert Morning**

The sun. The sun  
jumps up on the Savannah, a copper mask, a blazing pan  
beating, just jumping, no stopping,  
its deep bass echoing in the haze that makes the houses  
seem to vibrate, belly-out, shift their sides;  
and coming with the heat, the thrum and thrust of drums  
rising in the dust churned by heavy trucks whose steel  
shimmers as they rumble like chariots of thunder  
in the ruck and swell, the surge of masqueraders:  
a tumbled mass of sailors, kings, red indians and demons,  
birds and beasts, gods of cloth and cane and feather  
who roll and ripple on the riffs, the bursting waves of brass  
breaking on a hoped-for shore where everybody is somebody  
and the masks of everyday drop like discarded rotis  
to be crushed by the feet of the dancers in the street  
as freed and lost inside the tempo they celebrate themselves.



## Just between you and me

He's breaking that voice in for somebody else  
He's borrowed his ears from the elephants' graveyard  
His brains are as sharp as a squashed tomato  
His hair has been washed in a bucket of lard.

His legs are as straight as strangled bananas  
His breath smells as sweet as a dead skunk's armpit  
His nose is so long it touches tomorrow  
If he took off his cap his head would go with it.

His eyes wobble-wobble like gossy fried eggs  
But he's still my very best friend  
Even if his brain was found in a drain  
Don't you dare say a word about him -

If I call him names, it's one of our games,  
but if you do,  
it's rude.

## Just friends

Me and my friend  
crawl through bushes to secret dens,  
climb trees and walls,  
play football.

My friend can flatten big boys with a shove  
or stand like a rock and shout them down.  
When we're together we're stronger than two  
life's more fun with my friend around.

Me and my friend  
don't have to pose or pretend:  
there's nothing between us  
but trust.

Yet the stupid sniggers are painful,  
and silly gestures make me sore -  
why can't a boy and girl be friends,  
just friends, nothing more?

## The key to the castle

This is the key to the castle

This is the box  
with rusty locks  
that holds the key to the castle

This is the spider, huge and fat,  
who wove its web and sat, and sat  
on top of the box  
with rusty locks  
that holds the key to the castle

This is the cellar, cold and bare,  
dark as the grave, with nobody there  
except the spider, huge and fat,  
who wove its web and sat, and sat  
on top of the box  
with rusty locks  
that holds the key to the castle

This is the stair that crumbles and creaks  
where every small step moans and squeaks  
that leads to the cellar, cold and bare,  
dark as the grave, with nobody there  
except the spider, huge and fat,  
who wove its web and sat, and sat  
on top of the box  
with rusty locks  
that holds the key to the castle

This is the rat with yellow teeth,  
sharp as sorrow, long as grief,  
who ran up the stair that crumbles and creaks  
where every small step moans and squeaks,  
up from the cellar, cold and bare,  
dark as the grave, with nobody there  
except the spider, huge and fat,  
who wove its web and sat, and sat  
on top of the box  
with rusty locks  
that holds the key to the castle

This is the damp and dirty hall  
with peeling paper on its mouldy wall  
where the black rat runs with yellow teeth,

sharp as sorrow, long as grief,  
who ran up the stair that crumbles and creaks  
where every small step moans and squeaks,  
up from the cellar, cold and bare,  
dark as the grave, with nobody there  
except the spider, huge and fat,  
who wove its web and sat, and sat  
on top of the box  
with rusty locks  
that holds the key to the castle

This is the ghost with rattling bones,  
carrying his head, whose horrible groans  
fill the damp and dirty hall  
with peeling paper on its mouldy wall  
where the big black rat with yellow teeth  
sharp as sorrow, long as grief,  
who ran up the stair that crumbles and creaks  
where every small step moans and squeaks,  
up from the cellar, cold and bare,  
dark as the grave, with nobody there  
except the spider, huge and fat,  
who wove its web and sat, and sat  
on top of the box  
with rusty locks  
that holds the key to the castle

This is the child who came into play  
on a rainy, windy, nasty day

and said BOO! to the ghost who groaned in the hall  
and SCAT! to the rat by the mouldy wall  
and went down the creaking crumbling stair  
into the cellar, cold and bare,  
and laughed at the spider, huge and fat,  
and brushed off the web where it sat and sat  
and opened the box  
with rusty locks  
and took the key to the castle

## Keys

With this key I drive my house  
with this I open bottletops  
I keep this one to clean my nails  
and this to tighten big screws up

this is for where I pour money in  
this is for where fat moths fly out  
this one opens paint tins well  
cuts string and twists odd things about

I use this one to lock my street  
and this to shut up Auntie Glenda  
this one opens nothing at all  
what this one does I can't remember

## Knife Song

Even if I was lying in some puddle  
old and rusted to the hilt  
and you were to see me, lift me up;  
I would still be whispering - go on,  
test my edge - how far do you dare?  
You try me against the dead, the vegetable,  
like a sabre tooth, a stabbing claw;  
I am my own power, even for the weak.  
You press me against your thumb to see  
how sharp. And the skin turns cheesy yellow:  
blood pulls back, prepared to burst.  
You whirl me like a sparkler, slicing air.  
You like my dance. I make you hard.  
Think how I'll cut. It would be so easy.  
I fit well in the palm of your hand.  
I am comfortable here. I am humble,  
your servant, I am what you make me  
and my cold tongue whispers - go on  
test my edge - how far do you dare?

## **Late worker**

Dad works on the night shift  
he goes alone into the dark

He has no supper, Mum says  
he gets a bite at work

but he tells us a story, tucks us in  
and slips away like a shadow into shadows

He's always back by daybreak,  
his long black coat hangs in the hall

but his sad eyes, his great weariness show  
how tiring the work must be

and why else would he need to sleep all day  
in a wooden box in a cold cellar?

## Leave it alone

Imagine this. An autumn morning. The leaves scud and settle on the street  
A boy comes out of a house, bag on shoulder, off to school,  
shuffles, bounces, jabs a leg out at the railings, leaps back, lollops on  
going with the leaves, with the breeze behind him  
and he sees  
half on the kerb half on the pavement almost at the corner  
a pile, a gigantic heap of leaves.  
He starts to run, the target is too marvellous to miss,  
the greys the browns the faded greens swept to a high mound,  
and the breeze bringing more each second  
what a pile.  
And his legs ready themselves for that good kick  
that ploughing explosive rush through crackling dryness  
and he comes to the moment,  
hold it  
imagine it, that moment  
the moment all warriors, drivers, rulers fear  
and a thought goes down to the pit of his stomach  
a message drops to the bottom of his boots  
that he knows something's terribly wrong but can't spot it  
and he's going too fast, he can't stop  
hold it, that moment, that important moment  
before he hits  
and slips and skids  
on the brown steaming curd buried under the leaves  
as his clothes, his face are plastered in a thick crusty mass  
and coated with leaves at interesting angles  
and when he stands up - what to do, to go home, to stand  
in the shower in his clothes - to strip off there and then  
before the smell does for him? - and as he hovers in despair  
he wipes his face with the cleaner side of a sleeve  
he shuffles to the corner and there,  
still not far down the street  
is the elephant



## Look out

Here comes a spider with enormous feet  
in hobnailed boots as hard as the street

Here comes a wasp with a rolled-up comic  
as big as an atlas and twice as thick

Here comes a mouse with a human-trap  
that'll break a back with a terrible snap

Here comes a cow with a churning chainsaw  
Here comes a fly to squash you on the floor

Here comes a cat with a whale in a can  
Here comes a chicken with a frying pan

Here comes a dodo with an atom bomb  
(don't ask me where he came from)

and they all look big and angry and rough  
and they all, all say - We've had enough

## Lost

And how often have I told you  
you'll won't find something  
if you don't look for it

*I have looked*

and this room is a pit, an absolute shambles,  
how do you expect to find anything in here  
let alone your gym kit?

*That's not the problem. I need my gym things  
but I know where everything is*

Are you serious? In these mountains of mess,  
these dumps of dirty clothes?

*Yes. I drew a map. I thought  
if I know where everything is  
I won't have to tidy up. So I drew a map  
of everything, even the cobwebs*

So if you know where everything is  
what have you dragged me from my breakfast to find?

*The map.*

## Magic

She puts her hands in the sink - with each deft flick  
another plate comes out clean - I can't understand this:  
even saucers are awkward to me, take an age to wash.  
It's the same with flour: what runs and jumps from me  
obeys her instantly, rolling itself into a neat ball  
to unfurl like a handkerchief beneath her wand.  
She says to the fire - go on, you, burn! - and it does.  
Wool turns to clothes between her clicking fingers.  
The hands are always moving, you seldom see the trick  
till later, with surprise, you find the world changed:  
the dust gone, the dress ironed, the food laid out to eat.  
Clear up your things - she says - they won't put themselves away;  
but I think if she told them to, they would. She's so good  
at that sort of magic.

## Mangoes

because the rain has not yet fallen  
the valley's curled lips sweat towards the sky

& because the sun has buried itself in the valley  
the sweat is yellow, yellow of soil becoming sand  
of dry cane, of sulphur, of fire

& because this yellow cannot be denied  
because it glows in the heart of green  
green the child of sun and water

the huge trees with their domes of darkest green  
their thick cool domes of oily leaves  
are drenched with yellow blossom or dripping mangoes

green mangoes that are flushed with sunlight  
mangoes turning more yellow than earth than fire  
whose flesh is becoming sunshine & liquid

that hang like beads of yellow sweat  
& fall for the ants, the village children, the passerby,  
that are caught in sticky hands, in reed baskets, in hats,

so that everyone can eat the fruit of the sun  
the yellow sun cobwebbed by clouds

& because the mangoes are ripe the parrots are coming  
macaws with bellies the colour of ripe mangoes  
with backs the colour of brilliant sky

amazon parrots whose heads are splashed with blossom  
whose backs are washed the light blue of spring water  
whose bodies are the green of leaves in the rain

the rain that is beginning to fall in the valley

## Map

It's a maths lesson but I'm doing geography.  
I know this desktop like the back of my hand.  
There's a sharp groove chipped in the edge, a valley;  
here a small crater gouged near the centre,  
inked in, like these names of those who sat  
here before me: inked in too deep to be scrubbed out,  
as permanent as landscape, coloured like fields or lakes,  
marks that only time or deep re-working will erase.  
And I have discovered something else:  
these scratches on the desktop, these thin paths  
that I deepen with the point of my compasses,  
have begun to reveal the secret country of my name.

## The Megahertz

From behind  
the smooth sound  
of the  
orchestra  
came the  
urgent  
snuffling  
of some  
enormous  
beast.  
It grew  
louder,  
drowned  
the music,  
devoured  
the hall,  
chewed  
the transmitter,  
came clawing  
heavily  
along  
the wavelength,  
started  
scratching  
and whining  
inside  
the radio

In the nick  
of time  
I leapt  
to my feet,  
switched  
it off,  
saved  
the world.

## **Megaleague 3000**

Earth has not anything to show more fair -  
the referee computer in its sphere  
floats o'er the pitch with electronic ear  
and cameras that zoom in everywhere  
to judge on instant replay; and besides,  
there are no human players anymore -  
their massive transfer fees made the sponsors  
turn to androids whose moulded plastic hides  
are easily replaced. The act's the same,  
they're programmed to gesture wildly, to shout,  
cry and groan - all the rituals held dear  
by the few billion who still watch the game  
on real-size viddy-screens (no one goes out)  
and press their buttons to boo, laugh or cheer.

**Me One, Villa Nil** (villanelle)

As I sit quiet in my seat  
with pencil in hand, out of sight  
I'm scoring a goal with my feet.

Our team is close to defeat  
when I take this pass from the right  
as I sit quiet in my seat.

I might look unbothered and neat  
but inside I'm wild with delight -  
I'm scoring a goal with my feet.

Though I'm staring at a blank sheet  
I run upfield with all my might  
as I sit quiet in my seat.

A great shot! Fast and low, it beat  
the goalie! So hard to sit tight  
when scoring a goal with my feet.

I wish I was out on the street  
not in here, pretending to write.  
As I sit quiet in my seat  
I'm scoring a goal with my feet.



## **Mirror, Mirror**

Mirror, mirror, on the wall,  
I'm sure that's not my face at all -  
that one's somewhat baggy and the eyes are out of line -  
have I stayed awake all night with a face that isn't mine?

## Mr. Donne's Secret

What on earth is the matter with Mr. Donne -  
he used to look so neat and cool  
but now he staggers into school  
with a crumpled suit and odd socks on.

His carefree boyish charm has gone,  
his wornout baggy eyes are bloodshot,  
he's become a raggedy, mumbling clot  
who's nodding off all day long.

His aftershave smells more milk than lemon  
and on the shoulder of his jacket  
is a sticky off-white smear that  
has a slightly sickly pong ...

what on earth is wrong  
with Mr. Donne?

## **Moment**

In a moment  
I'll do my homework  
in a moment  
I'll take the look off my face  
in a moment  
in just a moment  
when this programme finishes  
in a moment  
when I've found a pencil  
in a moment  
when you stop nagging me  
in a moment  
in just a moment  
when pigs float past the window  
any moment  
now  
what's that?  
my friends are at the door  
and want to play out?  
I'm there already

## The Monster Quiz

in their little cages  
I hear the children sing  
"Monster dear, don't eat us up,  
we're much too fattening. "  
I squeeze along the corridor  
my tum touches both sides  
and glare in through each classroom door  
where, stacked in boxes on the floor  
my prisoners are kept squashed up  
even though the bell has gone.  
And if they get my questions wrong  
I chew their toes off one by one.

HOW BIG IS A ZIZ?  
WHAT DO THE SHE-BEARS TURN?  
HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE  
FOR A KRAKEN TO WAKE  
OR AN EAGLE TO GROW FROM A WORM?  
HOW MANY IS RHO?  
WHAT DID THEY LOSE IN NOK?  
WHO DID WHAT TO WHO  
IN KATUN EIGHT AHAU?  
HOW ROUGH IS RAGNAROK?

My heads jab at the cages, hooked like  
question marks; my helpless victims twist  
and turn as I ask them what they've never  
learned through mouths that reek of  
turpentine  
and sixteen-week-old stew.  
And if they won't reply right now  
I'll keep them till they do.

WHAT IS NAPIFORMED?  
HOW MANY SCISSORS MAKE TEN?  
WHAT IS TIED AROUND  
WITH A FIVE, FOLD BOND  
AND EATEN BY MERRY MEN?  
WHAT WOULD A NORN KNOW?  
WHAT MAKES A GLOWWORM GLOW?  
CAN YOU SNIGGLE A SNIG  
WITH A TWYFORKED TWIG?  
WHERE DOES THE OMO GO?

from their little cages  
I hear the teachers cry  
"Monster sir, don't eat us up  
we'd taste too old and dry. "

## Mosie

Don't ya mess wi me, pal,  
my aim is true;  
stiletto in the shadows  
looking for you

Nip ya on the finger  
armpit, neck or knee;  
Jag ya anywhur ah like,  
ya cant stop me

See them mobbing midgies,  
gang a mugging fleas;  
Na style, na class, jus numbers,  
there's none as brave as me.

Wasps are dumb an clumsy,  
one strike an they're dud,  
they're just easily upset  
but I'm out for your blood.

Sandflies are sneaky nippers -  
I'm elegant and proud;  
Hear me coming, human,  
I'll be singing clear and loud.

I like to boast and dance around  
before I get stuck in  
an when you can't hear me then fear  
cos I'll be sucking skin

"Float like a butterfly,  
Sting like a bee" -  
man, I can do all that an more,  
you've no chance against me!

## The mouse wheel

In a corner of the classroom the mouse  
was running round and round inside a wheel.  
I bent to look.  
it worried me, that wheel, that mouse -  
there was a wild glint  
in its sharp red eyes,  
like those of a mad inventor gripped by a big idea  
and as the tinny wheel clattered round  
I could see the dreams of power  
spiralling  
the mouse factories  
mice working ten hour days in treadmills  
for fat mouse manufacturers  
mouse motorways  
blocked by mice in mousemobiles  
rolling off on mini-mouse-breaks  
to Wensleydale or the Gorge at Cheddar  
mouse mafia, the feared Mozzarella di Napoli,  
making a quick getaway with sackfuls of ecus,  
European Cheese Units,  
from a hole in the wall raid on the Swiss Cheese Bank  
and worst, the unstoppable rise of a mouse military  
the swift scurrying of the four-footed infantry soon replaced  
by armoured columns, tanks, and then ..  
and then I saw the mouse had stopped to look at me  
and with one gesture of contempt  
like some imprisoned scientist who both knows his greatness  
and that his discovery will never reach the world  
it lifted its tail rudely  
and rolled into the straw.

## **My Grandfather Gavin**

My Grandfather Gavin  
kept his Morris Minor  
in a wooden boathouse  
miles from the seashore,

but he drove it like  
you'd steer a boat:  
it bounced, bobbed and bellied,  
only just afloat;

and up the rolling waves of hills  
and down the other side  
we sailed, as fast and thrilling  
as a roller-coaster ride.

My Grandfather Gavin  
was known near and far:  
I think people stayed indoors  
when he drove his car.

My Grandfather Gavin  
had a round bald head -  
it was rounder  
and shinier  
than his Morris Minor  
and he parked it  
in his bed.

## **My kind of villain**

My kind of villain  
is tall and thin  
with a droopy moustache  
that he strokes when vexed  
or when considering  
what kind of bad business  
to get into next.  
My kind of villain  
in his hooded black cloak  
plots wicked deeds  
in a voice that's halfway  
between cackle and croak,  
dreams up fantastic schemes  
and fiendish machines  
but never succeeds:  
though ruthless and strong  
he's a bit of a joke -  
something always goes wrong.  
Dashing but dim,  
doomed never to win -  
that's my kind of villain

what's yours?



## **Naming the Days**

Sun's day, Moon's day, Tiw's day, Woden's day,  
Thor's day, Frig's day, Saturn's day

Someday, Mum's day, Choose day, Wooden day,  
Thought day, Fry day, Slacker day

Such fun day, Monster bun day, To snooze day, Wet nose sneeze day  
Furry purrs day, Fly away day, Sit and natter day

Short run day, Maths begun day, True news day, Red knees day,  
Thirsty day, Fish-pie day, Scatter day

Every day's different, never repeated, unique:  
What names would you give the days this week?

## Nasty Nursery Rhymes

Three biker mice  
not very nice  
see how they run  
all mouth and gun  
they crashed into a canal on mars  
and splintered their skulls on their handlebars  
the ambulancemen scraped them into jars  
three biker mice

Old Mother Hubbard  
went to the cupboard  
to get her pet tiger some meat  
but all she had got  
was beans and carrots  
so the tiger bit off both her feet

Little Jill Horner  
although we warned her  
picked her nose with a spear  
she poked in too high,  
snot shot from her eye  
and brains dribbled out of her ear.

Little Miss Muffet  
sat on a tuffet  
eating old worms and hay  
along came a spider  
and sat down beside her  
and she gobbled it up straight away.

See-saw, Marjorie Daw,  
banged her bottom, very sore,  
I jumped off, she came down hard  
and spat her teeth across the yard.

Ride a black hearse to Banbury Cross  
to see a fine lady inside a crashed Porsche.  
Pick up her fingers, her ears and her toes,  
scrape off the squishy bits squashed in her clothes.

Georgie Porgie, cool and mean,  
Kissed the girls and made them scream  
"Go away, you slobbering creep,  
your breath smells like a mouldy sheep."

Jack and Jill went up the hill  
to fetch a pail of water-  
Jack was drowned  
Jill can't be found;  
the police still haven't caught her.

Baa, baa, cloned sheep  
have you any wool?  
No sir, just hair,  
my dad was a bull.

Little Miss Muffet  
sat on her tuffet  
eating her butties with Bert:  
a spider crawled on her hand:  
she picked it up and  
shoved it straight down the back of his shirt

Scary Mary  
big and hairy,  
how does your garden grow?  
with rotting smells  
and hideous yells  
and dead bodies buried below.

Mary Mary,  
airy-fairy,  
How does your garden grow?  
With water features  
and media creatures,  
on my terrible TV show.

## **New**

What will it be?  
Don't ask me.  
Thin or fat?  
I don't know that.  
Short or tall?  
I can't say at all.  
Brown eyes or blue?  
Haven't a clue.  
A dreamer, a screamer?  
I've no idea, dear.  
I can only tell you  
that it will be new  
and that certainly  
nothing will be  
quite the same  
again

## Nothing

I've got a present for you - here it is.  
Yes, it's a big  
load  
of nothing.  
I'd have wrapped it in shiny paper  
but I couldn't find the time.

As you can see  
it's flat on top  
with smooth round sides  
and when you put your hand into it  
there's nothing there at all -  
that's how full it is of nothing.

What do you mean - what use is it?  
Nothing can do anything,  
it's up to you:  
you can eat it, you can drink it,  
you can kick it, or stroke it,  
you can put it on your head,  
you can take it for a walk  
or talk to it when you're alone,  
and best of all  
you can  
think about it.

Here you are then - catch!  
Now where's it gone?  
Who's got nothing?

## The Old Man's Wishes

A fairy went North, South, East and West  
doing the things a fairy does best.  
She found an old man who lived in a drain, she heard him complain,  
"It's a shame, it's a shame, it's a shame,  
I shouldn't live in this stinky drain but in a wooden hut."  
"Very well," the fairy said,  
"turn three times round when you go to bed  
and in the morning you'll see what you'll see."  
So the old man did as the fairy said  
he turned three times round when he went to bed  
and in the morning he woke to see  
he was in a wooden hut.  
And he was so pleased as pleased could be,  
he forgot to thank the fairy.

Then the fairy went North, South, East and West  
doing the things a fairy does best.  
When she came back to see how the old man was, she heard him complain,  
"It's a shame, it's a shame, it's a shame,  
I shouldn't live in this wooden hut but in a little cottage."  
"Very well," the fairy said,  
"turn three times round when you go to bed  
and in the morning you'll see what you'll see."  
So the old man did as the fairy said  
he turned three times round when he went to bed  
and in the morning he woke to see  
he was in a little cottage.  
And he was so pleased as pleased could be,  
he forgot to thank the fairy.

Then the fairy went North, South, East and West  
doing the things a fairy does best.  
When she came back to see how the old man was, she heard him complain,  
"It's a shame, it's a shame, it's a shame,  
I shouldn't live in a little cottage but in a proper brick house."  
"Very well," the fairy said,  
"turn three times round when you go to bed  
and in the morning you'll see what you'll see."  
So the old man did as the fairy said  
he turned three times round when he went to bed  
and in the morning he woke to see  
he was in a proper brick house.  
And he was so pleased as pleased could be,  
he forgot to thank the fairy.

Then the fairy went North, South, East and West  
doing the things a fairy does best.  
When she came back to see how the old man was, she heard him complain,  
"It's a shame, it's a shame, it's a shame,  
I shouldn't live in a brick house but in a stone villa."  
"Very well," the fairy said,  
"turn three times round when you go to bed  
and in the morning you'll see what you'll see."  
So the old man did as the fairy said  
he turned three times round when he went to bed  
and in the morning he woke to see  
he was in a smart stone villa.  
And he was so pleased as pleased could be,  
he forgot to thank the fairy.

Then the fairy went North, South, East and West  
doing the things a fairy does best.  
When she came back to see how the old man was, she heard him complain,  
"It's a shame, it's a shame, it's a shame,  
I shouldn't live in a villa but in a marble palace."  
"Very well," the fairy said,  
"turn three times round when you go to bed  
and in the morning you'll see what you'll see."  
So the old man did as the fairy said  
he turned three times round when he went to bed  
and in the morning he woke to see  
he was back in the drain.

## **On the thirteenth day of Christmas my true love phoned me up ...**

Well, I suppose I should be grateful, you've obviously gone to a lot of trouble and expense - or maybe off your head. Yes, I did like the birds - the small ones anyway were fun if rather messy, but now the hens have roosted on my bed and the rest are nested on the wardrobe. It's hard to sleep with all that cooing, let alone the cackling of the geese whose eggs are everywhere, but mostly in a broken smelly heap on the sofa. No, why should I mind?, I can't get any peace anywhere - the lounge is full of drummers thumping tom-toms and sprawling lords crashed out from manic leaping. The kitchen is crammed with cows and milkmaids and smells of a million stink-bombs and enough sour milk to last a year. The pipers? I'd forgotten them - they were no trouble, I paid them and they went. But I can't get rid of these young ladies. They won't stop dancing or turn the music down and they're always in the bathroom, squealing as they skid across the flooded floor. No, I don't need a plumber round, it's just the swans - where else can they swim? Poor things, I think they're going mad, like me. When I went to wash my hands one ate the soap, another swallowed the gold rings. And the pear tree died. Too dry. So thanks for nothing, love. Goodbye.



## Oranges

which came first  
the colour or the fruit

\*\*\*

through the archway  
a tarnished moon.  
in the wicker basket  
green oranges huddle  
in unweeping melancholy

\*\*\*

in the long grass a ripe  
orange. its heart  
secretly stolen by ants

\*\*\*

in the tree a young  
boy &  
the oranges. both  
will come down  
together

\*\*\*

when they are ready to be picked  
the oranges  
stop pretending to be leaves

\*\*\*

the orange on the table  
drew all the light in the room into it  
& still it did not shine

\*\*\*

even in the hand the orange  
maintains an air of  
resolute inviolability

\*\*\*

her fingers pressed just so hard  
into the orange  
flesh into flesh  
her mind was elsewhere

\*\*\*

the torn skin  
shards  
of a broken pot

\*\*\*

nothing is shared  
as simply as  
an orange

## Out at lunch

All morning the rain had gobbled on the windows  
and going over to lunch we all got soaked so that  
you could hardly see the room for the steam rising  
from wet clothes and wide tins of food and what  
with the dank overpowering smells and the 'flu coming on  
my head was swimming and as we're standing in this mist,  
in line with our trays, JJ behind me says `Look  
worms in blood again' and though I knew he meant  
the spaghetti I got this uneasy sensation  
that the white mass was twitching but I felt so unsteady  
I said nothing. It was like being inside a cloud,  
not floating although my legs no longer felt sure  
they were part of me and JJ's face seemed to swell  
and his voice was at once far away and very loud  
`Look cat stew, you can see bits of fur, cat spew stew,  
look green sheep droppings, and is that maggots in rice  
or rice in the maggots...' There was no stopping him  
when he'd started this game, I tell you, one time he'd  
put string in his curry and insisted it was a rat's tail  
long after it was funny. `Hey, I'd like some baked bugs please  
with mashed brains and a giant slug.' My knees  
were wobbly, I took a cheese roll and an orange juice  
and even they seemed too much. When we sat down I felt worse,  
I couldn't touch the food, I stared at the table, at the usual  
crumbs, stains and slops, at JJ's plate opposite. most  
of all at his plate for it seemed like the beans  
were squirming and one or two slid off, over the rim,  
and scuttled away. It was a bit odd but I was past caring,  
I felt like I was hanging over a huge pit, head spinning so  
everything around was distant and dim  
except for JJ's blether, now a meaningless babble  
of surging waves through the blurring mist  
and his left fist gripping a fork he'd just jabbed  
into the mound of pale mashed potato  
that looked strangely like I thought my brain felt inside my head  
and when with a slow slither  
the sausage twisted sideways and bit into his wrist  
I fainted

## Palmtrees

A long time ago  
they grew to love the sun  
so much they simply  
stood & dreamed  
until their claws  
turned roots & they could  
no longer fly

& then small mammals  
learnt to climb  
up into their crutches  
to steal their eggs  
before they laid them

Great flocks of them  
flutter by the shore  
they do not notice  
the small mammals  
the sun shines on them &  
they are still dreaming

\*\*\*

In the enormous  
room of the dusky plain  
worn by their efforts  
against the cobwebs  
of dust & haze, like  
tattered feather dusters  
the palmtrees are propped  
up against an horizon  
glowing red raw with  
the ageless domed lamps  
of cane fires

## **Pantomime**

Mum is juggling with baking trays)

*I'm going out to play*

No you're not

*Yes I am*

Where's your sister?

*She's behind you*

No she's not

*Yes she is*

Oh there you are, tea's ready now

*We're going to play*

No you're not

*Yes we are*

I won't say it again

*What won't you say?*

What I just said

*What did you say?*

You're not going out

*You said it again*

(and mum driven crazy, throws the custard pie

## pants

the wind came roar  
ing from the sea  
it reeled around  
respectable trees  
it jiggled the roof  
tiles up and down  
and knocked old  
ladies to the  
ground ... but  
worst, in its  
rough panting  
play it danced  
ced my clean  
pants clean  
away

## Pencil

I want to write  
but the pencil fights  
my fingers:  
it judders  
it slides  
so that out becomes but  
and now turns to how  
and my a tangles itself  
into an interesting knot -  
it's too strong, this pencil,  
however hard I try  
it slips to one side  
and makes pot into got  
or dab into bad  
and if I try m or w  
it just wants to wobble on  
till it's drawn the sea.

I know what's wrong  
I've been given  
a doodling pencil  
that likes to scribble  
and make a mess.

What I need is a pencil  
that wants to write

## Penny and Kathryn

Penny and Kathryn  
that year they seemed older  
though we were all ten.  
I'd watch them in class,  
they didn't chatter or laugh,  
were so calm at their work  
it made me feel nervous.  
Gawky Penny seemed now to be  
slim and clever, her new glasses  
made her eyes large and dreamy  
above the small pout of her mouth.  
Kathryn was stocky, strong,  
her thick hair shook as she moved  
always as if sure where she was going:  
I liked that energy, almost feared it.

I wasn't mooning over them, they were just  
more interesting than the other girls,  
somehow stronger than the boys.  
I would have liked to be friends with them.

But one warm evening, going home,  
we saw them behind us on the road,  
two other boys and me, we said  
let's hide, let's jump out, it's fun -  
we thought it friendly, meant no harm.  
And I hid behind a gate post like the others,  
enjoying the wait, the tension,  
and leapt up grinning, happy as a puppy,

but the girls didn't look surprised  
or laugh or run or anything:  
they just looked, and the looks  
said they were past that sort of game,  
that we were silly little boys, to be ignored,  
and they left me standing foolish by the wall  
feeling they were right and knowing  
even as I made a rude face to cover up my shame  
how big a gap there was between us  
that I couldn't cross until I learnt  
what different games would please them.



## The Plot So Far

With the discovery of the elephants on the roof,  
the school was thrown into confusion. Drainpipes  
slithered from walls and wriggled away, doors  
became unhinged and flew off their handles.  
Assembly, that morning, had tasted of custard  
and the children, their mouths flecked with yellow flakes of skin,  
were having to sit hard to sop their chairs escaping.  
Nor could they catch the carrots dangled in front of them  
for the floor heaved like a sea and the teachers  
dropped their fishingrods and clutched at desks in seasick panic.  
Screams sharp as carving knives stabbed from the kitchen  
where the elephants, having stamped  
a small hole in the leaky ceiling,  
have lowered their trunks  
and are kidnapping young cabbages.  
The caretaker shouted at them till his back was sore  
but they paid no notice and he went to fetch a ladder.  
The building now began to rock more violently,  
the piano in the hall caught fire, a flock  
of guttural parrots swooped along the corridors  
or perched in the thickness of twisted creepers  
that cascaded urgently through collapsing ceilings.  
The desks in the classroom have turned to huge, rough stones  
but the children lean on them, half-asleep,  
for they are warmed, as if warmed by the sun,  
and the teacher's voice becomes a murmur,  
a soft wind among many glossy leaves,  
and under the floorboards great fish plunge  
in icy darkness; and the books become trees  
and the chalk becomes earth and the ink  
becomes a muddy, sluggish river  
where crocodiles crawl in the whirring heat.  
And meanwhile, the elephants . . .

## **Porkoplane**

When I go flying on my pig  
up high into the air,  
the people shout  
"How huge! how stout!  
How did it get up there?"

I sit behind its flapping ears  
and grunt a cheerful tune  
as we hunt for  
acorns in the clouds or  
truffles on the moon.

Back home we eat baked cheesy beans  
from buckets on the floor  
then end the day  
curled up in hay  
and snore and snore and snore.

## **Punishments**

I was standing in the corner  
and the strange teacher said:  
"You must get a plate of porridge  
and pour it on your head;  
strap a fried egg to your wrist,  
use it to tell the time:  
write an essay on a messy  
slice of toast and jam -  
then pretend you are a bus-stop  
where no-one comes to wait -  
and that, bad child, is what you get  
for coming in so late."

I was standing in the corner  
and the strange teacher said:  
"Your brain is like spaghetti  
wrapped in a loaf of bread;  
I'll have to paint you black and blue  
and sting you with my tongue  
and pour cold water over you  
till all you think sounds wrong -  
and on your mouth I'll stick a sludge  
of glue and sealing-wax -  
and that, bad child, is what you get  
for messing at the back."

## pyramid

P  
EAK  
PLACE  
PROUDLY  
PROVIDING  
PRESTIGIOUS  
PLUSH PRIVATE  
PILED PENTHOUSE  
PERFECTLY PLANNED  
PANORAMIC POSITION  
PART PAYMENT POSSIBLE  
PAST PHAROAHS PREFERRED

## Real problems

1.

If a supermarket trolley weighs 5 kilos and the baby, standing inside it, weighs 12 kilos and his father puts 6 tins of tomatoes each weighing 400 grams into the trolley .... work out

- a) How far the trolley will move before the baby drops a tin over the side; and
- b) If adding a packet of biscuits will make for more or less trouble.

2.

If I have a apple costing 10p and you have a packet of crisps that cost 20p, and I give you three bites of the apple (but the third bite has a brown bit), and you give me twelve crisps (of which two are tiny and one is burnt and sour); do we both feel satisfied or somehow cheated?

## Roll of Dishonour

Angry Alfred the Assassin - axe, acid and 'andsaw artiste  
Bold Brian, Birdbrain of the Bog, bully, braggart and beast,

Charming Charlie who cheerfully chains up his chums in a cellar  
Dirty Dora the dangerous dung dumping dungeon dweller

Evil Eddie the egg-eating Educated Exterminator  
Fat Francis the Flatulent, feared from Frankfurt to Fez and further

Ghastly Gertrude, the grim garrotting gran  
Hideous Henry, the horrid hooded hang-gliding highwayman

Insolent Ian the Impatient Impaler who adds insult to injury  
Gemstone Jeremy, jewel-thief and jester to the duped Duke of Germany

Comical Ken the Crooked Circus Killer - a song, a dance, a stab in the back  
Loathsome Lady LardLips who looks like a lump of lead in a sack

Mad Malkie, manic mass-murderer from the mongolian mafia  
Nail-Up-the-Nose Norman, not no-one nastia

Oily Oliver of Aughton, awful oozing owl-disemboweller  
Pongy Peter the particularly unpleasant pirate, pigfarmer and fowler

Queen Queechy the Quarrelsome, as queasy as an earthquake  
Rude Randolf the Wretched, Rotten Robber of rubbish and ratcake

Simon the Slippery, second son of Septimus the Savage and Sarah the  
SlySoandSo

Twitchy Thomas the Tired Thief of Thurso

Ugly Ulric the Undertaker, he's got a living to urn,  
Vengeful Violent Vera the Vurst Villains' Villain

Windy Walter the Warty, waif- whacker and wobbly blob  
Xerxes the extremely expert executioner and excitable slob  
Yucky Yolanda the Yabbering Yob  
and at the very end  
Zog the Zend

## The room

The baby's happy, the room is giggling  
rattling, jiggling in wide-eyed surprise  
as everything in it is made new, amazing,  
never been seen before

The baby's grumpy, the room aches  
torn by hopeless howls, filled  
with a worn-out cloud drizzling  
cold rain and a smell of sick

The baby's sleeping, the room  
is drowsy, purrs like a comfortable cat,  
smells warm and milky, falls into  
a dream where everyone sleepwalks softly .

## Roundabout

arguing with your parents  
is like being on a roundabout

not one of the razz and jazz fun of the fair sort  
one of grey tarmac grim with grinding traffic  
one you're going round and round  
shut in the car  
with the windows closed  
going round and round  
past all the exit roads  
and no-one can agree  
which one to take

round and round the map's no use will you  
go to Give In or Get Your Own Way? is there  
a decent road to Compromise?  
some are clearly marked Dead End, others  
may end in hopeless confusion or lead to endless detours  
that will bring you back just where you started

going round and round  
and no-one really knows the way out  
and the baby's been sick  
and everyone's shouting  
and the car's swerving this way and that  
because everyone wants  
to turn the wheel, press the accelerator, stamp on the brakes  
all at the same time  
arms and legs and voices flailing wildly

round and round  
with the rain battering down  
till you finally lurch off  
down one road or another  
with nobody sure  
that you've gone the right way



## Rubbish

It starts with dropping paper  
it ends with nuclear waste  
O we'll drop anything anywhere  
there's a scrapyard out in space

We're living in a hurry  
it's buy sell use and dump  
Whole towns in poisoned agony  
kids born with armless stumps

The sea's an open sewer  
there's poison on the breeze  
The world is turning into waste  
more chip-paper than trees

Just dump it round the corner  
in some poorer cheaper place  
Don't the human race look stupid with  
its slops smeared on its face?

## Rules of the game

Our school has no field so we can only play football in the yard - and it's small, so Thursday is when we're allowed to bring in our balls - and that's the first rule. I've noticed that all games need rules, and in each game there are some you can't play without - like if you throw one when you play snakes and ladders, that's how far you must move, but you could agree to start at the top and go down ladders and up the snakes and still have a good game. So it doesn't make much difference to us if there's five on one side and six on the other, or if we all run together after the ball and don't have a goalie - you understand - rules are just what you agree among yourselves - over the wire fence is definitely off the pitch and getting in the big boys' way is asking for trouble. Being rude to the janitor will get you sent inside and kicking spectators or their lunch-boxes is not allowed - you have to tolerate the crowd and you might start a fight that stops the game. Most of the simple rules we keep the same, no hands or fists, no deliberate tripping, no pulling shirts until they tear, no sitting on the ball unless you're really in goal. That's about it. But playing after the bell's gone could mean suspension. And you'd be a total nit-wit to pick up the ball and run away with it. That's not playing the same game any more. That's rugby, or a declaration of war.

## Safe at castle

Portcullis down, drawbridge up,  
safe against attacks.  
The serfs have all been soundly whipped  
and shiver in their shacks.  
Good, sighs Sir Percy  
Time to relax

A kitchen-boy turns the heavy spit,  
the cook hurls pots at mice.  
Before the great hall's roaring fire  
the dogs scratch at their lice.  
Mm, hums Sir Percy  
isn't this nice.

An owl hoots on the battlements  
the winter wind makes moan  
and in the pit beneath his keep  
the starving prisoners groan.  
Ah, sighs Sir Percy,  
There's no place like home.

## Smoke

They tossed the cigarette-butts carelessly away  
mimicing wealth or world-weariness, but they'd eyed  
each other closely, measuring each drag, each face,  
for signs of weakening. And now they all felt slightly sick  
and nervous of showing it they talked too hard, too loud.  
They kicked the air, the litter. They jostled,  
circling and shoving as they left the alleyway.  
They moved round each other like dancers on the same small stage.  
When they saw the girls they whistled for attention,  
shouted suggestions. But they were still watching each other.

## Snake's Dance

Sensuous slither      slinkiest slide  
the slip in the silence      the hiss and glide  
steadily sweeping      shuddering squirm  
quivering question      conquering worm

I start sliding this side, certain and sure.  
I spiral all scaly, coiling a tower,  
twisting and toiling, spellbound by stealth,  
I slip through the circle and surprise myself.

Head is for seeing, tail is for squeezing,  
tongue is for telling and fangs are for seizing;  
stretching and spinning I sway to the song -  
I go as I must, as I must I go on

Sudden is speed like a wave of the sea,  
swift is the sense as wind in tall trees,  
strong is as subtle as wise is indeed,  
they kneel to no-one who're born without knees

(and back to the beginning ...

## A spell

What have you got there? A spell  
Is it as strong as a wishing well?  
Will it make you very wealthy,  
does it stop you becoming unhealthy  
or turn you at midnight into a cat?  
No, this spell is not like that

Does it save you from drowning at sea,  
will it take you wherever you want to be,  
stop you from getting a runny nose  
or black warts from growing on your toes  
or make you invisible, except for your clothes?  
No, this spell isn't one of those.

Will it keep you from growing old  
or make everything you touch turn gold?  
Will it make somebody loving,  
will it stop the bullies shoving  
or save you from a vampire's bite?  
No, this spell would not be right.

I fear this spell won't stop you snoring  
or make teachers vanish when they're boring.  
This spell changes children who're calm and quiet  
into wild-eyed monsters who want to riot  
and scream and yell and fight and shout

I'd be silly to read it out

## Starship Blues

It's hard out on a spaceship, couldn't get much worse,  
All we get to see is the same old universe

The food tastes like rubber and looks like concrete tiles  
We only change our spacesuits every million million miles  
The captain's going crazy, he thinks we're crocodiles  
The doctor's seeing double, the atomic drive's got piles

We've been light years in a rocket-jam on the Milky Way  
It's "Watch that star!" and "Mind that sun!" all day  
We never get back home, we never see our pay  
The ones we left behind have all turned old and grey

Our ship's computer's happy, it thinks it's made of cheese  
It only answers questions put in ancient Japanese  
Something with no face and a horrible disease  
is doing something nasty down in the deep-freeze.

They told us we'd be heroes, go where none had gone before  
but we sit and stare at starscreens till our eyes are red and sore  
Sirius or Saturn, I don't care any more,  
if it wasn't for the black holes life would be a bore.

There's a jelly in my cabin, it's eaten up my berth  
Beam me up, beam me down, beam me back to earth

## Stocking

The old long stockings - every year  
their thick brown weave was stuffed  
into stiffness, stretched  
like a cartoon ostrich neck  
with knobby shapes - the parcels  
to be teased out one by one with that intense  
all-involving mix of hope and dread -  
for who thinks on the past or future in  
the moment of unwrapping the present?

So, every year, starting with  
the largest lumps stuck in the stocking's throat,  
we'd work our way down, tunnelling  
to find if fate matched our desires -  
so difficult at seven in the morning  
to praise the unwanted or expected,  
to mask disappointment at the not quite right:

but life itself is a gift, even if it's  
not just what we wanted,  
and from gifts we learn to accept,  
to understand at last that the real gift  
was the stocking itself, year after year,  
and the hands that filled it, and the certainty  
that after everything or anything,  
however hollow our fantasies proved,  
we would always find, tucked in the toe  
a tangerine, an apple,  
and a sixpence.



## Stop me if you've heard it already

Once upon a time  
in a kingdom far away  
there lived an old old woman  
in a gingerbread cafe.  
She had three strapping sons,  
two ugly daughters who told lies  
and a beautiful sad stepdaughter  
who was a giant in disguise.  
Now, one day a knight passed by  
clanking off to sea with a kipper  
and he dropped a golden frog  
that laid a talking slipper  
which the youngest son then sold  
for a magic mashed potato  
than first ate his elder brothers  
then began to grow and grow.  
It put the young boy on his back  
and flew off across the fields -  
his sisters pedalled after it  
on their spinning wheels.  
They crossed a shoreless river,  
they climbed a glass beanstalk:  
they caught that bad potato  
with a knife and fork.  
It turned into a princess,  
and so huge was their surprise  
the beautiful sad stepdaughter  
grew forty-nine feet high  
and the other sisters, curtseying,  
(for they were awful snobs)  
were squashed beneath her giant feet  
into two shapeless blobs.  
And when the old old woman  
saw this on her t.v.  
she sent a storm that sank the knight  
that very night at sea.  
But the storm came roaring home again  
and with a mighty clout  
it knocked the old old woman  
upside down and inside out.  
It wrapped the giant in a cloud  
and drowned her in despair  
which made the son dissolve in tears  
and vanish in thin air.  
The poor potato-faced princess  
was crushed by this disaster  
and then there was nobody left at all  
to live happily ever after.

## **strangers and sweets**

everywhere children go in danger  
of being accosted and having their love  
bribed or harshly demanded from them;

not least by  
these familiar strangers  
that lurk in their houses  
and claim it as a right

## Strange tales

1.  
Something caught his hand  
behind the clothes. Bravely  
he leapt in ... the wardrobe  
burped

2.  
I cracked the egg.  
Inside it was  
another egg:  
and this one smiled

3.  
He was hemmed in.  
He began to crawl  
along the low  
narrow tunnel  
hoping the machine  
had dropped a stitch

5.  
He became invisible.  
Everything was the same -  
people still bumped  
into him; worse, they did  
not even remark  
upon his disappearance

## Summer afternoon

It's afternoon and here I lie  
with my face turned to the sky  
and watch the clouds that drift and run  
(only flowers can stare at the sun)

Some things here are acting busy  
they buzz and bustle and end up dizzy,  
but the spinach, the flowers, the trees and I  
we hold the ground and look at the sky.

but every plant, however slight,  
is pushing and shoving for water and light,  
each grass, lettuce, cherry, heaves,  
kicking its roots and flexing its leaves.

In the whole garden there is only  
one thing that's not doing, and that's me;  
I'm not looking for food or safety or home  
I lie on my back and dream this poem.

## Tea

The teacher by the window  
is thinking about class 4b,  
the one reading the paper  
is wishing she was rich,  
the one chomping chocolate biscuits  
is dreaming of his girlfriend,  
the one slurping low fat yoghurt  
is hoping her car's been fixed.

The teacher beside the door  
is hoping the knocking will stop,  
The student in the corner  
is wondering where to sit;  
the teacher by the kettle  
is wishing it would boil  
the one staring wearily at the wall  
is thinking her head will split.

The teacher reading the notices  
is not really thinking at all.  
the one with her head in a magazine  
is dreaming of sun and sea  
the one in the tie is rubbing his eyes  
and hoping he's not going bald  
but the teacher by the window  
is thinking about class 4b

he's the one  
who just spilt his tea.

## Teacher's Report

English literature - weak: this term  
he has probably not read anything more gruesome  
than *Peter Rabbit*, cabbage chewer

English language- sad: lacks understanding  
of everyday speech - thinks cool is  
the temperature of school soup

Maths - illogical: when he sees  
a boy, a ruler, and a small lump of chewed paper,  
he does not put two and two together

Current affairs - poor: he displays  
shocking ignorance of *Big Brother*, soap star scandals  
and Saturday morning TV programmes

Science - mad: reacts easily, spouts gas, fizzes,  
turns bright red then blows his top

History - good: but then he ought to be  
he's lived through it all

## **This Autumn the Well-dressed Witch is wearing ..**

The House of Horror holds a halloween show  
where all the dark and midnight hags  
gather to gawp at the new sad rags  
and ghouls go all gooey and drool  
at the latest shrouds  
as flimsy and pale as clouds.

A wax model stands stiff, stuck with pins,  
in a shocking pink pointed hat -  
you hear one zombie say to another  
" I wouldn't be seen dead in that "

Ghosts glide down the black catwalk  
past werewolves dressed to kill,  
but the see-through look's no thrill  
to goblins in their birthday suits  
feathered hats and scarlet boots

And trendy witch magazine writers  
who're scribbling with their quills  
gloat and note with fixed smiles  
that this year it's good news for ravers:  
after the long flowing merlin style  
the cutty sark is back in fashion -  
essential gear for the new passion  
of extreme bonfire-leaping or  
that wild party in the woods.

But there's plenty on show for  
the more mature, haut coture  
gruesome garments, dismal dresses  
trimmed with bat-wings and bat-messes;  
the undead this season will be wearing  
slime green and mould grey with a hint of mud  
delicately flecked with blood  
and if you want to get admirers staring  
accessorise, yes, accessorise  
with a tasteful necklace of rabbits' eyes  
or handbag of newt skin.

Some vampires say it's hardly worth rising for  
but you can't please every old thing  
and it's so much fun in the graveyard, darling,  
how I wish you were here!

**This is not an apple** *(after Magritte)*

t  
h  
e  
se  
are words  
in praise of those  
who long ago planted the  
orchard and the generations  
who trimmed and tidied, swept  
and weeded, who helped the white  
storm of blossom turn each year  
to swollen drops of sweetened  
rain which store for winter  
the green tang of spring,  
red flush of summer in  
flesh crisp and cool  
as an autumn mist  
but this is not  
an apple



## Three witches

Three witches met in Back Heath Street,  
howling this song, stamping their feet:

"Bad to worse, bad to worse,  
children scream and mothers curse  
broken bottles, lumps of brick,  
pools of water thick with oil-slick,  
sludge of drain and sick of cat,  
brown spittle that some thick lad spat,  
gunge of grease and gob of tar,  
odd rusted bits off burnt-out cars;  
across the slimy pavingstones  
smear curry chips and chicken bones,  
snotty tissues, smelly rags,  
torn-up slug-stained plastic bags -  
and to make sure the spell succeeds  
throw in a mattress full of fleas  
that smells so bad the rats won't eat it  
and leave all to rot -

the spell's completed.

Grouse and grump, grouse and grump,  
this street  
has turned  
into  
a  
dump."

## To gain power over a balloon

First you must tie a string around your wrist  
with ribbons in spring and tinsel at christmas,  
tying it carefully, taking your time,  
breathing deeply, in and out,  
leaving a long length of string, as long as your arm,  
that you hold by its end, between thumb and forefinger.

Then hold the balloon in your lap, cupped by your hands:  
do not rub it, this excites it,  
it may squeak and try to slip away;  
do not pat it, it is not a kite,  
it expects no praise,  
it has nothing to prove.  
Hold it lightly, so the air inside  
does not get hot - heat bothers balloons.  
Be gentle, but show no real interest,  
a balloon has a mind like the wind.

Breathe deeply, in and out, in and out:  
the balloon likes to hear air moving around.  
Now take a full chest of air and  
HOLD YOUR BREATH

The balloon will now think you are a balloon.

Quickly slip the noose of string  
the string you're holding in your fingers  
around its neck, and knot it.

The balloon will now follow you everywhere.  
You can breathe again.

This spell  
is as strong as your string.

## Top Class

Our class isn't great at games like rounders and football  
but we're ace at climbing doorframes, at shuffling in the hall,  
running in the corridors and sliding down stairs fast;  
and there's one game at which we're absolutely world-class!

Our strategy is simple - attack, attack, attack!  
The front row pick their noses, while the chatters at the back  
keep up a constant gabble broken by loud roars,  
sudden high-pitched giggles and thunderous applause.

Yesterday, I'm proud to say, we set a new world record -  
as thirty soggy ink-pellets splattered on the board  
and every chair scraped backwards, we saw to our delight  
that with just a little effort our score could reach new heights.

So we all went completely quiet, then broke the eerie hush  
with a rattle of dropped rulers, followed by a furious rush  
of totally stupid questions, sniggers and rude squealing -  
and at the bell, we could tell our marks were through the ceiling.

Our rivals, 3b, did quite well, but we won by several feet.  
They came, they saw, they measured and admitted defeat,  
so we're still the school champions, no doubt of it at all -  
we're the class who drove their teacher  
furthest up the wall!



## tree

a  
raw  
frost  
bites and  
winds  
rattle my  
branches, but  
out here is where  
I am at home. Yet men  
cut me from  
my roots, heave  
me on trucks away  
to the walled prisons  
they live in. And there  
garla  
nded,  
in ga  
udy f  
inery, they sacrific  
ice me to a god

## **Universal Instant Gloop™**

Universal Instant Gloop™  
Tomorrow's food today!  
makes everything you fancy  
the new convenient way!

No mess, no wait, no waste!  
No need to scrape or peel!  
Stir in a flavour cube to taste -  
it makes any meal!

Butter, jam and toast;  
burger, sauce and bun:  
one pack of Gloop™ makes everything -  
so simple, fast and fun!

Universal Instant Gloop™  
sets your taste buds free!  
Enjoy straight blue bananas  
or square purple peas!

Amaze your friends, delight yourself  
with one wonder packet on your shelf!  
All you need is a handy scoop  
of Universal Instant Gloop™

## Villainelle

Young villains go to vile school  
to train for a wicked career  
'cos it's hard to be cunning and cruel

and stand up to hissed ridicule  
while the heroes get every cheer.  
Young villains go to vile school

where pupils must break every rule  
and teachers whine: Be nastier dear  
'cos it's hard to be cunning and cruel.

They practice the worst ways to drool  
or glare to fill victims with fear:-  
young villains go to vile school

to learn to be real baddies who'll  
improve stories when they appear  
'cos it's hard to be cunning and cruel.

Will they turn out sad or super-cool,  
with a moustache, a snigger or sneer?  
Young villains go to vile school  
'cos it's hard to be cunning and cruel.

## **vlad**

vlad  
ve vampire  
vlies vrough voonlight  
velvet vat vings  
vlitter-vlutter  
vlad's very vain  
vith vangs vo vlong  
vey vite vrough vlesh  
vlike vutter  
vlad vears a vast  
vile violet vest  
villed vith vermin  
vrom ve vault  
vich vongs vorse van  
virty vultures -  
vo vonder victims  
vaint vand vall  
vicious, vulgar,  
vlood-vrinking, vad,  
violent, villainous -  
vot a vlad



## wave

winds wail while  
wandering wide wallowing  
watery wastes, whisk worried  
wrinkles       wound with whipping  
wings           which whittle wedges,  
                  whirl, whorl, wrestle  
                  wantonly; which worst  
                  will wake wild weltering  
                  wrath wearing wrenched wrack,  
                  whose whomping writhing wallop  
                  whacks whales, whams wee walruses,  
                  wrecks warships with wuthering weight,  
                  whops worn wharves whose whole works wobble;  
                  wave walls wheeling, whooshing, whanging, whelming,  
wrap weeping white webs which wither when woven, wash weary away

## **We are not alone**

Captain's Log. Starship Saturnalian.

Earth year 2030, day 358 -

The new drive worked! We've tracked the alien spacecraft that vanished from earth's orbit late

last night. We followed its fantastic leap across the galaxy and now can see its sledge-like shape dropping in steep descent to a planet. Incredibly

a single cosmonaut whose suit glows red clings to its tail and holds long ropes to steer a group of prancing creatures: from each head sprout ariels that make them look like deer.

The planet's steaming, its surface smooth and dark as Christmas pudding. Prepare to land!

## Wee Beasties in the Wordwork

1.

He was slugged from behind  
he never saw it coming -  
like an earthy whale  
leaving a silver wake  
the giant slug  
slid over him.

2.

Look - his mum said -  
beautiful butterflies!  
And so they were,  
shiny black against the yellow surface.  
But how could he now  
spread his toast  
without disturbing them?

3.

Her wig was a problem:  
no matter how hard she brushed  
it would playfully insist  
on waving its forky-tail  
over her ear.

## Well hidden

This is where I was when searching voices were calling me.  
I was in places where time had no meaning;  
among tangled tall grass within the rough walls  
of the roofless ropewalks that stretched to the braehead,  
watching huge snails wander through broken pantiles  
under a sky aching with distance and the seagull's cry;  
am I there? or am I in the shed whose windows are dark with dust,  
whose warped benches and clay pots are coated with dust, that smells  
of this dust of dry earth and the wood's slow rot,  
of the green skin on the rainbarrel and oil in a rusting can,  
where everything has been holding its breath for a long time  
and vaguely stirs as I potter round and goes back to its secret dreaming  
when I leave. For I am not there. I am upstairs in a room squeezed  
into the slope of the roof, a room whose door is disguised as a cupboard,  
whose walls are pasted with newspapers as old as my great-aunt,  
only slightly yellowed where the weak light falls across the clutter  
of long-locked trunks and suitcases stuffed with mothballed clothes.  
and there I am sitting while the rain patters on the grimy skylight  
reading of ferocious battles, sunk fishingboats and farm shows,  
but do not think you can reach me there,  
for they are all in the past, in my mind only,  
and when I hide in them now, no-one can find me.

## What's for cena?

The Romans had a varied diet  
I wonder if you'd like to try it?

Let's start with a simple dish  
of broccoli baked with rotten fish.  
Now try dormice stuffed with pork,  
a peacock brain, a roasted stork,  
fat milk-fed snails, frogs in mustard,  
boiled ox-tails, nettles in custard,  
flamingo tongues fried with tomatoes:  
I'm sure you'll like a lot of those.  
Some crow and cabbage; lumps of horse,  
jellied snake in seaweed sauce,  
jackdaws, thrushes, stewed cow's udder -  
why have you begun to shudder?  
If you've had too much and your tummy's sore  
the vomitorium's through that door.  
Do what the Romans did - be sick  
and then come back for more. Be quick!

## **A wise child knows his own nose**

"If you want a good spell," the magician said,  
"one that helps you to write words right,  
you must read a red book in reeds till it's read  
and wait at night till a knight comes in sight  
then weigh his weight at a way-side site  
and drop a pail on his pale head.

"You must meet a bear and see the sea  
and eat bare meat and be a bee  
you must hear a tale without a flaw  
and saw a tail that isn't sore,  
knead flowers to flour, flee from a flea,  
and stare at stairs here on the floor.

"You need to know when to say no,  
which week is weak, which witch is not,  
which rain is quick, which rein is slow,  
which herd is heard, which wood would rot -  
which tide is tied into a knot -  
That's it," he sighed, "I've spelled the lot."  
And he threw me through the window.

## Where?

where do you hide a leaf?  
in, if possible, *a forest*.

where do you hide a wind?  
among straw *in dust*.

where do you hide a horse?  
within cloth or sea.

where do you hide the sun?  
behind clouds, under horizons.

where do you hide water?  
below a terrible flood.

where do you hide a storm?  
inside a ghost or magician.

where do you hide a word?

## Where is everybody?

Here we are, two weeks into the summer holidays,  
and there's no one around. It's not  
like Alasdair who went to Loch Ard  
or Cafy who went to Iran  
and never came back. It's not  
even like Ola who went to Bearsden  
or Emma who changed schools  
and were hardly seen again.  
It's not even like Cassy whose mum's  
full of twins and moving house.  
I can understand them. It's life.  
People move. But this is strange - there's  
no-one. I go to the supermarket, to the park,  
and there's no-one I even know. I ring their bells,  
I ring them up - no-one answers. They can't  
all be away. It's as if they'd all gone  
on holiday together, to a party without inviting me.  
I play with this and that, I watch tele, read comics,  
sometimes go swimming or get taken places.  
I even play with toddlers. I go to the gardens,  
kick a ball, hide in trees.  
But there's a big hole inside me. I keep  
expecting my friends to jump from the bushes  
shouting surprise. I wonder  
who'll be there when school starts again.  
Will I be in a class of one?



## **Wiz**

My pal's a wizard at footie,  
the ball is under his spell:  
when he dribbles it runs at his feet like a dog,  
when he shoots it's a homing missile.

He flies down the pitch without effort  
and seems always to know where to be:  
it's much more than skill and practice -  
it's soccer sorcery.

I'm sure he could play a whole team on his own  
but that's not all there is to football -  
he may be pure magic to watch  
but he's no fun to play with at all.

## The wizard's hat

What is under the wizard's hat:

a cone of ice  
sleeping mice  
his favourite spell?  
Who can tell?

What is under the wizard's hat:

a pile of bones  
a tower of stones  
a fiendish device?  
a passing bell  
a red red rose?  
Who knows?

What is that under the wizard's hat:

a crust of bread  
a book he's read  
a bag of groans?  
mashed potatoes  
loaded dice  
a rotten smell?  
Can you guess  
more or less?

So what is under that wizard's hat:

a ziggurat  
a dancing bat?  
his pointy head  
an awful mess?  
an unblown overgrown saxophone  
a dozen crows  
a word of advice?  
a caramel, a cockleshell, a fond farewell  
a heap of dust?

No. It's just  
his fat old cat.

## **You're new here, aren't you?**

I'd better warn you - try not to go at all, or take a friend. It's not just that there are no locks and the bigger girls keep barging in, it's ... well ... the one right by the door maybe alright but there's always something inside it, grunting loudly. The second cubicle has the octopus - or giant squid - no-one's seen more than its tentacles; but don't worry it can't get you while you're sitting down - just watch out when you get up to wipe and go out backwards. The third one's covered in scribbled stories that would make a sewer rat sick. And judging by the mess some of them have been. The fourth, the furthest in, is full of spiders, fat black beasts that drop into your hair. None of them has any paper except the smelly mass blocking the bowl; and don't try to wash your hands, the soap stinks and simply writhes with maggots and worms sometimes dribble from the taps. Now, let me tell you about the boys ...

## **You're not going out dressed like that!**

You're not going out dressed like that!  
That ring's too big for your nose  
and what with the zips, chains and safety pins  
you're wearing more metal than clothes.

You're not going out dressed like that!  
That T-shirt's a filthy disgrace -  
what did make those stains? It's so short and tight  
you pop out all over the place.

You're not going out dressed like that!  
Red hotpants don't suit you, they're sad,  
and those three-inch high heels just look silly -

go back upstairs and change, Grandad!

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