

Francis Cairns

Poems to Puzzle Jimmy

MERSEYSIDE POETRY
MINIBOOKS SERIES



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THE MOST BEAUTIFUL VILLAGE COMPETITION

Exhilarated by success with some improvements –
The school refencing, bus-stop relocation –
And eager to outshine its sister movements,
Claughton and District Enhancement Association
Entered the annual, national competition

For the loveliest village. So, in the run-up weeks,
Hedges were manicured and lawns hand-trimmed,
Children restrained, dogs dressed in plastic breeks,
The local cat breed combed, Lord Evans slimmed,
And the litter-cart was active without intermission.

And all would have been well; except some craz-
y hotheads among the members, having read
That the judges favoured rural peripheries,
Immediately went and blew up Birkenhead.

JIMMY FRAMES A RESOLUTION

Famed, he believed, for drafting documents from Bid-
ston to Laird St., when Claughton Bowls Club faced
A Borough Council bid to clap the lid
On its socials (so The Wirral Globe), Jimmy raced
To the rescue – and the Committee, night by night,
Converted "absolutely disgusted" to merely "pained",
"Strongly opposed" to "troubled", then (despite
Misgivings) "concerned". Paragraphs waxed and waned,
While the sage propounded principles of composition:
"Number your items; avoid exaggeration,
Insults, vain adjectives, all repetition,
Sentimentality, handles for derogation"–
To such effect that the final draft read 1)
We disagree 2) It's good clean fun.

CHIPS

Fastidious, as his habit. and so immensely
(Jimmy) abhorrent of low-class delectations,
Abstained from chippies – loathed their odour intensely:
And Mrs Jimmy agreed. His protestations
Were loud at a proximate fish among friends. One day
On the Claughton bus, home as he went from shopping,
Two graceless scuts, well-portioned, came his way,
Munching their smellies (and far too big for stopping)
And pushing their kind-meant offerings to his nose.
Well he was impregnate through every orifice: –
Garments, his skin, his hair, from teeth to toes.
But the worst yet awaited, when he got home. It was this:
His wife, standing accusing, hands on hips:
"You won't be wanting your tea, since you've had chips."

JIMMY BECOMES A PRIVATE DETECTIVE

Turned on by a Bogie retrospective on tel,
Plus lesser tube-tecs (some friends said mishearing
An appellation) Jimmy incontinently fell
To practice as a private dick, endearing
At once himself to Bedford's small-ad board,
Returner of pups and cats "White bib and paws,
Answers to 'Ignatius', fifty pence reward".
So, plastic-macked, our upholder of the laws,
And replica-Birettaed, Claughton his main
Pitch, stalked till his first 'divorce-enquiry' came
– A malicious club-mate's set-up. Caught, nose to pane,
By the uniformed branch ("Got you, we know your game").
A long and trying time he was before
They warned him strictly and let him out of store.

JIMMY TAKES A FLUTE LESSON

Allured by an ad on Bedford's notice-board,
Jimmy ("French flautist: lessons by the hour")
Enrolled – and duly presented his restored
Instrument chez Mam'selle Joss at "The Bower",
Noctorum Road, next day, having passed a night
Fantastical, largely featuring her thighs,
White against black suspended, of appetite
Hip-crushing to strain him into paradise –
To be pained by reality: a class of three;
Miss Joss, probably Australian, meticulous
On musical performance; and the thrill, when she
Laid him down (for breathing) and placed her metatarsus
On his diaphragm, dashed by her "Cut the fuss,
Mate, and get yourself a better truss."

JIMMY EXPERIENCES AVANT·GARDE THEATRE

Seduced by midweek concessions – and after six
(Jimmy) free transport – joined in a theatre ride
Liverpoolwards to an avant-garde, ambulatorix
Drama: no seats; no smoking; no divide
Between players and payers; programmes vaguely hawked
By pink punks; stage over stage overhid..
It was not like Cloughton; and so at first he was shocked.
But then cheered up, as strolling ladies did
Things with his trousers, and one bold roustabout
Stripped to her buff (but nothing was undisplayed),
Till he caught the spirit and was himself about
To initiate some business when, dismayed
His friends gripped him and, recomposing his dress,
Returned him home by ultimate duress.

JIMMY INSPIRES FUTURE SPECULATION

When package-tourists jump, jump on the official spot
Where Burdakov, dying, dug moon-ice first,
Or pay more to ear-clear at Mars-base (hot
Zone) by the luminous memorial of the burst
(All facile to foresee), then old space-hands
Will mutter in bars about sardine-cans, decadence –
By others seen as progress in pioneer lands,
Not unaccompanied by culture: as evidence:
Selene College, Harvard's lunar mate,
Specialising in fragmentary Twentieth Century A.D.
Old English Lit. and Women's Lib., will graduate
A *cum laude* soon, on Merseypoets, Ph. D.,
Hypothesising far too plausibly to fail
That Jimmy the Claughton character was female.

THE MAN WITH THE HEARING AID

Rather conventional the man with the hearing aid,
A Building Society manager, and in his spare time,
Vergor or sexton or something, so I was told,
To the local church. His wife provided half
The living of Mycroft's Bakery and looked it.

Sometimes I saw him in Birkenhead Park, watching
Brown gym-knickered schoolgirls at tennis practice;
But then he had no children himself. Eventually
I bought his ground flat in Mona Street
And, transferring keys, "I thought I should tell you,"
he said,

"You look a decent lad, but the man in the flat
Upstairs is some sort of sex maniac;
Or pervert at the least – the things I've heard,
Lying in bed at night, minding myself,
With the mike of my aid sellotaped to the ceiling."

CAT

Unintentionally, through a temporal fault
He chanced to own himself, before his death
Reborn as a cat – the kitten came
Bought with the house; he never actually liked it.

Five full years they bore each other hardly;
Put out when his wife left for work, they glared
Uncomprehendingly through panes; he sometimes thought
The cat knew something: it looked, looked.

Finally on the pretext of a limp,
The RSPCA called, two years added
And a tip and off he went for electrocution,
Always wondering why he felt uneasy.

RARE BREED

The Cloughton Fat-Faced Cat is a rare breed,
Though common in our parts; greatly sought
For character not appearance, it is a
Local living legend.

Said to possess a keener eye, deeper miau,
Entrepreneur, aggressor, scavenger, pimp,
Mirror of owners, it sits in windows
Supervising energetically.

Hong-Kong millionaires, filmstars, Arab sheikhs
– The Sunday Observer unearths – have often paid
Tens, hundreds, for ordinary mogs
Cunningly fitted with cheek-pads and exported.

TIME-TRAVELLER.

The bank customer, unsure where he was, when,
What denomination, colours – pressed, with relief
"People," confessed, "believe time-travellers live like
Royalty : padded expense accounts, assignments
Through the pleasure years, free transport. I blame
Temp-Recruitment with their come-on posters, sales-sex.
They don't show wards full of broken officers –
Chronic time-shock, paradox victims, hosts
For interface virus, plus ordinary disease; you see it,
Since Liverpool lies on a temporal node, here too:
Derelicts of the service, funny old veterans at forty,
Men and women, shouting at passers on the stride,
Or chattering soft to themselves, holding onto railings."

TOURISTS

In Cornwall emmets, in Devon they call them grockles,
Since they swarm in summer like ants, blacking the sands
Like stranded jellyfish or like monstrous cockles,
Filling their moving mouths with feet and hands
And excreting fivers – gathered as winter fuel
By the hardy natives. Protection Societies scream;
But experienced exploiters cannot think it cruel:
"There are so many of them and they seem
Not to mind. Some of them even come back
Annually to be squeezed and plucked and carved
And served weak tea, greased chips and studied lack
Of courtesy – what if we kept them starved?"
On Merseyside however we call them Sir,
Puzzled, not really knowing what they're for.

HORIZONTAL MAN.

A horizontal man feels time
Pass faster than a vertical
This is a scientific fact
Explicable by analogy
If time is a stream the floater moves
More than a wader can resist
That is why sleeping people stir
Only occasionally and the dead
Say nothing for a long long time

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FRANCIS CAIRNS was born in Glasgow and has lived on Merseyside since 1974. His publications in the field of classical literature include *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry* (Edinburgh U.P.) and *Tibellus : A Hellenistic Poet at Rome* (Cambridge U.P.). His poems have been published in local and national magazines. This is his first collection.

WINDOWS

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