

Risk

Collected Poems and Stories

Keith Sagar

Contents

Six Paintings by D.H.Lawrence:

- Boccaccio Story (1968)
- Red Willow Trees (1968)
- Resurrection (1968)
- Summer Dawn (1968)
- Dance Sketch (1984)
- Dandelions (1987)

Fishing Trip (1970)

Crow Goes to the Movies (1971)

Playing with Fire (1974)

Risk (1977)

The Nightingale Man (1977)

I Blew It (1977)

The Wholly Ghost (1977)

The Seven Lively Sins (1978)

Mola (1978)

Photographer in New Mexico (1978)

The Beast [story] (1978)

Interface:

- Bicolour Blenny (1979)
- Cleaner Wrasse (1977)
- Mantis Shrimp (1977)
- Achilles Tang (1978)
- The Reef (1979)

Encounter (1975)

City Boy (1980)

Cleveleys (1978)

Bereft (1981)

Metaphysician (1984)

A Chip Off the Old Block (1984)

Playing at God (1984)

Intersections – Hyderabad (1985)

The Feast [story] (1988)

Animal Crackers (1991-2001)

Dilemma (1993)

Death of a Poet (2000)

I must have written some poems as a child. Happily, they have not survived. The earliest poem I can remember must have been written when I was about fourteen. We had been set to translate Verlaine's 'Chanson d'Automne'. It's a poor poem, but I was quite taken with it at the time, and thought it needed to be translated into verse (which we had not been asked to do). My reward was a detention on the charge of copying out some published translation – praise of a sort I suppose.

In my last term at school I had a poem in the school magazine which consisted entirely of quotations. And in my first term at Cambridge I published one in a Cambridge magazine which consisted entirely of clichés. It was actually called 'An Eclectic Sunset'!

The second hand nature of these early poems illustrates what Ted Hughes meant when he spoke of the 'terrible, suffocating, maternal octopus of the English poetic tradition'. That wonderful phrase 'maternal octopus' perfectly captures the rich, nourishing quality of our poetic inheritance, but also its tendency to overwhelm. It makes it so difficult to find one's own poetic voice (so presumptuous to even think of it), so difficult to make oneself heard, in Hughes' phrase 'against that choir'. Reading English at Cambridge had the same effect on me as on many others: it gave me a great deal, but it also silenced me, poetically, for sixteen years.

My first adult poems were also, in a sense, second-hand. On my first visit to the States, in 1968, I saw for the first time D.H Lawrence's original paintings, which I had long admired in reproductions. They demanded an imaginative response - that I try to find a poetic equivalent for what Lawrence had done with paint. (Lawrence himself had written poems on the same subjects as one or two of them.) I produced four poems, and added two more years later.

SIX PAINTINGS BY D.H.LAWRENCE

BOCCACCIO STORY

The farmer lies naked beneath his shirt.
His trunk supports a tree.
His limbs direct the furrows of a field.
His thighs illumine the noonday scene.
Olives spurting silver at the field's edge
Reflect. Two white dogs trot over furrows,
Nosy about the nuns, who creep,
In lavender habits and bobbing bonnets,
Flushed and bright-eyed, towards
The limp exposed phallus of the farmer
Who is not really asleep.

RED WILLOW TREES

These willows weep not.
They thrust from the Tuscan Hills
Firm as willows never were since Angelico
And red as the carrotty hair of a man -
Red tufts and plumes from the antlered boughs
That branch from the top of a manly trunk
Where a clear stream forks and flows.

RESURRECTION

The grey-faced man is no longer a man.
His corpse still carries the tomb's chill.
Life is an ache and consciousness a nostalgia.
Under the hands of the women who raise him up
His spirit winces. He gazes beyond them, beyond
All colours and presences,
Asking, mutely, where,
If not in the tomb,
The tyranny of touch
Can be cast off.

SUMMER DAWN

Out of the smudge and shimmer
of a many-coloured summer dawn
the shifting light lifts
here a knee
here a thigh
here a glowing buttock
of the two towelling bathers fresh from the sea
into momentary definition.

DANCE SKETCH

a couple dances a goat prances trees
lean to be in at the dance the dance
draws to its circle the ghosts of the glade
they join hands they whirl into a current
that urges and urges
all life into motion
all life into dance

DANDELIONS

Naked, unselfconscious, insouciant,
the sun on his shoulder
Piero the contadino
pisses into a bed of dandelions under a Tuscan pine.

The little suns are not extinguished -
they reach to receive the blessing of his grace;
they proffer in return their yellow wealth;
they shine.

*

My first wholly first-hand poem, 'Fishing Trip', came in 1970. I had no interest in fishing, but a friend was a member of the York Sea-Angling Club. I was visiting him on a Saturday. On the Sunday he had planned an early start with seven other members of the club to go to Whitby, where they had hired a coble to take them on a fishing trip. The coble held eight fishermen; but on the Saturday one of the eight cried off, and I allowed myself to be persuaded to take his place. The poem records exactly what happened. The irony of the poem seems positively heavy-handed to me, but one reviewer of *The Reef* solemnly informed me that fish do feel pain.

FISHING TRIP

On a sea without foam, without waves,
Eight men in a coble from Whitby
Sat or stood in the sun and fished.

The horizon dissolved into a haze
And in the middle distance a school of dolphins broke
And broke again the rocking calm.

The men were silent, absorbed, baiting their hooks.

The hook goes through the mussel's tongue and fleshy stem.
The weight drops through the clear water
Through the dark green water
Down, out of sight,
Down, into another world, where soon
Some living thing remotely nudges my finger.
I jerk and reel
For an age I reel
Drawing at last a shining life

Out of its element -
Or two or three on the same line.

Whiting and larger haddock and big cod
Gaped while the hooks were wrenched from their throats,
Slithered and thrashed on the deck, then stared
Through a thickening mist at the staring sun.

It was a good day, a day to remember, that August Wednesday.
Our arms arched from reeling in so many fish.
The men smiled and were happy.
This was what they had come for.

On the way back they admired
The jigger that had done most damage with the big cod.
Next time they will all bring such jiggers.

Crowds gathered on the quay to watch the catch brought in.
Wives and children lined the streets to watch the boots unloaded.
Fridges and larders bulged with fish.
Many were thrown away.

The North Sea did not notice its loss.
The depths still teemed
With whiting and haddock and big cod
Eating the smaller fish.

Fish don't feel pain. And what if they do?
We did no worse to them than they do to each other.
We accepted the morality of the North Sea.
We enjoyed the carnage and the day out.

*

The next several poems were all directly or indirectly connected with Ted Hughes. *Crow* was published in 1970. The following year I tried my own hand at a *Crow* poem. A few years later I saw to my amazement the same title, 'Crow Goes to the Movies' listed in a Liverpool University Library catalogue of their Hughes manuscript holdings. The chance of Hughes having written a poem with the same title (and why the American 'movies' rather than cinema) seemed so infinitesimal that I assumed that one of the typescripts of my own poem which I had distributed to friends must have found its way to Liverpool as a genuine Hughes ms. I went to Liverpool to look at their collection, and found that it was indeed a genuine Hughes poem, quite different from my own. I don't know which came first. It would be eerie if they turned out to be exactly contemporaneous.

CROW GOES TO THE MOVIES (after Ted Hughes)

Crow saw a film
Of the speeded-up growth of a bean.
A tiny white fist thrust upward,
Spread long fingers like an Indian dancer's
And flung flamboyant tendrils to caress the world.
Crow was lost in admiration.

Then they showed the metamorphosis of the butterfly.
Crow was dazzled by the technicolour wings
But the transformation troubled him:
"When I eat a caterpillar am I eating a butterfly?"
The thought stuck in his throat. He gagged.
The unborn colours heaved in his belly.

Next came the foetus of a man
Curled serenely in the womb
Its arms cradling the enormous brain.
They showed the children of that brain
Flying higher and wider than any bird.
Crow clapped.
But the brain became a cancer
And its floating children a pink foam on the sea.

The main film was the speeded-up story of evolution.
Miraculously life generated itself,
Spawned amoebas and deep-sea monsters
Till the sea became a seething cauldron
The land a tangled proliferation of forms.
But the big stars - man and the vertebrates -
Made only a fleeting appearance,
And Crow could not see himself among the extras.
When they showed the Great Auk's egg in its museum case
Crow felt it was time to leave.

*

My research on Hughes involved reading a lot of Jung. In his wonderful little book *Answer to Job* I was particularly struck by the sentence: 'When God cast the devil out of heaven he cut off an essential part of himself'. My thinking about that produced 'Playing with Fire'.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

God thought he would make something out of nothing

By rubbing his hands together and saying the magic words
LET THERE BE LIGHT!
In concentration he clenched his eyes
But when he opened them he saw

A flaming being reared up against him
A proud thrusting hot-head
Stiff-necked
Red in the face
Throbbing with indignation.

He could not recognize the little cherub
Which had nestled
So demurely
In his lap
So long.

God grasped the risen angel by the neck -
Lightning forked his eyes
Blinding him for ever -
The Milky Way spirited up -
Comets lashed their tails through space.

"You devil!" cried God,
Drew his ancient sword
And blindly hacked.
He screamed.
Too late he regretted it.

The angel writhed and fell
Into Eden, where it lay
Spent in the grass, among the flowers,
Under the trees laden with fruits,
Which had sprung from its blood.

God staggered off
Clutching his wound
His falsetto cries
Echoing through space
Like a one-man choir of angels.

*

Although we had been corresponding for some years, my friendship with Hughes properly began in 1975. In the spring of 1977 he sent me an advance copy of *Gaudete* (inscribed 'The head is older than the book'). Not only was I bowled over by the book in

its own terms, it also had a dramatic and immediate effect on my own poetry: I wrote more poems in 1977 than any other year, and better ones.

RISK

Which way to Paradise?

Follow the snake
Into the dumb oracular cave.
Leave your armour under this bush
Your clothes upon this rock.
Hang your helmet on this bough.
Bury your sword.
Walk slowly.
Now crawl.
Feel with your hand
For the brink of the pit.
Now stand.
Leap.

Do not flail and thrash --
You will be shattered anyway.
Perfect your fall
Into a dive
A glide
Flight.
You will crash anyway.

Where am I?

Nowhere.

Am I blind?

Open your eyes.

Which way to Paradise?

You passed it in your fall.

My dreams suddenly became available to me for poems.

THE NIGHTINGALE MAN

There was this garden
Right there just off the sidewalk
Among the shops and office blocks.
It was shabby, trodden and littered.
There were a few little pools
With concrete paths.
In the far corner was a big bush
With many small birds in it.
One of them was singing
Very loud and metallic
Or perhaps it was a phonograph.

And a man stood on the sidewalk
Almost swamped by the rush-hour crowds.
He shouted to the passers-by
That these were nightingales
And for a dollar he would call one
To come and sit on your head and sing.

Someone gave him a dollar
And he whistled
And a nightingale came
And sat on his grizzled head.
He had a hard time making it go
To the other man.
Then it sang.
There was quite a crowd watching.

A little girl with tightly bound hair
With plastic flowers in it
Walked stiffly between the pools
Like a little oriental lady.
I don't know if she was part of the act.
One of the nightingales came
Uncalled
And sat on her head.
But it did not sing.

I'll tell you where it was.
Just a couple of blocks from
That big brothel where the women sit
In those huge first-floor windows,
Twenty or thirty of them
(Beauties most of them)

Waiting to be picked out.

‘I Blew It’ was written on my birthday.

I BLEW IT

It was my lucky day.
I had won first prize.
I would be taken before the goddess.

Something short-circuited
Like a shooting star
In my head.

‘You are standing before her.’

I knelt.
I knew that to look upon divinity
With profane eyes
Could be the death of me.
Any mistake
Could be the death of me.
I put my hand over my eyes
Even though they were shut tight.
I imagined her incredible beauty,
That I might touch her breasts.

‘Is it permitted to look?’

‘It is not permitted to ask.
Or to kneel.
Or to cover your eyes.

You have lost your prize.’

THE WHOLLY GHOST

Stretched out under a tree,
Weighted his hands and feet with stones,
And dozed in the cool of the day.

He stirred.
He woke

Stifling.

What weight was this upon him?
What perfume heavy in the air?
What hand moved his hand
To what hot softness?
What orgy of solids and liquids,
Heat, weight, textures,
Moving of limbs,
Heaving of flesh,
Crushed him,
To his agony and delight,
And drew his soul from him?

*

He died.

And in death he dreamed
That a radiant woman stood
In an oval frame,
One hand on her belly,
The other holding
A sparkler
Whose sparks
Fell on his bed,
Set fire to it,
And lifted him on sheets of flame
To toss him
Into a lake
Where he hissed and writhed,
Split from end to end,
Slithered from the steaming pool
And his own black skin
Onto a grassy bank
At the foot of a tree,
Drew his body up
(His limbs had gone)
Raised his head
And opened his mouth to scream,
But heard instead
A song winding up from the entrails of the earth
Wordless and weird
Like the first song ever sung
In the first green silence
By a beautiful woman
Who looked hard at his tree
Put one hand upon her belly

And stretched out the other.

THE SEVEN LIVELY SINS

PRIDE

Pride is the self in blossom
the tossed head
the flounce and flare.

It is the spark in the eye
of the angel who would not
grovel before god.

Pride is the backbone of the soul –
what they try to break
in the torture chamber –

The rigidity of the dead man.

COVETOUSNESS

“I want” makes the world wag
And gives the maker
A market for his work.

“I want” is the magnet by which
Things move towards those
Who will make best use of them.

“I want is the only language of desire,
And desire is the quickening
Of the self to the other.

ENVY

To envy no man
Is to think oneself perfect.

I am not envious, and that
Is a measure of my vanity.

WRATH

Give me bright tigers of wrath.

Let us turn, tigerish,
On those who would kill them
To powder their bones,
To make rugs of their burning hides –

Seal clubbers,
Whale slaughterers,
Lacing the seas with red. –
All who take life for cash or fun –

Into the tigers' den with them!
Let Mammon save them
From the wrath
Of the god of tigers.

GLUTTONY

“Enough is as good as a feast”
Said my grandmother –

And blighted my life.

SLOTH

Who would you wish for your neighbour?
Zeal o' the Land Busy
Or one who sleeps in the sun?

Sloth is the Belacqua bliss
The dolce far niente.

Sloth hands like a ripe fruit
On the tree of life, waiting

For the blessing
Of the fat worm.

LECHERY

God pulls the string
And you jerk and jerk.

It's the only string left –
Without it you would

Collapse in a heap
And be thrown into a box.

*

Throughout the seventies I made frequent trips to the States, especially Taos, New Mexico. One of the trophies I brought back was a mola, a colourful embroidered panel made in, I think, Paraguay. This one was a demon. When I got back I had it framed in the traditional double frame, and it still hangs in my study.

MOLA

Multicoloured, clawed,
Snag-toothed and square-eyed,
A winged demon waits at the top of my stair.

He squats obscenely
In his glory
In his black womb.

I have nailed his wings to a board,
Imprisoned him in a double tomb.

But even in his darkness,
Even in pitch darkness,
His eyes still glare.

PHOTOGRAPHER IN NEW MEXICO

Stink of cats.
Other unclean smells.
Unmade bed. Layer
Upon layer of dirt.
A shambling bear
In a filthy lair
Under pure Taos snow.

Flabby balding recluse,

Anxious to talk
About his work
And finding himself
And finding his woman.
Gave us coffee
In dirty cups.

Photographer.
He opened a door -
A gleaming studio,
Orderly,
Spotless,
Space-age,
In the midst of chaos.

He showed us samples.
His new technique -
Revolutionary.
Held to the light
They sprang to life.
Transparencies
Four feet square.

Machinery, landscapes,
Figures - but mainly
Machinery, sawmills.
Such contrast, tone,
Definition,
I had not seen before.
Then his story:

Failed marriage
(Not soul-mates) -
Separation.
Found himself
Through spirit guide
From the seventh level
Of the Astral Plane.

Unlocked his talent -
The breakthrough
In his work,
Unlocked his future -

His soul-mate
Waits for him

In Germany.

A glamorous rich widow
Gleaned from a glossy
Magazine, modelling mink.
He will go there,
Knock on her door.
The borzois bark.
She opens -

"I am your soul-mate
Come to claim you; come
From under Taos mountain
To claim my bride
According to my spirit guide
From the seventh level
Of the Astral Plane."

It was her destiny.
She had no choice.
Now, in his shack
Under Taos mountain
She feeds his cats,
Makes his snow-white bed,
Strokes his shining hair.

She washes coffee cups
While he develops
His shots of Swedish sawmills
In his space-age studio
Under Taos mountain -
One of the sacred places
Of the earth.

The Lawrence trail also took me several times to Italy. On one occasion I was with an American friend, who suggested, towards the end of our fortnight, that we go our separate ways one day, and each come back with a short story. I had never attempted any fiction. The previous week we had visited the Etruscan tombs at Cerveteri, a magical place, and that night I had had a very strange dream, fixed in my memory by having been told to my friend on waking. Out of the reality and the dream I made 'The Beast'. On my way home through London I bought the latest issue of *Bananas*. It contained a new story by Ted Hughes called 'The Head': a story much longer mine but virtually containing mine, even down to details, images and phrases. When I showed it to Ted he seemed unsurprised by the similarity, but surprised me with his interpretation, which I'm sure is

right, and which brings the story into a much closer relationship than I had perceived to the poems. [I discuss the two stories in detail in my contribution to *The Epic Poise*.]

THE BEAST

It was late May and a late spring. The sun was bright but not burning, There were flowers everywhere. The air was rich with scents, and the cypresses rustled softly to themselves. We were among the first to arrive that morning. A group of screaming schoolchildren was soon left behind: and we soon lost each other in the maze of tombs.

The area of the necropolis would have looked tiny on any map; but because of the number of the tombs and their apparently random arrangement, in reality it seemed vast. It had nothing whatever of the gloom, the dank morbidity of an English graveyard. Here the word resurrection seemed more than the empty token it has become in Christianity. Somewhere, in some form, the Etruscans who had been buried here are dancing again and smiling still, in this world or another.

I strayed further and further from the trodden paths, glimpsing my friend in the distance less and less frequently. Birdsongs were now the only sounds.

Most of the tombs were circular, about fifty feet in diameter, and domed. The tumuli were all wildly overgrown, and ablaze with broom. Handsome green lizards sunned themselves on the wall, posed to be photographed, then, at the crucial moment, scuttled off towards the dark entrances, and stood for a moment at the thresholds, brighteyed against the blackness. Steps led down to the entrances, most of which were blocked with rubble. Some of the tombs were flooded, and the stairs disappeared into a phosphorescent green scum. A few were open and cobwebs guarded their darkness and silence.

Time slowed as the sun climbed. I walked through waist-high flowers round the circumference of a high tomb, and suddenly came upon an opening at my feet the size of a house, a sunken court. An intact staircase led down to it from a far corner. I had seen nothing like it before. I could see no way to the stair but by leaping a five-foot gap with an unsure footing and a fall of some twenty feet. I jumped it safely and descended the stair. There was a doorway in the middle of each wall. All were blocked, but one not completely. I crawled through. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness I could see nothing but rubble-strewn empty chambers, and was about to turn back when I caught a glimmer of light ahead – another exit. With great difficulty I scrambled through and stood up.

*

I stood at the head of a steep valley with strange primitive trees and giant mosses and ferns. The sides of the valley were close and sheer and the sky looked far up. It was cold, and there were neither birds nor flowers. Nothing moved in the unnatural stillness. I moved slowly forward, intruding on the last fastness of an earlier world-age, long before the Etruscans danced, long before civilizations existed or joy was known.

Beneath the ancient trees like standing fossils, something took shape, something brown and beastlike. It did not move. I approached in fear. It was some great Elk-like beast with massive antlers. But what was wrong with it? Its stillness was not the stillness of a cocked lizard, nor yet the stillness of death. With a pang of horror I saw that it had

no eyes, just black holes where its eyes had been. It must be dead, long dead. But it was not dead. It made a sound, a sound I heard with my spine, the sound of aeons of accumulated agony and resignation. The beast could neither live nor die. It stood in an attitude of utter wretchedness. And I saw that among the antlers were shafts of wood driven into the skull and wedged there. The beast had long ago lost the will or the strength to try to dislodge them.

Fear gave way to compassion. Tentatively I touched one of the shafts. The beast did not move. I grasped the shaft and gently pulled. Slowly it came away, leaving a bottomless hole like the eye-sockets. Slowly I pulled out another and another, inching them out as gently as I could, though the beast made neither sound nor movement. It took an age to remove them all. I stood back and wondered what the point of my intervention was. The beast had stood thus for centuries. Surely it could feel nothing. Then I remembered that sound. Had the beast really made it, or had I imagined it?

Now I looked at the cavernous face of the beast, and the beast looked at me. With its empty eye-sockets I knew that it looked at me. And I knew that, though I saw no tears, it wept. And I knew that its weeping was a remission of its agony.

[Note: It was long after writing this story (based on a dream) that I came across Barry Cooke's magnificent painting *Megacarous Hibernicus* (1983), of which Aidan Dunne has written:

Megacarous Hibernicus is a cloudy, epic vision of an elk, its body in profile, its head, and the great spread of its antlers angled towards us. Hazy, emergent, it stands against and blends into a moist, dark blanket of space, like a murky soup of time, suffused with a misty light. The antlers radiate a pearly luminescence. There are hints of pinky-red veins worked into their surfaces. Trailing green lines, as lazy and vegetative as lianas, sketchily delineate their outlines, but they are anything but finished, definitive presences. Soft, pulpy masses, they look as if they are growing like plants, The animal's body is ambiguously stated. We feel the space of its physical bulk almost as a hollow, a scooped, excavated trench. Within its contours, forms slide into one another, a jumble of skeletal and muscular tissue. It is like a portrait if the elk revived in its peaty habitat, something of its organic coherence is preserved but there has been a transaction between organism and environment, and the elk has taken on some of the qualities of its surroundings. It is ghostly presence, hazy and evanescent, but the pale shafts of skeletal bone, the red sinewy trails of pigment, flowering antlers webbed with veins, and its heroic, questing attitude, surveying us through the centuries, indicates a resurrected, sentient state. (*Barrie Cooke, 1986*)

I like to think that Cooke's purer vision represents a later stage of the resurrection of the same elk, the same unkillable holy life in our common consciousness.]

*

At that time I kept marine tropical fish and invertebrates in two large aquaria. On one occasion when Hughes was staying with me, he spent at least half-an-hour sitting

close to one of them staring silently at a single fish. He had been adopting that technique for his own poems – staring at a creature for hours until time and the rest of the world ceased to exist. The most striking product was ‘Eclipse’, a long poem about a pair of spiders on his windowsill. When he had gone, I tried the technique myself, and produced several poems.

Bicolour Blenny

What sticks up from that coral-head?
A blob of mud with alert tilting eyes?
Look closer.
A sooty cricket with Martian antennae?
No.
Just a mud-coloured blenny
Propped on his primitive fin-feet
On perpetual look-out.

Here comes a shrimp,
Perfected and preserved
For just this moment -

The blenny launches upwards -
An inch of sooty chest -
Then suddenly he is on fire -
A jet of flame leaps upwards from the tail
And fires the long dark body.

Slaked with shrimp, the fire subsides
Into its coral-head grate.
The flaming skirt is folded neatly
Into its niche;
While the lugubrious square head
Pretends once more
To know nothing about it
To be nothing but mud and greed.

CLEANER WRASSE

Into the gaping mouth
Into the ticklish gills
He slides and works
Knowing his uniform stripes
Of black and electric blue
Are his safe conduct
Down the one-way tunnel

His passport to hell and back
A routine journey he makes
Warily, but without a qualm
Knowing he is needed.

The road to hell is paved with
Parasites, wounds, debris.
He is doctor and dentist
Barber and janitor in one.
Patiently they queue, large and small,
Predators and mortal enemies
Check by jowl
Behaving themselves
Taking their turns
At the cleaning station.

Remove the cleaner wrasses
And their partners
The cleaner shrimps
In their red-and-white striped jerseys
With their prehensile antennae
And built-in delicate forceps
And the fish will flit
Leaving a ghost-reef
A deserted coral garden
A plankton paradise.

MANTIS SHRIMP

First a forked red feeler waving, then another,
Then two swivel eyes on stalks
Cocked one this way, one that,
Their shutters opening to oblong mirror slits
Reflecting nothing -
A metallic satin blackness beyond stars.
No head to speak of.

He rears his mantis chest
And there are his weapons,
Red bulging hammers, spring-loaded,
Doubled back under until needed
To smash a mollusc shell for a meal,
Or perhaps for building blocks
For his ramparts.

Here he comes now.
A giant green millipede,
Articulated tube-train,
Cross-eyed reeling Scotsman
Swirling a tartan kilt,
Demonic mandarin in dragon silk
Trailing a peacock fan.

Now he flings upwards at a fish,
Flails inches wide - floats gently down,
Loses his bearings - eyes swivel wildly,
Somersaults under his own tail-feathers
And dives for his grotto,
Spins inside it to peer out again
With his crazy periscopes.

ACHILLES TANG

[*Acanthurus achilles*, also known as the Red-tailed Surgeon, from the mid-Pacific atolls. Like all Surgeonfish it has a retractable blade at the base of the tail with which it slashes its rivals.]

'The black one with red in its tail.'
Black? Red? Have you no eyes?
That body-shade is far from black
Is far from any colour
You could give a name to.
Nearer to brown, but not quite brown;
Maroon then - nearer still,

But still far off. Half way
Between maroon and darkest brown
Suffused with rusty red of congealed blood.
Black-pudding colour!

There we have it now.
The one thing in the world
That shares its colour, and that too
Is called black.
Body and fins are edged with metallic brightness.
The blood-orange tail
With its edge of electric blue
Is a bright crescent
A perfect scimitar.

That horizontal blood-drop at the heel,
At the base of the tail,

That is the mark of Achilles,
The spot where the poisoned arrow
Is destined to find its mark.

Blood rises in the thumb-prints of the mother
As she dips him in the bright river,
Baptising him, she thinks, to an endless hero's life,
In fact, to the agony and torn scream
Of a stuck pig.

It had been my ambition for years to see the fish I kept in their natural environment. At last, in 1979, I took a holiday on the Red Sea, much of which I spent snorkelling. It was very exciting, and I expected some poems to come out of it; but none did. A fortnight after I got back I was watching television at a friend's house when I suddenly called out 'Paper and pencil, quick'. Within half-an-hour I had written 'The Reef'.

THE REEF

There is another world down there.
It is not far.
Just wade out and lean forward
Until your face, masked, breaks
Through the interface
And you are there
Floating at the top of its low sky
A privileged displacement
Weighing nothing
Almost ignored by its denizens
Though breaking its silence
With your hoarse snorkelling.

And your eyes cannot believe it -
So many many shapes too strange
To be called beautiful:
Coral heads
Staghorn, mushroom, rose and brain
In hazy shades of green and pink and blue,
Tight little clusters of goniopora
With florets dancing,
Huge spiky plates of acrapora
Jutting into the blue.

And so many fish sailing in harmony:
Surgeons, butterflies, damsels, clowns,

Flying the vivid flags of themselves.
So many species
Distinct
Yet living such linked lives,
Stately and sure in their orbits.

But your eyes widen and strain
Beyond these riches. beyond all forms
To the deeper blue beyond,
The opaque blue milk
Of the gulf.

And you turn your back
On the enchanted garden of delights
The great display case of jewels
The long Picasso gallery.
And you swim
Out of your depth
Past the last outcrops
The last shadowy fish
Into the liquid blue dusk
And towards your fear.

What are you afraid of?
Not sharks -- they are few and friendly -
Not drowning - it would be hard to sink in this salt sea.
You are afraid
That when you turn
There will be nothing behind you
But the endless blue,
That the surface will not open to receive you
Back into air and sunlight -
That the other world, the known world,
No longer exists, perhaps never existed.

And suddenly you are tired and gasping
There is water in your mask and tube
You break surface
Gulp air
Thrash back to the shallows and the shore
To sit shivering in the hot sun
Until you are sound enough
To out again
Into the reef.

*

In 1974 I had moved from Clitheroe to a cottage at Osbaldeston Green, the most rural place I had ever lived in. My frequent walks in the surrounding country provided material for such poems as 'Encounter' and 'City Boy'.

ENCOUNTER

I sat on a bank at still dusk
Moving no muscle
Losing the sense of my own body
As I peered at a small pool
Rippled by scudding coots
And a bush shaken and loud with birds.

Suddenly, a tremor under me
And a faint sound -
A far-off tearing of roots.....

Yes, a distinct moving of the earth
And an almost rhythmic tearing
Getting louder and nearer
Then heaving under my heel and scraping at it
And the grass around it waving wildly.....

I would have cried out and leaped up in fear,
But my habit of stillness, watching the birds,
Steeled me to sit tight
And face what would come.

The bank crumbled behind my heel.
A small, tender, dirty-pink snout
Sniffed the air and was gone.
An unlucky mole, with all those acres to go at,
Had hit the one spot
Where an evil-smelling monster
Crouched waiting for it.

CITY BOY

First Bradford
A world of muck and brass
Where Nature was small livestock
In cages in the yard
And birds' nests in the park.

Then Cambridge
A world of art and learning
Where Nature was specimens
In the Botanical Gardens
And the Zoology labs.

Then Chesterfield
A world of coal and iron
Where Nature was rambles
In the National Park
On Whit weekends.

Then Clitheroe
A hill near, bright water
Where Nature was walking
On fells and by rivers
And nice views from the car.

Now Osbaldeston
A few farms and cottages
Where Nature is everywhere-
Fields, ponds and woodlands
On every side.

Any day, walking near my home,
I can see swallows and magpies,
Rabbits and curlews,
And water-hens on the ponds.

On luckier days I might
See a hedgehog rummaging
Or a heron sailing over
Or scare a snipe from the long grass.

On luckiest days I might
Startle a flaming pheasant cock,
Be startled by a quicksilver squirrel
Or even see a mole come up.

Today I loitered in the hedge
Watching a distant rabbit nibbling
In the last streaks of sun,
Then suddenly I was not alone.
Round a curve in the hedge
Ten yards away

The most elegant fine face
Was looking at me.

It stayed as long
As miracles need to stay -
Just long enough to register
The large black liquid eyes
The burnished hide
The oh-so-delicate legs
As it silkily leapt the fence
Into dark tangle.

Nature was giving its lesson
As if for the first time
Though proved every second,
That it is sweet and swift
And sane and sure
And shaming to man
Who seeing a miracle
Reaches for his gun.

(A hundred years ago
Hopkins watched kingfishers
On the Hodder near here.
But this is nineteen-eighty
And the world is full of people
And traffic rumbles
Day and night
On the A59.)

"There lives the dearest freshness
Deep down things"
And now my life is lifted
To a new cleave of being
By the knowledge
That it is there now
Not half a mile away
Living its perfect deer life.

I produced two books on tropical fish at that time, and this involved visiting a friend who was an importer in Cleveleys. He would telephone me whenever anything came in he thought I might like to photograph. That's why I was in Cleveleys in February.

CLEVELEYS

At the seaside for the first time
in a year or more.
Must have a look at the sea.

But the sea is far out here
even at high tide, and in the February fog
I cannot see it.

I trot out over clinking pebbles
over dry sand with its refuse
wet sand with its jetsam
to the rippled sand with its runnels
running parallel to the sea
but reaching it
somewhere.

I leap them, spattering myself,
splash through pools,
circumvent the deeper ones.

I can hear the sea
breathing hoarsely -
a few more steps and I must see it.

But no - only deeper, wider
runnels and pools
and the sound of the sea so near
but no nearer.

It can be half a mile out at low tide.
Soon the light will be failing.
Better turn back.

So I turn, expecting to see
the reassuring bulk of the prom.
But there is only
the same sand, pools, fog
in all directions.

Still, you can't miss something
the size of a promenade.
It would fill the horizon
if there were a horizon.

So I stride out, leaping

the same runnels, circumventing
the same pools.

Gulls rise at my approach -
there were no gulls the other way –
must have strayed already –
to the left I think.

Suddenly I notice that the sound
of the sea has changed to a slow
sucking and sluicing.
The fog rolls back from a fringe
of surf, that slides away
under the fog.

I have reached the sea.

What now?
Visions of nightfall
and the pools filling all round me
and no-one knowing I am here.

Sight is useless.
Keep the sound at my back.
So I try
to walk away from the sound ...

But the fog swallows the sound
swirls it round
regurgitates it
somewhere else.

What a fool to think
I could walk a straight line
without bearings!
I had tried that as a child
striding down a narrow back
with eyes closed –
and paid with my new front teeth.
This time there might be
a higher price.

Years ago
three had ridden out on horseback
on these very sands, in fog,
and were never seen again.

So I trudge
clueless
into the thickening fog.

Hearing a dog bark somewhere
I veer to the right.
Nothing more, just
the muffled hushing of the sea
all around me.

Then, as my last hope
Ebbs
at my extreme right
a darkness.

I approach and
it is the prom - a strange deserted prom
half way to Fleetwood.

But I stride it singing "Step I wi' ma crummock through the isles".

*

Up to this point I had published only one or two poems in journals, but in 1980 Michael Dawson, Director of the Yorkshire Arts Association, invited me to contribute to a series he was publishing called Proem Pamphlets. The idea was that in each a well-known poet would introduce a sample of the work of an unknown poet. Mine, *The Reef and Other Poems*, is now a collector's item, not for the poems, but for the introduction - a beautiful little essay on simplicity in poetry - by Ted Hughes.

*

BEREFT

I dreamed that I had lost you
Literally lost you
Knowing you were somewhere
In the strange city
But simply having forgotten
At parting
To name a time and place
For our next meeting.

Apart from this, the early eighties produced nothing but a handful of short largely satirical poems:

METAPHYSICIAN

That egg's the biggest in the world
An ostrich cannot match it.
Some say 'twas laid by God himself.
That man is trying to hatch it.

There's something tragic in his plight
As he sits perched in air
Spreadeagled to the starry night
The frost upon his hair.

Why don't he try a smaller egg
That he can get his arse on
And keep his feet upon the ground –
The foolish little person?

A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

Woodenly grinning
He leans from his rack of cloud
And offers the handle of his mighty hammer
To the infant carpenter
Trying for the first time
To nail two pieces of wood together.

PLAYING AT GOD

He was half-asleep in a deck-chair
When the ship struck

Like this insect sunning itself
On the open page
Of this book
Which I am about to close.

In 1985 the British Council sent me on a lecture tour in India, starting in Hyderabad. This was a great culture shock. I kept a few diary notes, thinking I might make poems from some of them. In the event they all insisted on being in the same poem.

INTERSECTIONS: HYDERABAD

This is the feast of Ganesh.
His garish image
Elephant, man and god
Presides at every intersection.
His music
Blaring from a thousand loudspeakers
Invades the surrounding country.
His worshippers kneel
Among the rubbish at his feet
Looking up, wide-eyed, ecstatic
At his grotesque fluorescence
And the gaudy bulbs
Which form his aureole.

Two great water-buffalo lie
In the middle of the main street
The rush-hour traffic streaming by on either side
Like a torrent round worn boulders.
They chew the cud (or something?)
Imperturbably.

A gross naked man lies on his back in the mud
In the middle of the bazaar.
He is the colour of water-buffalo.
He has neither hands nor feet.
He waves his stumps in the air
Howling.
The crowd streams by on either side
Imperturbably.
A tin at his side
Contains three coins.

A dead dog lies
In the middle of a quiet country lane
One hind leg pointing absurdly up
To a heaven of imperturbable blue.

In 1988 I was reading short stories by Beckett and Kafka, and I suppose their influence must have helped to generate 'The Feast', which I wrote in my head while driving into Manchester.

THE FEAST

It would be the feast of a lifetime. The food and drink were to be the best that land, sea and air, nature and man, could produce. Fish, flesh and fowl. Fruits of the tropical forests. Exotic dishes from all the corners of the world, each with its appropriate wine. Triumphs of haute cuisine by master chefs. Everyone would eat and drink as much as he or she wished. Delightful conversation would flow with the wine. The feast would be interminable. There would be entertainment between the courses: singers and dancers, musicians and magicians, acrobats and athletes, the finest in the world. A special dining hall would be built for the feast, in a palace, in a city, with the finest architecture the world had ever seen. There would be intervals in the feast from time to time. The guests would be taken on conducted tours of the city, its museums, its art its exhibition halls, where the finest art and craftsmanship ever created would be gathered. There would be time to wander in the older parts of the city, to go on excursions into the surrounding country, extraordinarily varied country - gentle temperate hills and lakes, mountains, deserts, tropical rain forests, frozen tundra, Arctic wastes; the sea not far away where one could dive into coral reefs; plenty of time to walk, climb, explore, discover the undiscovered. Time, too, for getting to know one's fellow guests (and what geniuses they might be, saints and sage, world champions), for developing friendships that would last, marriage even. Children might be born between courses. They would need no tickets to the feast. Men might put their heads together and invent wonders, solve all problems, save the world.

Tickets for the feast were, of course, hard to come by. Anyone might apply: it stands to reason that few could go. In--one was very clear about the procedure. There were tokens one could collect. But how many were needed to exchange for a ticket, no-one knew.

Clearly a great many. There were several ways in which tokens could be obtained, in exchange for goods, work, services. Some kinds of work, not always the hardest, earned more than others.

As time went by life became geared more and more to the earning and buying and selling of tokens. Everyone worked all the hours that god sent. There were of course short cuts to the accumulation of tokens. Large numbers of them could be won in lotteries; and it was not long before they began to be stolen and forged. People would sell anything for tokens. Prostitution flourished. Men would sell their wives and children into it; probably, if the truth were known, their mothers. Men killed for tokens. Yet however many tokens anyone amassed, they knew they would be far short of the number needed for a ticket. Men and women worked for a lifetime, then passed their tokens to their children, saying 'I shall never go to the feast, but perhaps my children or my children's children...'

When the feast is to be no-one knows. Or where. Perhaps it has already begun. But if one can join it at any time, that need not matter. Perhaps it is already over, and if one should, at last, by some miracle, obtain a ticket and find the place, there might be nothing but the mouldy scraps and relics of a feast enjoyed by others long ago.

Perhaps they are all lies about the feast. Perhaps it would be a poor affair of bread and water for starvelings, or plates of illusory food without substance, or rich dishes which, as one bent to taste them, would be snatched away by invisible hands. Perhaps there has never been and never will be any such feast. Only romantics and fools still believe in it. Best, after all, to forget the ridiculous feast. Our tokens at least are solid and real. They can't take those away from us.

*

About 1990 we were on a cruise from St. David's, and our guide told us of the devastation caused to both flora and fauna on one of the islands we passed by the introduction of rabbits. To amuse the children, I made up a little nonsense poem about the

destructive potential of rabbits. They liked it, so I quickly produced several more. A few years later, having gradually accumulated a dozen such poems, I set myself the task of producing one for every letter of the alphabet, which involved verbal contortions probably beyond the reach of younger children who might enjoy the merely silly poems.

ANIMAL CRACKERS

A is for **A**nteater
Who watched his aunt eat her
Breakfast in wonder and pain,
For the ants that she ate
Reappeared on her plate,
Having eaten their way out again.

Are you aware
That you're really a bear
And should be called **B**runo or **B**ruin?
If you take off your vest
And examine your chest
You'll find what you've got is a bear skin!

The long-legged **C**heetah
Runs one kilometer
In very much less than a minute.
In a race with a **J**ag
The cheetah won't lag.
There wouldn't be very much in it.

D is for **D**inosaurs.
They are the biggest bores
In the dim dusty museum.
They are nothing but bones,
And exciting as stones.
Just exit whenever you see 'em.

E is for **E**lephant.
He's not very elegant.
His baggy pants sag when he bends.
He's a giant grey prune
Or a barrage-balloon
With a rubbery tail at both ends.

F is for **F**lea.
Did you ever see
A flea-circus that came to your town?
Flea-ballerinas

Can fill all arenas,
And flea-clowns can bring the house down.

Giraffe gave a laugh
When they raffled his scarf,
Thinking that no-one could wear it.
It was riddled with holes
And infested with voles
Who would not volunteer to repair it.

H is for **H**orse-fly.
Have you seen a horse fly?
Or heard those huge wings overhead?
It lives in a nightmare's nest;
It flies out when you're at rest
To land at the foot of your bed.

I is for **I-I**
(Or Aye is for Aye-aye?)
Anyway, it's a sort of a lemur.
It looks like a cat
With the ears of a bat,
And it lives in Madagascar.

J is for **J**ay
I'm delighted to say,
(For it saves me from telling more lies).
His cheek is beyond belief
And he is such a thief
He'd steal the tears out of your eyes.

K is for **K**akapo
And Kiwi and Kokako,
All birds, but they walk on the ground.
They are pestered by rats
And by stoats and by cats.
No wonder they cannot be found.

L is for **L**eopard. He
Is living In Jeopardy
(Though I can't find the place on the map).
Like jaguars and ocelots
He can't change his splendid spots
That's why he ends up in a trap.

'Men are apes', said Charles Darwin.

Chimp chattered with chagrin.
Gorilla was ill as a parrot.
Sang the orang-utan
'We're much higher than man –
For folly that ass takes the carrot'.

N is for **Nonesuch**,
Which means that there is no such
Creature - all searching will fail.
If you try to find one,
Or creep up behind one,
He'll flit with a flick of his tail.

'A rink, I think,'
Said the **O**wl with a wink
'Is the best place for a skate'.
Skate floundered in fear
And dabbed at a tear
For the rink owl had meant was his plate.

P is for **P**anda who
Eats only fresh bamboo,
And has a face that looks puzzled.
When there is no bamboo
Unless he can find a zoo
He gets completely bamboozled.

Q is for **Q**uagga.
Some think it's a zebra
But zebras are really distinct.
Don't search for a quagga;
It's far too much bother –
Since quaggas, I fear, are extinct.

R is for **R**abbits.
They have two bad habits:
The breed fast and eat all the greenery.
If they bred any faster
There'd be a disaster –
Just rabbits instead of the scenery.

S is for **S**ea-lion
You can rely on
A sea-lion to clap with his flippers
Whenever the bell rings

That signifies herrings,
Or, for a special treat, kippers.

Said the pelican to the **T**oucan
'Pelicans can can-can'.
The toucan said 'Toucans can too'.
So they can-canned together
But I don't know whether
You can see such a thing at the zoo.

U is for **U**nicorn.
You knew his unique horn
Held the most powerful magic.
It would cure any ill,
So they hunted him till
The last unicorn fell. It's so tragic.

A **V**ampire flew onto the wicket
Insisting on playing some cricket:
"Blood-sucking just isn't my game,
So don't call me a vampire",
He said to the umpire,
"As a cricket bat I'll make my name".

The **W**ombat walloped the wallaby
From Battersea
To the London Zoo
And there he battered the kangaroo;
For the wombat
Loves combat.

X is for **X**eme.
Don't think that I mean
To pull the wool over your eyes.
It's a gull. Just you hurry
To your dictionary,
You'll find that I tell you no lie.

Y is for **Y**eti.
Don't you think it a pity
To hound the 'abominable snowman'?
He cannot ever rest,
But must climb Everest
To find a place where there is no man.

Z is for **Z**ho.
I knew that would throw
You. You thought I'd say zebra I'm
Sure. A zho is a yox -
That's half yak and half ox.
(For zebra there isn't a rhyme!)

*

DILEMMA

The darkness approached him.
Should he turn and flee?

He could easily outrun it...
But then might never know

What it wanted of him,
What secrets it held.

Should he meet it then?
Let it swallow him?

Then he might never see
The bright sun again.

*

My most recent poem was a belated response to the death of Ted Hughes, whose work will continue to fertilize my own as long as I go on writing.

DEATH OF A POET

A ghost crab sidled into his body
By moonlight
Laid its thousand eggs.

*

When that oak fell a tremor passed
Through all the rivers of the West.
The spent salmon felt it.

*

A rare familiar voice
Entered the October silence
While red leaves fell.

[© Keith Sagar 2001]

[I should be glad to hear from any publisher, conventional or print-on-demand, who would be interested in publishing *Risk*.]