

# *Risk*

## *Collected Poems and Stories*

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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 spirted 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.

**G**iraffe 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.

**'M**en 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*.]**