My collected poems, other than the nonsense poems, are now published by the Arrowhead Press as ***Mola***, which can be bought (£7.50) direct from the publisher, Arrowhead Press, 70 Clifton Road, Darlington, Co.Durham, DL1 5DX. (01325) 260741. E-mail editor@arrowheadpress.co.uk Website www.arrowheadpress.co.uk

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.

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.

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.

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'.

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. Among other things, my dreams suddenly became available to me for poems.

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.

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 an 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 it 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.

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[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 revivified 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.

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'.

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’.

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, and made my rash walk to the sea.

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.

The early eighties produced nothing but a handful of short largely satirical poems.

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.

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.

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 Jag
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.

'**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 **N**onesuch,
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 Yeti.
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!)