

'The patron saint of poetry'  
Carol Ann Duffy

**Rodger**

**MIC**

**GOUGH**

THE COLLECTED  
POEMS: 1959-2024

*The Collected Poems*

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*Poetry*

Summer with Monika  
Watchwords  
After the Merrymaking  
Out of Sequence  
Gig  
Sporting Relations  
In the Classroom  
Holiday on Death Row  
Unlucky For Some  
Waving at Trains  
Melting into the Foreground  
You at the Back  
Defying Gravity  
The Spotted Unicorn  
As far as I know  
The Way Things Are  
That Awkward Age  
Everyday Eclipses  
Collected Poems  
Selected Poems  
It Never Rains  
joinedupwriting  
Safety in Numbers  
Penguin Modern Classics  
The Mersey Sound (*with Adrian  
Henri and Brian Patten*)

*For Children*

Sky in the Pie  
Until I Met Dudley  
Dotty Inventions

Bad, Bad Cats  
Good Enough to Eat  
The Bee's Knees  
Nailing the Shadow  
Pillow Talk  
Counting By Numbers  
My Dad's a Fire Eater  
Helen Highwater  
Another Custard Pie  
All the Best (*selected poems*)  
Slapstick  
An Imaginary Menagerie  
Lucky  
Mind the Gap  
Poetry Pie  
80  
Money-go-Round  
Crocodile Tears  
Over to You!  
All Aboard the Ark  
  
*Theatre*  
Tartuffe  
The Hypochondriac  
The Misanthrope  
Sky in the Pie  
Mr Toad's Money-Go-Round  
The Sound Collector

*Autobiography*  
Said and Done

# *The Collected Poems*

1959–2024

ROGER McGOUGH



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First published 2024

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Set in 12/14.75pt Dante MT Std

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-68100-8

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# Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	xvii	Where Babies Come From	29
Take Comfort	1	Another Brick in the Wall	30
The Overall Winner	2	Of Protestants	31
My Little Eye	2	Hard Times	32
Learning to Read	3	Meals on Leaves	32
Another Time, Another Place	4	Sacrifices	32
Bye Bye Black Sheep	5	Brasso	33
Snipers	6	Queen Elizabeth I Visits	
Bucket	7	Merseyside in 1949	34
Smart Railings	8	The Bridle Path at Litherland	35
Tramp Tramp Tramp	8	How to Become a Sixer	35
Bars are Down	9	Spitting Prohibited	36
Hearts and Flowers	10	My Busconductor	37
Quiet Kittens	13	My Busseductress	38
Grandma and the Angels	13	George and the Dragonfly	39
Aunt Bridie Goes to Heaven	14	The Icingbus	40
Sad Aunt Madge	15	Vague Impressions	41
Casablanca	16	A Fine Tooth Comb	43
What Happened to Henry	17	No Grannies in this Poem	44
What Happened to Dorothy	18	Snowing Down South	44
<i>Beau Geste</i>	19	'What does your father do?'	45
'Street Urchins'	21	Mermaid and Chips	46
Wearing Thin	22	Sunset	47
Squaring Up	23	At Parties	47
Alphabet Soup	24	Schizophrenia	48
The Railings	25	Beatitudes	49
A Dish Best Served Cold	26	The Sandcastle	50
Having My Ears Boxed	27	Is This Your Last Summer?	51
Great Aunt Edna's Embroidery	28	I say I say I say	52
Pakorras	29	Limestreetscene '64	52

Liverpool (after William McGonigal)	53	Contact lenses	83
The Gateway to the Atlantic	54	You and Your Strange Ways	83
Double Acrostic	55	The Fish	84
Everyman basement 1964	55	May Ball	85
For you everything's gonna be all right	55	An Apology	86
Washed Up	57	Comeclose and Sleepnow	86
The Stranger	58	Aren't We All?	87
poem about the sun slinking off and pinning up a notice	59	after the merrymaking, love?	88
Knees down Mother Brown	59	A lot of Water has Flown under your Bridge	89
Poem for the Opening of Christ the King Cathedral, Liverpool, 1967	62	Dunenudes	90
Funland	64	The sun no longer loves me	91
10.15 Thursday morning Memphis Tennessee	66	Vinegar	92
Late Night Nightmare	68	On having no one to write a love poem about	92
At the 11th Hour	69	Dreampoem	93
When the Epilogue's over	71	Dreampoem 2	93
Sundeath/greentears	72	What You Are	94
Poem on being in love with two girls at the same time	73	Yellow Book	99
Man the Barricades, the Enemy has let loose his Pyjamas!	73	The Casket	100
Discretion	74	On Picnics	100
Who was the Naughty Girl?	75	A Square Dance	101
My cat and i	76	Why Patriots are a Bit Nuts in the Head	102
The Act of Love	76	M62	103
Orgasm	77	Mother the Wardrobe is Full of Infantrymen	103
If life's a lousy picture, why not leave before the end	79	Noah's Arc	104
Shy	79	Icarus Allsorts	106
My little plastic mac	80	On having a first book of poetry published	107
Near to You	81	At Lunchtime	108
Rainbow	82	Memento Mori	110
		A Coincidence	111
		Let Me Die a Youngman's Death	112
		SUMMER WITH MONIKA	113

First Day of School	134	One Poet May Hide Another	173
Streemin	135	The Word Juggler	174
The Lesson	135	Lunch with the Laureate	174
A Good Poem	137	Feamus	175
Nooligan	137	The death of John Berryman	
Out and About, the Lads	138	in slow motion	176
He who owns the Whistle, rules the World	140	Poem for a Dead Poet	177
Rainymorning	140	Aubade Mirabilis	177
Autumn Poem	141	This be Another Verse	178
Goodbat Nightman	141	The Darling Buds of Maybe	178
Conversation on a Train	142	The Oxford Book of Twentieth-	
Do You Wanna Know a Secret?	143	century English Verse (edited by Philip Larkin)	179
Summer with the Monarch	144	Charlie and the Chaplain	180
Hey Dude	145	Dylan the Eavesdrop	181
A Bolt from the Blue	147	ITZ	182
Thank U Very Much	148	Michael Rosen at 70	183
Bob Dylan and the Blue Angel	148	Three Cheers for the Cheerleaders	184
ON THE ROAD	151	Is My Team Playing?	185
Getting on at Notting Hill	162	Footy Poem	186
The Clever Pillar Box	163	Villanelle	187
Stumbling over the words	163	SPORTING RELATIONS	188
Big Ifs	164	Buddies	216
For Want of a Better Title	165	9 to 5 (or cosy biscuit)	216
Good News and Bad News	165	happiness	217
Classical Records	166	Un	218
I wish I were a crotchet	166	Amateur traumatic	218
Practice Makes Perfect	167	Bravado	219
Let's Hear It for Poetry	168	Vandals	219
The Power of Poetry	169	Bulletins	220
How Shall I Compare Thee?	170	Trenchwarfare	220
What Poverty My Muse Brings Forth	171	McGough's Last Stand	221
A Visit to the Poet and His Wife	172	tigerdreams	222
All for Laurie Lee	173	Tightrope	223
		Hash Wednesday	224

The Mongrel	224	Come January	259
10 Ways to Make a Killing on the Stock Market	225	Confusion	260
All Over bar the Shouting	226	The Perfect Negative	261
Last Lullaby	227	Mindfulness	262
40 – Love	228	The Villain of the Piece	262
You and I	228	The Importance of Timing	263
No Message	229	Ringin' the Changes	264
A Golden Life	229	The Point	265
POW	231	Fingers Crossed	267
Three weeks ago we decided to go our separate ways	232	All the World's a Soap	267
The Rot	233	Poem in 2 Acts	269
Mouth	234	Poem to be Stitched inside a French Beret	270
HOLIDAY ON DEATH ROW	236	One Breath	271
Indefinite Definitions	241	The Facetious Carbuncle	271
The Lake	247	Word Bank Incorporated	272
Give and Take	248	Not to Mention the Reader's	273
Curse	249	'Look, Daddy, the Candle is Crying'	274
Pure Jaguar	249	Paradise Lost	275
Je est un auto	250	Window-gazing	276
Stop All the Cars	251	An Almighty Gloosh	279
Repelled by Metal	252	Global Haggis Day	280
Five-car Family	252	The Wallet	281
The Wooden Clog	253	On Reigate Hill	283
Stinging in the Rain	254	Sheer	284
One More Battle	255	They Came Out Singing	285
Closing In	255	Defence	285
snowscene	256	The Cat in Me	286
One Rainy Morning in April	257	Welcome Winter	287
One Hot Afternoon in Late August	257	In Good Spirits	288
One Unseasonably Sunny Day in March	258	The Disinclination	288
One Mild Morning in Early November	259	'The Fight of the Year'	289
		Mrs Moon	290
		Nothing Ventured	290
		Thud	294

A Cold Calling	294	Kinetic poem no. 2	327
Dear Diaries	295	Watchwords	328
Mad Ad	295	Words	328
Voiceover	296	Word Traps	328
The Lottery	297	Words . . . Poems	329
The Publicist's Last Letter	298	Smithereens	329
Beyond Compare	298	Planet Babel	330
Johnny-Come-Lately	300	MILT	330
Fizzing in Chiswick	301	My Divine Juggler	331
Father's American Walking		The Full English	332
Sticks	302	Last Times	333
The Lost Lost Property Office	303	In Case of Fire	334
The Cats' Protection League	305	Vague Assumptions	334
Mafia Cats	306	Days	336
The Care Less Cat	307	The Bee, the Wasp and the	
The Golden Retriever	308	Poet	336
Another Person's Dog	309	Behemoth	337
Mr Nightingale	309	Bees Cannot Fly	337
Mr Sappho	310	The Fly	338
Mr of Arc	311	Spaced out Summer Poem	339
Mr Blyton	312	My Life in the Garden	339
Lord Godiva	314	Happy Birthday	340
Mr Mae West	315	The Perfect Place	341
Monsieur Piaf	315	Uncle Roger	341
Try This for Size	316	The Journey of a Lifetime	342
Being Careful	317	Look on My Works, Ye Mighty	344
Not a Page-turner	318	Rocker-by	345
One after Another	319	Where It's At	346
How to Escape from Prison	320	Crazy Bastard	347
A Bull in a China Shop	321	Fear of Flares	347
The Nearest Forty-two	322	Clutching at Cheese Straws	348
In Two Minds	323	Half-term	349
The Land of Lost Tongues	324	Isolation	349
Quick as a Flash	324	The Poet's Garden	349
The Written Word	325	Perfume	350
Assass in	327	Melting into the Foreground	351

Chicken	353	My Shadow is but a Shadow of Its Former Self	377
Ode on a Danish Lager	353	Balloon Fight	378
Used to Drink	354	The Man in the Moon	379
Star Juice	355	Daddy ain't there	379
Another Midlife Crisis	356	Eternal Rest	381
Shavings Account	356	Press Save	381
Prayer to Saint Grobianus	357	War of the Roses	382
Don't Read All About It	357	Tomatoes	383
The Bad, Bad News Vendor	358	Defying Gravity	383
It's a Jungle out There	358	Sad Music	384
Flight Path (9/11)	359	God Rest the Queen	385
Everyday Eclipses	360	Just the Way You Are	386
The End	361	In at the Kill	387
Hard Times	362	At Three and a Half	388
The Bright Side	362	Four Sons	389
The Unknown Worrier	363	Bearhugs	389
Worry	364	Cinders	390
New Brooms	364	Monstrance	391
Waxing Lyrical	365	Who are These Men?	391
My Little Bird	366	Just Passing	392
Sing Their Praises Loud	367	The Way Things Are	393
low jinks	368	You are Grown-up	394
Passion	369	Die Barriere	395
Solarium	369	Vow	396
Dressed for the Occasion	370	Epithalaneum	396
Getting On	370	Everything Touches	397
Getting Off	370	And so to Bed	398
You may get the vote		Vampire	400
at eighteen, but you're		crusader	401
born with a price on		Nocturne	402
your head	371	exsomnia	403
Why me?	371	Catching Up on Sleep	403
Science, where are you?	372	Wink	404
In Vain	373	ofa sunday	404
The Health Forecast	374	Flying	405
Echoes Sound Afar	376		

Unlikely	405	The Trouble with Snowmen	439
Waving at Trains	407	Soil	440
Newsflash	408	and the field screamed	
Postcard	408	‘TRACTOR’	442
dawnmare on 24th St	409	The Birderman	442
Incident at a Presidential		The Scarecrow	444
Garden Party	410	The Scarecrow Replies	445
There’s Something Sad	410	Rabbit in Mixer Survives	445
What the littlegirl did	411	Happy Ending	448
Poor Old Dead Horses	411	The Badge of Shame	449
The Horse’s Mouth	412	The One about the Duck	450
The Collection	413	Love a Duck	452
Just another Autumn Day	414	Honey and Lemon	453
out of sequence	415	Five Ways to Help You Pass	
UNLUCKY FOR SOME	417	Safely through a Dark Wood	
The City of London Tour	423	Late at Night	454
The Last Strike	423	a cat, a horse and the sun	454
Conservative Government		Trees Cannot Name the	
Unemployment Figures	424	Seasons	455
Work-to-rule	424	Trees are Great	455
A Fair Day’s Fiddle	424	The Puzzle Tree	456
As far as I know	425	Top of the Tree	458
Closet fascist	426	The View	459
Pantomime poem	427	Sap	459
Water, Tree, Cave, Mother	428	Spring Resprung	460
Three Rusty Nails	429	Conservation Piece	460
Persimmons	430	Greenpiece	461
Sleep Over	431	Bad Day at the Ark	462
The Wreck of the <i>Hesperus</i>	431	Bad Day at the Ark (ii)	463
A Cautionary Tale	433	Bad Day at the Ark (iii)	464
‘US Flies in Hamburgers’	434	The Father, the Son	465
Vegetarians	435	Spoilsports	467
Uncle Harry	436	Pen Pals	468
There was a Knock on the Door.		Ex Patria	470
It was the Meat.	437	Old-fashioned Values	470
Cabbage	438	Homophones in the Laundrette	471

Light Sleeper	472	Dialectically Opposed	503
Posh	472	The Grandad Shop	504
Shite	473	Wobblies	505
Estate	474	Hopeless at Names	506
Cupboard Love	474	Two Riddles	506
Fart	475	The Examination	507
End of Story	477	The Poet Takes an	
No Surprises	478	Autumnal Stroll on	
Six Shooters	478	Hampstead Heath	508
The Terrible Outside	481	From 'Les Pensées'	508
The End of Summer	482	Toffee	509
The Identification	483	His poems are nets	510
A Brown Paper Carrierbag	484	Trust Me, I'm a Poet	511
A Cautionary Calendar	485	Wheelchairs	512
Kyrie	486	Quiet Zone	513
Train Crash	487	Poetspotting	514
Good Old William	488	Meeting Sharon Olds at	
Funny Sort of Bloke	488	Victoria Station	514
Tide and Time	489	Blazing fruit	516
Hill o' Beans	490	Take a poem, Miss Smith	517
A Good Age	490	An Ordinary Poetry Reading	518
In Transit	490	After the Poetry Reading	519
What My Lady Did	491	Clone	520
Poem for a Lady Wrestler	492	Muffin the Cat	521
The Tallest Man in Britain	493	The Logic of Meteors	522
The Host	493	Starfish Enterprise	523
Laughing, all the way to Bank	495	ADDRESSES	525
Queue Music	495	The Wrong Moustache	546
A Valentine Poem	496	I Am Not Who I Am	
As Every Bandage Dreams	497	Supposed to Be	547
Romantic	498	A Real Live Poet	548
Your Favourite Hat	498	What Keeps Me Awake at Night	550
The Lucky Ones	500	This is One of Those Poems	550
The Map	501	Zen and the Art of Poetry	551
Whoops!	502	Awful Acrobats	552
Bath – Avon	502	On Good Authority	553

That Poem You were Writing	554	Children's Writer	594
Scorpio	555	Wistful Haiku	595
Educating Rita	556	New Poem	595
A Serious Poem	558	Sound Advice	595
It's Only a P . . .	558	Literary Riddle	596
It's Only a P . . . (Part Two)	559	Acrostic	596
Coach and Horses	560	Granny's Favourite Anagram	596
'Coach & Horses. Interior'	560	Clerihews	597
Gone but not Forgotten	561	Apostrophe	598
The Filmmaker	563	A Critic Reviews the	
When I am Dead	564	Curate's Egg	598
Porno Poem	565	@thomasdylan LOL	598
I Don't Like the Poems	565	EPITAPHS	599
The Battle of Bedford Square	566	The After-dinner Speaker	599
For the Sake of Argument	568	The Perfect Crime	600
The Newly Pressed Suit	569	Drop Dead Gorgeous	600
Framed	570	Deadpan Delivery	600
the picture	571	Sign Language	601
The Revenge of My Last		The Juggler	601
Duchess	571	Fame	602
'And when did you last see your		Q	602
father?'	572	Rhyming Sausages	603
At Home with the Surrealists	573	Vanity Press	603
The Dada Christmas Catalogue	574	The Rhyming Diner	604
How Patrick Hughes Got		Shearing on the Côte d'Azur	604
to be Taller	575	Jellyfish Morton	605
The Boyhood of Raleigh	576	Rubber Bullets	605
Ex art student	577	VAT	605
Yak ad infinitum	577	Windows of the Soul	605
THE SPOTTED UNICORN	581	There are fascists	606
Tsutsumi	592	The Leader	606
Skywriting	593	Quick on the Draw	606
Mensa	593	Slow on the Drawl	607
Oxbridge Blues	593	Gun Love	607
Writer's Block	594	Moist	607
Executioner's Block	594	Ode to the Leaf	607

Recycling	608	What Man Wears	618
Survivor	608	Hen Party	619
Autosuggestion	608	Lonely Hearts	619
The Waiting Game	608	Scintillate	620
Tube Strike Haiku	609	Italic	621
Multistorey Car Park	609	Time Flies	621
Dear Scott	610	Said and Done	621
Drinking Song	610	The Proverbials	621
Passive Drinking	611	The Flag's Proud Boast	624
Missed	611	The Poet on Fire	625
Depressed?	611	Borrowed Time	625
7 a.m.	612	Punk Doll	626
My Philosophy in a Nutshell	612	Hooked on Haiku	626
Wartime Blues	612	joinedupwriting	627
Fired with Enthusiasm	612	THE ELEMENTS	628
Early-morning Poems	613	Elephant	637
Friends of the Earth	613	Swans	637
Palmistry	613	Attic Salt	639
Cane Toads	614	Bad Clowns	640
Rainforest Gateau	614	Not to Mention Brexit	641
Seagulls	614	Staying In	642
A 13-Amp Slug	615	Ice while it lasted	642
The Deserted Village	615	LIFE BEFORE BIRTH	643
Taking Stick	615	Reciting Poetry to Prince Philip	646
The Concise Guide for Travellers	616	Salt & Vinegar	647
Neighbourhood Watch	616	Alternative Santa	648
Fire Guard	616	Santa Claus has a Brother	649
Poem against Capital Punishment	616	Driving Home for Christmas	650
Fatal Consequences	617	Sleighbells & Handcuffs	651
Global Warming	617	Carol-singing in Knotty Ash	652
Love Cycle	617	Lily in the Living Room	652
Life is but a Tree	617	Greek Tragedy	654
When the Bough Breaks	618	The Duvet	656
In Good Hands	618	Advice on Writing a Poem about the Pandemic	656

Advice on Writing a Poem		When It's Over	682
about Liverpool	657	Another Year, Another Bicycle	683
Advice on Writing a Poem		The Ginsberg Skeleton	684
for a Royal Occasion	658	I Hear America Sighing	686
Advice on Writing a Poem to		Late-night News	687
Celebrate a Famous Poet's		Who's That at the Door?	688
Birthday	659	Eternity, same old	689
Advice on Writing a Poem	660	On Dover Beach	690
Creeping Up on Poetry	661	All in Time to the Music	691
The New One	662	The Good Ship Attenborough	692
A Labour of Love	663	Let me take you for a walk,	
A Fresh Coat of Paint	663	yes you	694
Stuffed	664	Another Long Queue	695
Firing Blanks	664	Quodlibets	696
The Poem you are about to		Breakfast at the Adelphi	697
Read has not yet		Torchlight Procession	698
been Written	665	Anybody There?	698
Out of My Depth in Language	665	Where am I Now When I	
Violin Left on Train	666	Need Me?	699
The Graveyard Slot	667	Warning Signs	700
Violin Left on Train (Part Two)	669	Tensions	700
Creative Writing	670	Harbouring a Grudge	701
Creative Waiting	671	Chained to the Past	702
A Silence Crying Out for		Here I Am	703
Attention	673	font	703
And you are?	674	A Joy to be Old	704
Some Questions Regarding		Nice Try	705
the New Bicycle	675	The Wrong Beds	705
This Summer, We Will Not be		Retirement	706
Taking a Holiday Abroad	676	Charity Shop Blues	706
Seaside Staycation	677	The Cure for Ageing	708
Adultery in Isolation	678	The Old Jokes	708
After you. No, after you	679	Carpe Diem	709
There's a Hole in My Trainer	679	The Living Proof	710
Lockdown Daylight Robbery	680	What is the word ...	711
The Pips	681	I am Not Sleeping	711

A Fine Romance	712	Let Me Die an Oldman's	
A Waste of Time	713	Death	719
So Many Poems, an Apology	714	One Last Chance	720
Where is My Mother?	715	Call Me World	721
First and Last Times	716	<i>Addenda</i>	723
Payback Time	717	<i>New Unpublished Poems</i>	725
Big Hugs	718	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	727

## Foreword

The years spanned by the poems in this volume divide into several periods, from the late fifties, when I wrote my first poem while at Hull University, through the sixties with the Beatles, *The Mersey Sound* and the Scaffold, followed by the dark come-uppance of the seventies and beyond.

I have always been prolific ('too prolific', many a critic would say), because I loved setting out on a creative journey to see where the poem would take me. A poem rarely arrives fully formed; the excitement comes from not knowing what is going to happen. As well as poems for both adults and children, there have been the plays, stories, anthologies edited, competitions judged, and poetry readings all over the world. Even so, as a writer, I rarely enjoy the feeling of having completed something worthwhile – because I'm always right in the middle of something else.

One thing I have discovered over the years is that the more you write, the more you write. This may seem obvious, but I like to regard it as an old poet's blessing. The more I write, the longer I live; the longer I live, the more I write . . . Until. Not that the writing improves necessarily, but having so much material on hand means that I can revisit and revise poems written years ago, ones I had forgotten about, many of whom were perfectly content to rest in peace (and I should point out that original, unrevised versions of the poems are available in all good charity shops and secondhand book stores).

There is a sense, not so much among poets themselves but among academics, that poems are sacred texts and, once completed, should remain forever thus. I disagree. Although I rarely write poems to be performed in public, I believe that they are at their best when spoken aloud, and because I have been performing them over the years, it becomes obvious when an audience fails to recognize a once-topical

reference or a once-famous name, and so inevitably I look for an alternative. The plot would remain the same, but I would audition and recast the poem. Attitudes change over the years, mine as well as society's. Language shifts, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes seismically.

So, why have I changed them? Because they're mine, and I could. Foreword is forewarned.

## *Take Comfort*

Take comfort from this.

You have a book in your hand  
not a loaded gun or a parking fine  
or an invitation card to the wedding  
of the one you should have married  
but were too selfish. Always imagining  
there would be someone better out there  
but there wasn't, and you missed the boat.

And now you're pushing fifty, what are the chances  
of your finding that perfect elusive partner? Highly unlikely.  
Like an empty glass on a bar-room counter, loneliness beckons.

Not an empty glass, or a bottle smashed on a bar-room counter  
a photograph of the one you will always regret not marrying  
not a letter from the hospital, the results devastating.

After the disaster, the dust and the screaming  
a child's arm thrust out from the rubble.

You have none of these in your hand.

A dirty syringe or a deadly scorpion  
a Molotov cocktail or an overdose  
not a loaded gun or a parking fine  
you have a book in your hand.

Take comfort from this.

## *The Overall Winner*

I remember wondering, aged eighteen months,  
as the Lady Mayoress crowned me  
'Overall Winner of the Bootle & District Bonny Baby Show'  
if life would be downhill from then on.

My mother, posing proudly for the *Echo* photographer,  
would seldom feel so fulfilled.  
One arm around her prize-winning son,  
the other holding the prize, a pair of khaki overalls.

No crawling races, rattle-throwing or dummy-catching,  
no tricky questions, no need to impress or outfox.  
All I had been required to do was smile  
and not fill my pants.

By and large, life skills that have stood me  
in good stead over the years.  
But on a daily basis I miss the unsolicited adulation,  
the warm consolation of my mother's arm.  
The overalls? I never did find a use for them.

## *My Little Eye*

The cord of my new dressing-gown  
he helps me tie

Then on to my father's shoulder  
held high

The world at night with my little eye  
I spy

The moon close enough to touch  
I try

Silver painted elephants have learned  
to fly

Giants fence with searchlights  
in the sky

Too soon into the magic shelter  
he and I

Air raids are so much fun  
I wonder why

In the bunk below, a big boy  
starts to cry.

## *Learning to Read*

Learning to read during the war  
wasn't easy, as books were few  
and far between. But Mother  
made sure I didn't go to sleep  
without a bedtime story.

Because of the blackout  
the warm, comforting glow  
of a bedside lamp was not permitted.  
So Mum would pull back the curtains  
and open wide the window.

And by the light of a blazing factory  
or a crashed Messerschmitt,  
cuddled up together, she would read  
saucebottles, jamjars, and, my  
all-time favourite, a tin of Ovaltine.

So many years ago, but still  
I remember her gentle guidance  
as I read aloud my first sentence:  
'S-p-r-i-n-k-l-e t-w-o h-e-a-p-e-d  
t-e-a-s-p-o-o-n-s-f-u-l o-f...

# *Another Time, Another Place*

## *Another Time*

A summer's day on the beach at Seaforth.  
There is a war on, so sunshine is rationed, and the sea  
half a mile away, never more than a wet promise.  
Unmanned pill-boxes gaze sullenly out over the Mersey.  
Rotting dragon's teeth, half submerged, wait to repel  
enemy tanks. Crabs scuttle across minefields.

A three-year-old follows the ball  
as it bounces over the wire  
and skims across the sand,  
windswept, light as a balloon.

A girl still in her teens  
finds the gap in the barbed wire  
and races after him.  
Scoops him up and bursts into tears.

The area had been cordoned off  
and the MOD signs made clear the danger.  
But little boys can't read  
and balls are there for the chasing.

## *Another Place*

A summer's day with Aunty Kath on the beach at Crosby,  
where a platoon of Gormley's iron men is now stationed.  
Has she any recollection of running across a minefield  
to rescue me all those years ago? Or is my imagination  
playing tricks? A scene perhaps from a film half recalled?

'All true,' she says. 'You gave us the fright of our lives running off like that.' 'It was the big red rubber ball,' I said. 'I remember chasing after it in the wind.' My aunt stopped. 'Red rubber ball? There was no ball. You were following the dog. You remember Goldie?'

A golden retriever finds a gap in the barbed wire and races across the sand. Suddenly an explosion. The dog obliterated in one ear-splitting instant. The child turned into an iron statue. Eyes tightly shut he watches the red ball bounce harmlessly into the distance.

## *Bye Bye Black Sheep*

Volunteering at seventeen, Uncle Joe  
Went to Dunkirk as a Royal Marine  
And lived, not to tell the tale.  
Demobbed, he brought back a broken 303,  
A quiver of bayonets, and a kitbag  
Of badges, bullets and swastikas  
Which he doled out among warstruck nephews.

With gasflame-blue eyes and dark unruly hair  
He could have been God's gift. Gone anywhere.  
But a lifetime's excitement had been used up  
On his one-and-only trip abroad. Instead,  
Did the pools and horses. 'Lash me, I'm bored,'  
He'd moan, and use language when Gran  
Was out of the room. He was our hero.

But not for long. Apparently he was  
No good. Couldn't hold down a job.  
Gave the old buck to his Elders and Betters.  
Lazy as sin, he turned to drink  
And ended up marrying a Protestant.  
A regular black sheep was Uncle Joe.  
Funny how wrong kids can be.

## *Snipers*

When I was kneehigh to a tabletop,  
Uncle Ted came home from Burma.  
He was the youngest of seven brothers  
so the street borrowed extra bunting  
and whitewashed him a welcome.

All the relations made the pilgrimage,  
including us, laughed, sang, made a fuss.  
He was as brown as a chairleg,  
drank tea out of a white mug the size of my head,  
and said next to nowt.

But every few minutes he would scan  
the ceiling nervously, hands begin to shake.  
'For snipers,' everyone later agreed,  
'A difficult habit to break.'

Sometimes when the two of us were alone,  
he'd have a snooze after dinner  
and I'd keep an eye open for Japs.  
Of course, he didn't know this  
and the tanner he'd give me before I went  
was for keeping quiet,  
but I liked to think it was money well spent.

Being Uncle Ted's secret bodyguard  
had its advantages, the pay was good  
and the hours were short, but even so,  
the novelty soon wore off and instead  
I started school and became an infant.

Later, I learned that he was in a mental home.  
'Needn't tell anybody . . . Nothing serious  
. . . Delayed shock . . . Usual sort of thing  
. . . Completely cured now the doctors say.'  
The snipers came down from the ceiling  
but they didn't go away.

Over the next five years they picked off  
three of his brothers; one of whom was my father.  
No glory, no citations,  
Bang! straight through the heart.

Uncle Ted's married now, with a family.  
He doesn't say much, but each night after tea,  
he still dozes fitfully in his favourite armchair.  
He keeps out of the sun, and listens now and then  
for the tramp tramp tramp of the Colonel Bogeymen.  
He knows damn well he's still at war,  
just that the snipers aren't Japs any more.

## *Bucket*

every evening after tea  
grandad would take his bucket for a walk

an empty bucket

when i asked him why  
he said because it was easier to carry  
than a full one

grandad had an answer for everything

## *Smart Railings*

towards the end of his tether  
grandad  
at the drop of a hat  
would paint the railings

overnight  
we became famous  
all over the neighbourhood  
for our smart railings

(and our dirty hats)

## *Tramp Tramp Tramp*

Insanity left him when he needed it most.  
Forty years at Bryant & May, and a scroll  
To prove it. Gold lettering, and a likeness  
Of the Founder. Grandad's name writ small:  
'William McGarry, faithful employee'.

A spent match by the time I knew him.  
Choking on fish bones, talking to himself,  
And walking round the block with a yardbrush  
Over his shoulder. 'What for, Gran?' 'Hush . . .  
Poor man, thinks he's marching off to war.

'Spitting image of Charlie, was your Grandad,  
And taller too.' She'd sigh. 'Best-looking  
Man in Seaforth. And straight-backed?  
Why, he'd walk down Bridge Road  
As if he had a coat-hanger in his suit.'

St Joseph's Hospice for the Dying, in Kirkdale,  
Is where Chaplin made his last movie.  
He played Grandad, and gave a fine performance  
Of a man raging against God, and cursing  
The nuns and nurses who tried to hold him down.

Insanity left him when he needed it most.  
The pillow taken from his face  
At the moment of going under. Screaming  
And fighting to regain the years denied,  
His heart gave out, his mind gave in, he died.

The final scene brings tears to everybody's eyes.  
In the parlour, among suppurating candles  
And severed flowers, I see him smiling  
Like I'd never seen him smile before.  
Coat-hanger at his back. Marching off to war.

### *Bars are Down*

When I was a lad  
most people round our way  
were barzydown.

It was a world full of piecans.  
Men who were barmy, married to women  
who wanted their heads examined.

When not painting the railings,  
our neighbours were doolally,  
away for slates.

Or so my dad reckoned.  
Needed locking away  
the lot of them.

Leaving certain McGoughs  
and a few close friends  
free to walk the empty streets

in peace. Knowing exactly  
whether we were coming or going.  
Self-righteous in polished shoes.

Picking our way clear-headedly  
between broken slates  
and loose screws.

## *Hearts and Flowers*

Aunty Marge,  
Spinster of the parish, never had a boyfriend.  
Never courted, never kissed.  
A cut-price dentist and a smashed jaw saw to that.

To her,  
Life was a storm in a holy-water font  
Across which she breezed  
With all the grace and charm  
Of a giraffe learning to windsurf.

But sweating  
In the convent laundry, she would iron  
Amices, albs and surplices  
With such tenderness and care  
You'd think priests were still inside.

Deep down,  
She would like to have been a nun  
And talked of missing her vocation  
As if it were the last bus home:  
'It passed me by when I was looking the other way.

'Besides,'  
She'd say, 'What Order would have me?  
The Little Daughters of the Woodbine?  
The Holy Whist Sisters?' A glance at the ceiling.  
'He's not that hard up.'

We'd laugh  
And protest, knowing in our hearts that He wasn't.  
But for the face she would have been out there,  
Married, five kids, another on the way.  
Celibacy a gift unearned, unasked for.

But though  
A goose among grown-ups,  
Let loose among kids  
She was an exploding fireworks factory,  
A runaway pantomime horse.

Everybody's  
Favourite aunt. A cuddly toy adult  
That sang loud and out of tune.  
That dropped, knocked over and bumped into things,  
That got ticked off just like us.

Next to  
A game of cards she liked babysitting best.  
Once the parents were out of the way  
It was every child for itself. In charge,  
Aunt Marge, renegade toddler-in-chief.

### Falling

Asleep over pontoon, my sister and I,  
Red-eyed, would beg to be taken to bed.  
'Just one more game of snap,' she'd plead,  
And magic two toffees from behind an ear.

### Then suddenly

Whooshed upstairs in the time it takes  
To open the front door. Leaving us to possum,  
She'd tiptoe down with the fortnightly fib:  
'Still fast asleep, not a murmur all night. Little angels.'

### But angels

Unangelic, grew up and flew away. And fallen,  
Looked for brighter toys. Each Christmas sent a card  
With kisses, and wondered how she coped alone.  
Up there in a council flat. No phone.

### Her death

Was as quick as it was clumsy. Neighbours  
Found the body, not us. Sitting there for days  
Stiff in Sunday best. Coat half-buttoned, hat askew.  
On her way to Mass. Late as usual.

### Her rosary

Had snapped with the pain, the decades spilling,  
Black beads trailing. The crucifix still  
Clenched in her fist. Middle finger broken.  
Branded into dead flesh, the sign of the cross.

### From the missal

In her lap, holy pictures, like playing cards,  
Lay scattered. Five were face-up:  
A Full House of Sacred Hearts and Little Flowers.  
Aunty Marge, lucky in cards.

## *Quiet Kittens*

Behind NHS frames, a pink plastic eyepatch.  
Deaf, she wore a hearing aid, switched on  
only when the priest came to visit.

Hands, gnarled by arthritis, were turkey claws  
with which she lifted a huge teapot, sawed bread  
and dealt cards from the bottom of the pack.

When she lost her toes, the hospital prescribed  
surgical boots. Heavy, black leather lace-ups  
she wouldn't be seen dead in.

Instead, a visit to Freeman, Hardy & Willis  
with Uncle George, to bring home a pair  
of Quiet Kittens several sizes too big.

'You mean Hush Puppies, Gran?' we shouted.  
Resourceful to the end, she stuffed the gaps  
with cotton wool and shuffled on for years.

## *Grandma and the Angels*

Whenever it snowed  
Grandma would say  
'The angels are having a pillow-fight'

Whenever thunder rumbled  
She would say  
'The angels are rearranging the furniture'

Whenever gales rattled the windows  
Grandma would say  
'The angels are blowing on their hot soup'

Whenever someone died  
She would say  
'The angels have a new friend to play with'

When Grandma passed away  
So did the angels.

### *Aunt Bridie Goes to Heaven*

And let us not forget Aunt Bridie,  
who is still with us, thanks be to God.  
Eighty-nine and still going strong.  
Wrong. Weak, but eighty-nine and still going.  
And knowing exactly where she's going. To heaven.

You don't spend great chunks of your life  
hunched in prayer, or on your knees in church,  
without gaining a sense of direction.  
You don't mix with the cream of Irish clergy  
without gaining some insight into life everlasting.

Having outlived seven siblings, two husbands  
and an only child, she is no stranger to the deathbed.  
Each night she rehearses that final scene  
and worries about falling into a coma and missing it.  
Worries too about the new priest, a good and holy man  
by all accounts, but West African.

And when the Angel finally calls, Aunt Bridie will slip away.  
And if St Peter's not there waiting, there'll be bloody hell to pay.

## *Sad Aunt Madge*

As the cold winter evenings drew near  
Aunt Madge used to put extra blankets  
over the furniture, to keep it warm and cosy.  
Mussolini was her lover, and life  
was an out-of-focus rosy-tinted spectacle.

but neurological experts  
with kind blue eyes  
and gentle voices  
small white hands  
and large Rolls-Royces  
said that electric shock treatment  
should do the trick  
it did . . .

today after 15 years of therapeutic tears  
and an awful lot of ratepayers' shillings  
down the hospital meter  
sad Aunt Madge  
no longer tucks up the furniture  
before kissing it goodnight  
and admits  
that her affair with Mussolini  
clearly was not right  
particularly in the light  
of her recently announced engagement  
to the late pope.

## *Casablanca*

You must remember this  
To fall in love in Casablanca  
To be a jockey in Morocco.

The size of tuppence  
Photographs show Uncle Bill holding silver cups  
Wearing sepia silks and a George Formby grin.

Dominique  
Had silent-filmstar looks. With brown eyes  
Black hair and lips full to the brim, she was a race apart.

He brought her over  
To meet the family early on. An exotic bloom  
In bleak post-war Bootle. Just the once.

Had there been children  
There might have been more contact. But letters,  
Like silver cups, were few and far between.

At seventy-eight  
It's still the same old story. Widowed and lonely  
The prodigal sold up and came back home.

I met him that first Christmas  
He spoke in broken Scouse. Apart from that  
He looked like any other bow-legged pensioner.

He had forgotten the jockey part  
The fight for love and glory had been a brief episode  
In a long, and seemingly, boring life.

It turned out  
He had never felt at home there  
Not a week went by without him thinking of Liverpool.

Casablanca  
The airplane on the runway. She in his arms.  
Fog rolling in from the Mersey. As time goes by.

## *What Happened to Henry*

What happened to Henry Townsend that summer  
still turns my stomach. Not long after the war  
when barrage balloons had been cut loose  
and coal was delivered by horse and cart

lads would chase the wagon up the street  
and when the coalie wasn't looking  
grab hold of the tailboard, and legs dangling  
hang there for as long as they could.

According to one, Henry, head thrown back  
and swinging too close to the edge,  
had caught his foot between the spokes  
of the rear left wheel. As it turned

his leg snapped in half. I heard the screams  
three streets away. Not his, but his mother's,  
who'd been gabbing on the corner.  
Air-raid sirens to send us all scurrying.

The driver, ashen-faced beneath the coaldust  
held fast the reins to prevent the horse  
from moving, but nervous, it bucked  
and strained and tried to pull away.

Glad to be of use, two men unbuckled the traces,  
freed the horse and laid the shafts gently down.  
A kitchen chair was brought out so that  
Henry could take the weight off his leg.

\* \* \*

Those are the facts and this is the picture:  
Late one summer's afternoon in Seaforth  
on a wooden chair on a cobbled street  
a ten-year-old sits with his leg in a wheel.

His mother is crying, but not Henry.  
He is stock-still. Against her blue pinny  
his face has the pale luminescence of an angel.  
A neighbour brings him out a drink of water,

cup and saucer, best china. No sign yet  
of an ambulance. Not a policeman in sight.  
Frantic, my gran arrives to chase me home.  
(Compared to his sister, though, Henry got off light.)

## *What Happened to Dorothy*

That's me on the left.  
Page-boy in a velvet suit.  
Four years old, blond curls and scowling.  
Lucky horseshoe trailing.

That's Dorothy, Maid-of-Honour.  
Though only three years older,  
in her long white dress,  
veil and floral tiara, she could be a teenager.

She never would be, though.

(It wasn't a road accident)  
Tin bath in the kitchen.  
(It wasn't diphtheria)  
Pan after pan of boiling water.  
(Or polio, or cancer)  
Kids warned not to run about.  
(It wasn't murder on the sand dunes)  
Only half full, but scalding  
(It wasn't drowning in the canal)  
When she tripped and fell in.

That's me on the left.  
Lucky horseshoe still trailing.  
That's Dorothy, still seven.

## *Beau Geste*

It was a special occasion, my father  
taking me to the pictures on a Saturday night.  
Just the two of us. A film that Mother  
didn't care to see, *Beau Geste* in black and white.

In the crowded cinema you couldn't breathe  
for cigarette smoke, but for little four-eyes' sake  
Dad found a couple of seats up near the screen.  
As things turned out, a big mistake.

I was too close to the sun. Its rays burned  
through my lenses into the brain like a laser.  
Sweat tickled in wadis down my back.  
I loosened my collar and removed my blazer.

When the fort was attacked I was on the parapet,  
an easy target. I cursed the Legion under my breath.  
We were outnumbered, but when my rifle jammed  
I stood proud and flung it at the face of death.

The next thing I remember was crawling  
across that burning hell of no-man's-land,  
parched and delirious. Then I recognized  
my brothers and collapsed into the sand.

Choking, I gasped, 'Water . . . Water . . .  
Sorry, Beau, Digby, John, I can't go on, it's no use.'  
'What's that, son?' came a familiar voice.  
'Hang on until the interval, we'll get some juice.'

I shook my head. Was it a mirage? A miracle?  
An usherette clothed all in white as in a dream  
was standing in a spotlight among the dunes  
with a tray of cold drinks and Wall's ice cream.

We never saw the end, and walking home, Dad  
more embarrassed than annoyed, shook his head.  
'You shouldn't let your imagination run away with you.  
Not a word to anybody, and go straight to bed.'

It was only a film after all, so I did as I was told.  
Still blushing with shame, I could hardly refuse.  
Although the first thing I did was go into the yard  
and shake out the sand from my shoes.

# *‘Street Urchins’*

*Henri Cartier-Bresson*

In the foreground, two boys with dirty faces  
snub-nosed and unwashed,  
are grinning wildly as they hug each other.

One is bare-footed, his elder brother  
wears oversized boots without laces.  
Both in ragged matching jumpers.

It is a sunny day, but cold.  
A lamp post leans a heavy shadow  
diagonally across the pavement.

In the background, the mother  
pushing the large hooded pram  
is muffled in headscarf and winter coat.

In black and white, the photograph  
could have been taken in any street  
in any industrial town not long after the war.

\* \* \*

Fade in colour and movement.  
The town in fact is Liverpool,  
a September morning down by the docks.

After telling the Frenchman to fuck off  
the boys, still laughing,  
race each other down the cobbled street,

cross a bomb site and turn  
into a jigger that runs between  
the backs of terraced houses.

A seven-year-old boy,  
unsure of his surroundings,  
is taking a short cut home from school.

The boy in boots picks up half a brick,  
his brother, a jagged piece of roof slate.  
They close in on the stranger.

I give them all I have  
A thripenny bit and a brand-new pencil.  
Fade out colour and movement.

## *Wearing Thin*

'You'll soon grow into it,' she would say  
When buying a school blazer three sizes too big.  
And she was right as mothers usually are.

Syrup of figs. Virol. Cod liver oil.  
Within a year I did grow into it  
By then, of course, it was threadbare.

Pulling in different directions  
My clothes and I never matched.  
And in changing-rooms nothing has changed.

I can buy what I like and when  
New clothes that are a perfect fit.  
Full-length mirror, nervous grin,  
It's me now that's threadbare, wearing thin.

## *Squaring Up*

When I was thirteen and crimping my first quiff  
Dad bought me a pair of boxing-gloves  
In the hope that I would aspire to the Noble Art.

But I knew my limitations from the start:  
Myopia, cowardice and the will to come second.  
But I feigned enthusiasm for his sake.

Straight after tea, every night for a week  
We would go a few rounds in the yard.  
Sleeves rolled up, collarless and gloveless

He would bob and weave and leave me helpless.  
Uppercuts would tap me on the chin  
Left hooks muss my hair, haymakers tickle my ear.

Without glasses, only one thing was clear:  
The fact that I was hopeless. He had a son  
Who couldn't square up. So we came to blows.

Losing patience, he caught me on the nose.  
I bled obligingly. A sop. A sacrifice.  
Mum threw in the towel and I quit the ring.

But when the bell goes each birthday I still feel the sting  
Not of pain, but of regret. You said sorry  
And you were. I didn't. And I wasn't.

## *Alphabet Soup*

Whenever I went into our local library  
I would take out a book for my dad.  
An adventure yarn. Something to do with the sea.

Occasionally, I'd bring home one he'd read before.  
'Doesn't matter,' he would say, 'it's a good 'un.'  
And settling down, sign on for the same voyage.

It wasn't laziness on his part, but a kind of fear.  
Libraries were for educated people.  
Full of traps. Procedures. Forms to fill in.

They would notice his handwriting wasn't joined up  
So then they would try and catch him out.  
Ask questions about Shakespeare. About proper books.

\* \* \*

Although a stevedore (Mum preferred that to 'docker')  
And landlubbered all his married life  
He'd have passed four-square on seamanship.

Because he'd been to sea himself when young  
And would often talk, with some regret,  
Of how he'd nearly jumped ship in Fremantle.

He loved the solitude of the bush. Its stillness,  
And the sky a blueprint for eternity.  
'And the names of the places. Now that's poetry!'

I picture ourselves in the outback  
The nearest library five hundred miles away  
Him, married to a girl from Manjimup  
Me, trying to make sense of alphabet soup.

## *The Railings*

You came to watch me playing cricket once.  
Quite a few of the fathers did.  
At ease, outside the pavilion  
they would while away a Saturday afternoon.  
Joke with the masters, urge on  
their flannelled offspring. But not you.

Fielding deep near the boundary  
I saw you through the railings.  
You were embarrassed when I waved  
and moved out of sight down the road.  
When it was my turn to bowl though  
I knew you'd still be watching.

Third ball, a wicket, and three more followed.  
When we came in at the end of the innings  
the other dads applauded and joined us for tea.  
Of course, you had gone by then. Later,  
you said you'd found yourself there by accident.  
Just passing. Spotted me through the railings.

\* \* \*

Speech-days • Prize-givings • School-plays  
The Twenty-first • The Wedding • The Christening  
You would find yourself there by accident.  
Just passing. Spotted me through the railings.

## *A Dish Best Served Cold*

After the war, many men went straight from active service into teaching. A leap too far in some cases.

At our school the demobbed fell into two categories, the humourless disciplinarians, and the mildly demented.

‘Old Joe’ Kelly taught General Science to the lower school and if he had tales to tell about his time in Burma he kept them to himself. A loner, it was rumoured he’d ended up in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

Lunchtimes he would spend in the pub, before returning to eat his sandwiches at his desk. Head down, he would crouch behind the upturned lid and mumble scientific jumbo with his mouth full.

The brightest boy in our class was called Lo. Norman Lo, half-Liverpool, half-Chinese. Reading quietly, good as gold, he was ill-prepared for the aerial attack about to take place that day.

It was a biting cold afternoon in December, When Joe, drink taken, lurched into the room, and stumbling between the rows of desks, smacked Norman hard on the back of the head.

‘What’s that for, sir?’ cried Lo.

‘Pearl Harbor,’ said Joe.

## *Having My Ears Boxed*

I am waiting in the corridor  
To have my ears boxed.  
I am nervous, for Mr O'Hanlon  
Is a beast of his word.

For the last twenty minutes  
I have let my imagination  
Run away with itself.  
But I am too scared to follow.

Will he use that Swiss Army knife  
To slice through cleanly? Bite them off?  
Tear carefully along perforated lines?  
Tug sharply like loose Elastoplasts?

Acknowledging the crowd's roar  
Will he hold my head aloft  
As if it were the FA Cup  
And pull the handles? Aagghrr . . .

And then the box. Cardboard?  
Old cigar-box possibly? Or a pair?  
Separate coffins of polished pine.  
L and R. 'Gone to a better place.'

Impatient now, I want to get it  
Over with. Roll on four o'clock.  
When, hands over where-my-ears-used-to-be  
I run the gauntlet of jeering kids.

At six, Mother arrives home weary  
After a hard day at the breadcrumb factory.  
I give her the box. She opens it  
And screams something. I say:

‘Pardon?’

## *Great Aunt Edna’s Embroidery*

Aunt Edna, who once posed nude  
For LS Lowry, would sit me on her knee  
(she had just the one), and tell ee  
bah gum stories of days gone by.

‘Ee bah gum, it were reet tough,’  
she would say, ‘workin at mill  
from dawn until dusk,  
and all for a measly ten shillin a week.’

The thought of clogs and cobbled streets  
of matchstick men and smoking chimneys  
would bring a tear to her eye,  
(she had just the one), then, brightening:

‘Mind you, in those days you could buy  
a nice house, end-of-terrace for sixpence,  
and for a fortnight in Blackpool  
you got change out of a farthing.’

With Mr Lowry dead and gone,  
Aunt Edna, long in the tooth  
(just the one), loved to reminisce.  
Embroider the truth. Take the piss.

## *Pakoras*

You remember coal being delivered by horse and cart, surely?  
And your mother made you watch from the backyard window  
And count how many bags the coalie humped into the shed?  
(Otherwise he'd cheat, throw down an empty one.)

And sarsaparilla came in refillable earthenware jars?  
You remember that, surely?

Don't worry, this will not be a list poem writ in sepia.  
No threepenny joeys, dolly tubs or ration books  
No trams, no fog, no Carmen Miranda. This is memory,  
Real as the pakoras at yesterday's buffet lunch.

## *Where Babies Come From*

As the subject was never mentioned at home,  
I have an elderly Irish Christian Brother to thank  
for teaching me all I would need to know about sex.  
Brother Nolan was my form master at junior school,  
And creeping up behind me one morning in his soft Irish  
brogues, asked if I was ever troubled by 'thoughts'.

'Not that I know of, sir.' Himself insisted. 'Dark thoughts.  
Is there anything you want to know about . . . sex?'  
To be honest, there wasn't, but not to appear churlish,  
I stammered, 'Where do babies come from?'  
He took a long, reflective drag on a stick of chalk  
then walked away. Had I gone too far, I wondered?

Part of his duties involved running the stock room  
and doling out sports gear, exercise books, ink,  
board dusters and boxes of chalk, etc. Yes, chalk.

Like putting Billy Bunter in charge of the tuck shop.  
As requested, I turned up there next morning  
and knocked nervously on the door.

He opened it, and first checking the corridor was clear,  
beckoned me in. Drawing closer, Nolan whispered,  
'You'll find the answer to your question  
under that box of pencils by the window.  
Read it carefully, and I'll be back in forty minutes.'  
He then disappeared, locking the door behind him.

Of course, being ten years old, I was more interested  
in the contents of the stock room than in the words  
of wisdom that were destined to change my life.  
So, I tried on a first-team rugby shirt, puffed on my first  
piece of chalk, got a finger stuck in a test tube,  
and measured my head with a large, wooden compass.

Eventually I read the note, which said simply,  
'The baby is a seed.' 'If that's true,' I thought, 'then why  
aren't we all flowers?' As the bell rang for the end of playtime  
he unlocked the door and led me down the corridor.  
'From now you'll not be troubled by any more "thoughts",  
but say your prayers every night, just to be on the safe side.'

### *Another Brick in the Wall*

'It's like bashing your head against a brick wall,'  
said Brother Ryan,  
bashing my head against a brick wall.

## *Of Protestants*

You knew where you were at Holy Cross Junior School.  
The world was divided into Catholics, by far the best,  
and those doomed to a life of bewilderment, emptiness  
and eventual damnation, the rest.

Jews were fine, but only Catholic ones  
like the Twelve Apostles and the Virgin Mary.  
Muslims mysterious, Buddhists weird,  
but of Protestants, one had to be wary.

King Herod, for example, Judas and Henry 8th,  
Rangers fans, the average bobby on the beat,  
serial killers, and those big, rough boys  
from the tech at the end of our street.

Then the whisper that Hitler had been a Catholic.  
Robespierre, Guy Fawkes, Mussolini, Al Capone?  
My faith suddenly being put to the test.  
So one morning in class I asked Sister Malone.

Smack! 'Protestants, the lot of them.' Smack!  
'Burning in hell as sure as night follows day.'  
Then softly, 'Not to worry, I won't tell your parents.  
Now stand up everybody and let us pray ...

'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy  
Ghost ...'

## *Hard Times*

When we were up we were beaten  
When we were down we were kicked  
We used to be given meals-on-wheels  
Until the wheels got nicked.

## *Meals on Leaves*

Chameleons who are colour-blind  
are hopeless at camouflage

Red and green, they look the same  
So by and large, they're easy game.

## *Sacrifices*

I was forever hearing about the sacrifices  
My parents made.  
Little ones almost daily  
Big ones when required.

Having me meant sacrifices. Going without.  
And then to cap it all, the Scholarship:  
School uniforms, violin lessons,  
Elocution, extra tuition.

'If it's not one thing it's another.  
I hope you're worth it.' But was I?  
The dictionary confirmed my doubts:  
'*Sacrifice*, a ritual killing of a person  
or animal with the intention of pleasing a deity.'

Sacrifice. No, I wasn't worth it.  
All that blood for a few O-levels.

## *Brasso*

While my sister was polishing the lino  
or outside in the yard chopping wood,  
I would settle down in the back kitchen  
with the *Echo* spread out on the table  
and begin my weekly chore.

Some rags, a tin of Brasso, and before me  
the family hoard: two candlesticks, ashtray,  
coal scuttle, toasting fork and small handbell  
from Llangollen in the shape of a lady  
wearing the national costume of Wales.

My favourite I saved until last,  
a German clock encased in solid brass  
that had seen action during the war.  
Requisitioned by dockers from a U-boat  
handcuffed to the Pier Head. How I polished it.

The rub of the rag, the thrum of the engine,  
the ticking of the clock. My courage  
was about to be tested. The commander  
downed periscope and gutturalled:  
'Oberleutnant, vot time ist?'

'According to this heavy rectangular clock  
badly in need of a polish, it is fünf past drei.'  
'Time then for action. *Achtung!* Fire!'  
Das Boot shuddered as its torpedoes  
Streaked towards a convoy of our brave lads.

'*Tauchen! Tauchen!*' came the order as depth charges  
exploded all around. The windows rattled  
and the crockery shook on the kitchen shelf.  
In the yard outside a dog howled.  
I dived beneath the table and held my breath.

On the count of *zehn* we resurfaced,  
and while the crew went on deck to surrender  
I stayed below and wrapped the clock in dirty rags  
before smuggling it into the front room  
where it shines in pride of place to this very day.

### *Queen Elizabeth I Visits Merseyside in 1949*

Where are they now, the good citizens of Crosby  
who greeted me with such warmth and favour?  
The cockle wenches who sprinkled rose petals before my feet?  
The soldiers of the Royal Guard?

Where are they now, my faithful courtiers?  
Lord Gloucester, fat as a globe, who stumbled  
when bowing low, sending his cap spinning  
across the lawn like a blue velvet frisbee.

Where the roll of parchment upon which  
I had written my speech? Lop-sided throne,  
newly painted and sticky to the touch?  
Whither the groundlings, my faithful retainers?

Whither the voice unbroken, the cheeks unshaved?  
Where is Miss Allen, who tried in vain  
to teach me how to act like a monarch?  
'Head up, Roger, speak slowly and clearly.'

And amdrums later, after all those schoolboys  
dressed as girls, the real thing in my arms.  
The stage set and a full moon. 'Head up, Roger.'  
Another lead role, another lead balloon.

### *The Bridle Path at Litherland*

Bunking off school for the afternoon  
We'd take our bikes for a ride  
Scorching along the bridle path  
The murky canal at our side.

Courting couples caught in action  
Tramps and narrowboats we spied  
We saw fish and birds and gypsy boys,  
But never once, a bride.

### *How to Become a Sixer*

Wait until Akela is out of the room  
and the noise level begins to rise.  
As soon as you hear returning footsteps  
call out in a loud, clear voice:  
'Quiet, everybody. We promised to get on  
with things in silence. DYB. DYB. DYB. Remember?'

By now the footsteps will have stopped  
and the Pack looking to see if you are being serious.  
Ignore them, and use the pause  
to do something useful, like tying a knot.  
Akela will then make stamping noises  
and open the door. Everything is shipshape.

Acknowledge the appraising glance  
but appear embarrassed, as if you wished  
you could bite your tongue off.  
Promotion will quickly follow. And disappointment:  
Akela in a tent, unfurling his knob.  
Dirty Old Bugger. DOB. DOB. DOB.

## *Spitting Prohibited*

When I was a boy (cue Brass Band)  
A notice downstairs on every bus and tram  
Said: NO SMOKING, SPITTING PROHIBITED.

Then overnight, or so it seemed, things changed.  
The second part was painted over  
And the sign said simply: NO SMOKING.

Imagine that first morning, when passengers,  
Bleary-eyed, looked up and saw,  
By omission, an invitation.

Then did everybody, unrestrained,  
Leap up, clear their throats and let rip?  
Expectorate to their lungs' content?

Did drip, dribble, spurt and spatter?  
Hawk and croak until the windows were streaming  
And the passageways awash?

Transport Committee met and unanimously agreed  
That every by-law be clearly stated  
And the notice then to read:

NO SMOKING. SPITTING PROHIBITED.  
PLEASE REFRAIN FROM URINATING AND DEFECATING,  
SOLICITING AND IMPORTUNING.

FORNICATION AND BESTIALITY FORBIDDEN.  
ARSON, RAPE AND PILLAGE NOT PERMITTED.  
(STRICTLY, NO BRASS BANDS.)

## *My Busconductor*

My busconductor tells me  
he only has one kidney  
and that may soon go on strike  
through overwork.  
Each busticket  
takes on now a different shape  
and texture.  
He holds a ninepenny single  
as if it were a rose  
and puts the shilling in his bag  
as a child into a gasmeter.  
His thin lips  
have no quips  
for fat factorygirls  
and he ignores  
the drunk who snores  
and the oldman who talks to himself  
and gets off at the wrong stop.

He goes gently to the bedroom  
of the bus  
to collect  
and watch familiar shops and pubs pass by  
(perhaps for the last time?)  
The same old streets look different now

more distinct  
as through new glasses.  
And the sky  
was it ever so blue?

And all the time  
Deep down in the deserted busshelter of his mind  
he thinks about his journey nearly done.  
One day he'll clock on and never clock off  
or clock off and never clock on.

### *My Busseductress*

She is as beautiful as bustickets  
and smells of old cash  
drinks Guinness off duty  
eats sausage and mash.  
But like everyone else  
she has her busdreams too  
when the peakhour is over  
and there's nothing to do.

A fourposter upstairs  
a juke-box inside  
there are more ways than one  
of enjoying a ride.  
Velvet curtains on the windows  
thick carpets on the floor  
roulette under the stairs  
a bar by the door.

Three times a day  
she'd perform a striptease  
and during the applause  
say nicely 'fares please'.

Upstairs she'd reserve  
for men of her choice  
invite them along  
in her best clippie voice.

She knows it sounds silly  
what would the police say  
but thinks we'd be happier  
if she had her way.  
There are so many young men  
she'd like to know better  
give herself with the change  
if only they'd let her.

She is as beautiful as bustickets  
and smells of old cash  
drinks Guinness off duty  
eats sausage and mash.  
But she has her busdreams  
hot and nervous  
my blue-serged queen  
of the transport service.

## *George and the Dragonfly*

Georgie Jennings was spit almighty.  
When the golly was good  
he could down a dragonfly at 30 feet  
and drown a 100 midges with the fallout.  
At the drop of a cap  
he would outspit lads  
years older and twice his size.  
Freckled and rather frail  
he assumed the quiet dignity  
beloved of schoolboy heroes.

But though a legend in his own playtime  
Georgie Jennings failed miserably in the classroom  
and left school at 15 to work for his father.  
And talents such as spitting  
are considered unbecoming  
for up-and-coming pork butchers.

I haven't seen him since,  
but like to imagine some summer soir e  
when, after a day moistening mince,  
George and his wife entertain tanned friends.  
And after dinner, sherry-tongued talk  
drifts back to schooldays,  
the faces half recalled, the adventures  
over-exaggerated. And the next thing  
that shy sharpshooter of days gone by  
is led, vainly protesting, on to the lawn  
where, in the hush of a golden August evening  
a reputation, 20 years tall, is put to the test.

So he takes extra care as yesterheroes must,  
fires, and a dragonfly, encapsulated, bites the dust.  
Then amidst bravos and tinkled applause,  
blushing, Georgie leads them back indoors.

## *The Icingbus*

the littleman  
with the hunchbackedback  
crept to his feet  
to offer his seat  
to the blind lady  
people getting off  
steered carefully around  
the black mound

of his back  
as they would a pregnant belly  
the littleman  
completely unaware  
of the embarrassment behind  
watched as the blind lady  
fingered out her fare

\* \* \*

much love later he suggested that instead  
of a wedding-cake they should have a miniature bus  
made out of icing but she laughed  
and said that buses were for travelling in  
and not for eating and besides  
you can't taste shapes.

## *Vague Impressions*

Ossie Edwards couldn't punch a hole in a wet echo.  
He was no fighter.  
And if he wasn't thicker than two short planks  
he wasn't much brighter.  
To compensate, he did impressions.  
Impressions of trains, impressions of planes,  
of James Cagney and Donald Duck.

As they all sounded the same  
his impressions made little impression  
on the 3rd year Cosa Nostra  
and so he was bullied mercifully.

Then, quite suddenly, Ossie saw the light.  
One Monday morning during R.I.  
he switched to birdcalls.  
Peewits, kestrels, tomtits and kingfishers

he became them all.  
Larks and nightingales.  
The birdnotes burst from his throat  
like a host of golden buckshot.

And as the nearest anyone got to ornithology  
was playing football on debris with a dead pigeon  
there could be no argument.  
So he was rechristened 'Percy'  
and left alone.  
And left alone  
he twittered his way happily to 3 'O' levels  
and a job in a shipping office.

'Twas there he met Sylvia  
whom he courted and married.  
She took an interest in his hobby  
and they were soon appearing in local concerts:  
'The Sylvatonies – Bird Impressionists'.  
The double-act ended however  
when Sylvia left him for a widower  
who taught her how to sing.  
Her love for Perce she realized  
never was the real thing,  
but, like his impressions, a tuneful imitation.

And that was years ago and still  
whenever I pass that way at night  
and hear the shrill yearning hoot of an owl,

I imagine Percy perched out there in the darkness,  
lonely, obsessed.  
Calling for his love  
to return to the nest.

## *A Fine Tooth Comb*

When granny was young she was famous for her teeth.  
Although, not so much for her teeth  
as for the thick golden hair that covered them.  
Unusual, even for those days.

But that blonde smile was her crowning glory  
and last thing at night, she would gargle  
with shampoo before combing her teeth,  
or brushing with a pocket-sized Mason & Pearson.

They were the pride of Halifax, and many a lad  
came a-calling, until Ted. Love at first sight  
they were married the following year.  
Then came the war and the long march into night.

As granny grew older her teeth fell out  
one by one, and her hair turned grey.  
And today, she has but a single tooth  
set in a thin curtain of silver.

Alone now, but the nightly ritual continues  
as she takes from her dressing-table drawer  
'A present to my one and only girl'  
from Ted who went to war and didn't come home.

Polished rosewood inlaid with pearl:  
A fine tooth comb.

## *No Grannies in this Poem*

There are no grannies in this poem  
I wouldn't let one in if she tried  
It's no way to treat old ladies, I know,  
But I've kept them waiting outside.

It's not raining out there at the moment  
And we are in for a settled spell  
They've got lots in common to chatter about  
And they get on reasonably well.

This poem, you see, is about witches  
And things that grannies don't care for  
Like vampires and aliens from outer space  
Waging inter-galactic war-fare.

So if you want a poem about grannies  
I suggest you go look elsewhere  
For there are no grannies in this poem.  
Definitely not. Definitely not.

## *Snowing Down South*

'It's snowing down south,' one girl would say  
When another's petticoat showed beneath the skirt  
And, giggling, they would rush off to the Ladies.

Modesty restored, they would return to the floor  
And dance demurely, with a poise we could not match  
We boys, who stood pretending not to watch.

Then half an hour or so before the Last Waltz  
The DJ would put on some rock 'n' roll  
And emboldened with ale, we'd form a ring.

Eyes closed, they'd spin, those girls, skirts swirling high  
To reveal . . . Need I go on? Mid-fifties.  
You've seen the pictures, heard the songs.

In the spotlight of our lascivious gaze  
Fired by the rhythm, our whistles and screeches  
Down south, suddenly, everything is peaches.

### *'What does your father do?'*

At university, how that artful question embarrassed me.  
In the common-room, coffee cup balancing on cavalry twills  
Some bright spark (usually Sociology) would want an answer.  
Shame on me, as feigning lofty disinterest, I would hesitate.

In the hope of being misheard, should I look away,  
and mumble 'docker'? 'Doctor, you say? Jolly good.'  
Or should I pick up the hook and throw it down like a gauntlet?  
'Docker. My dad's a docker.' A whistle of corduroy.

How about? 'He's a stevedore, from the Spanish "estibador"  
Meaning a packer, or loader, as in ship.' No, sounds too  
*On the Waterfront*, and Dad was no Marlon Brando.  
Besides, it's the handle they want, not the etymology.

'He's a foreman on the docks.' A hint of status? Possibly.  
A touch of class? Hardly. Better go with the straightforward:  
'He works on the docks in Liverpool', which leaves it open.  
Crane-driver? Customs and Excise officer? Canteen manager?

Clerk? Chairman of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board?  
In dreams, I hear him naming the docks he knew and loved.  
A mantra of gentle reproach: *Gladstone, Hornby, Alexandra,*  
*Langton, Brocklebank, Canada, Huskisson, Sandon, Wellington,*  
*Bramley Moor, Nelson, Salisbury, Trafalgar, Victoria.*

## *Mermaid and Chips*

We had half a dozen chippies  
within walking distance of home.  
The nearest was the dearest.  
A penny more on the fish, stingy with the chips,  
and no mushy peas, we gave *The Friary* a wide berth.

Mr Clarke, who limped and chain-smoked  
in the *Happy Plaice*, was as sour as his pickled eggs.  
Known as ‘Spit-in-the-boiler’, his dark shop  
we avoided like the plague. (Although,  
in defence of the grumpy emphysema sufferer,  
it was said that the infected phlegm  
would have been rendered harmless by the boiling fat.)

The *Lobster Shell* with its takeaway paper napkins  
and finicky wooden forks? Too pretentious.  
And the *Chip Suey*, where Mai Lai lost her dentures  
shouting at a pan of curry sauce? Too risky.

Our chosen chippy, *Turner’s*, was a family affair,  
with Ted a showman, at home on the range.  
In front of which he entertained the queue  
behind him with a stream of quips  
delivered into the steamed-up mirror.  
‘Flippin’ chips,’ he would say, doing just that.

The temperature of the smoking fat he gauged  
with a callused finger, before committing to the deep  
the batter-shrouded cod. A master of the guillotine,  
he sliced spuds for scallops, while his wife  
and young Linda in overalls, salt-bright and spotless,  
divvied out the crisp, golden hoard.

Despite my school uniform, Linda took a shine to me.  
Extra chips were a matter of course, not to mention  
the odd fishcake. But I wanted more than scraps.  
As mum and daughter worked behind a counter  
we only saw them from the waist up  
and I dreamed of Linda as a mermaid,  
half-woman, half-haddock. Big breasts  
and a silvery fishtail in place of down there.

## *Sunset*

tonight  
above the ghost trees tightly  
s-t-r-a-i-n-i-n-g,  
I saw the sun  
setting.  
Immersed in the lowing clouds  
looking . . . . .  
Like a fried egg.

## *At Parties*

At parties  
I talk to many pointless mouths  
and run out of ideas early  
like cigarettes  
I look into the empty packets of many eyes

and hold the damp glove of somebody's hand  
and all the time I feel like the blind man  
nearing the end  
of a long train journey  
listening to the monotonous  
rhythm of distance  
and hoping that someone  
with a kind voice  
and gentle hands  
will come into  
the lonely compartment  
and help him off  
at the right station.

## *Schizophrenia*

From the armchair  
I watch you lean  
against the wall  
and press your cheek  
to the dull pattern.  
You whisper fantasies  
and smile nervously,  
rather like a girl,  
gentle on the chest  
of her first spent lover

Before the last  
dystrophic fingers  
of the moon have slid  
from the windowpane  
you will moan,  
and I will lead you  
into father's room  
where already  
he is filling the oven  
with tears

## *Beatitudes*

The moon slithers  
over the phalanx of 4 a.m. rooftops  
and the silence  
nags at my ears.

The street-lamps  
like tired prostitutes  
shiveringly wait  
for the daylight of their rest  
and the darkness  
reverberates.

A pillarbox  
hangs around the corner  
as gloomy as a penny-black  
darkly gaping  
for a paper sandwich.

None so forlorn  
as a motorbike  
with a sheet over its head  
passing oil  
and praying for the ignition  
of reincarnation.

A cat miaows like thunder  
across the stillness-stricken  
street  
and the echo  
throbs the scene  
into nervous agitation.

I dash downstairs  
and out into the  
pulsating night  
seeking to . . .  
Visit the motorbike and

Feed the pillarbox and  
Clothe the street-lamps and  
Invite the moon in for a coffee  
and a cigarette . . .  
. . . but they are all dead  
And the silence  
nags at my ears.

## *The Sandcastle*

There is a littleman  
hiding  
in the Whit sandhills  
this eventide  
at Southport

He is trying to build a castle for himself  
with high walls, drawbridge  
and a large moat going all around  
But the sand is too fickle  
and his fingers too clumsy

The trippers  
have called it a day  
Like a chill wind  
news of the missing child  
is spreading  
Time to be heading home

On a darkening  
deserted beach  
the littleman  
is desperate  
to be inside the castle  
before her body  
is discovered

## *Is This Your Last Summer?*

Old woman  
sitting  
getting  
coffinbrown  
on the Blackpool beach  
cockleeyed and  
musselmouthed  
dare you eat a peach?

Twilight lady  
lyle and lace  
will summer ever see your face  
here again?

Deck-chaired and  
fleck-haired with  
age-old sand and skin  
will Santa coagulate your blood  
and grinning,  
do you in?

When summers spent,  
do you want your funeral bier  
charabanced along the pier  
as part  
of the illuminary celebrations?

and so,  
until that saucy day,  
gather ye seashells while ye may.

## *I say I say I say*

I say I say I say

A funny thing happened on my way here today  
the buildings had hiccoughs the roads ran away  
Buses grew hairs in the most private places  
traffic lights chuckled and pulled funny faces  
Hot-bladdered lamp posts chased little dogs  
the moon took a hiding from stars wearing clogs  
Policemen threw helmets at innocent stones  
as cheeky boys laughed and broke words with bones  
Sir Walter Scott has started to snore  
The lions in Lime Street have started to roar  
A poet's not safe out alone any more.

## *Limestreetscene '64*

Turned left into Lime Street  
felt small  
like a pelota ball

St George's Hall  
black pantheonic  
like a coalman's wedding cake  
glows in the neonic  
presence of Schweppervescence  
and 'Guinness is good for you'

Proud buses turn up Skelhorne Street  
and vomit and dribble up the hill  
once more to fill  
their 'no smoking' 'spitting forbidden' bellies.  
Ahoy Doris, docker's delight  
with cheeky breasts and indelible lips

tempting by  
laying a perfumed trail of gin  
Irish linen and men

Outside the Chinese cafés  
like buddhas bouncers stand  
lest a band  
of teds or sailors  
or drunken Viking whalers  
should seek to violate the chow mein  
and trample on the waterchestnuts

Turned left into Brownlow Hill  
felt big  
as a pig.

### *Liverpool* (after William McGonigal)

O Liverpool on the Mersey River  
Noble city, how I shiver  
With pride at the thought of your history  
And your great men who are gone  
Like Huskisson and Mr Gladstone.  
After each you have named a dock  
From Seaforth to the Liver clock  
And some miles further on,  
Even to Dingle and fair Garston.

You are the second greatest port in all the land  
And your population runs to eight hundred thousand.  
Twenty miles of busy docking  
Thanks to all the good men working  
On them. The brave stevedores and men in crane-driving  
Have helped to make this great port thriving.

Your flour mills and other famous industries,  
Biscuit, pea, soap and sugar factories  
All play a very important part,  
And of all industrial south-west Lancashire  
Liverpool is the very heart.  
Noble city astride the River Mersey  
I am sure we all salute thee.

## *The Gateway to the Atlantic*

I am the warm hello and the sad farewell  
I am the path to glory and the road to hell  
I am the gull on the wing and the salt in the air  
I am the night patrol and the morning prayer

I am the port register, read the names with pride  
I am the thickening fog and the quickening tide  
I am the pool of life and the Mersey sound  
The voice of angels, the ghosts of the drowned

I am the gift of the gab and the quiet word  
The night watch and the early bird  
I am the bijou apartment, the sheltered accommodation  
The blitz, the wrecking ball, the restoration

I am the ferryboat, the slaver, the man-o'-war  
I am the keeper of the quays, welcome ashore  
I am the starstruck, eternal romantic  
I am the gateway to the Atlantic.

## *Double Acrostic*

Lippy loose-limbed liberatingly lyricalL  
Irreverent inspired je ne sais quoI  
Vibrant visionary with a capital V  
Edgy eccentric essentially europhilE  
Racy restless raw rock 'n' rolleR  
Pacy passionate positively poP  
Obsessive optimistic on the gO  
Off the wall outlandish ee aye addiO  
Legendary life-giving life-loving liverpoolL

## *Everyman basement 1964*

*Liverpool 8*

Evenings we'd spend together in the cellar bar below  
Venture upstairs occasionally to watch a theatre show  
Events and Happenings, poems on Monday nights  
Read by wistful beatniks fed on City Lights  
Young, we talked of freedom, pop art, CND,  
Miniskirts and football, and we danced to R&B,  
At midnight we'd wander home with dreams enough to spare  
Now I wander still down Hope Street but you're no longer there.

## *For you everything's gonna be all right*

For you everything's gonna be all right

For you they'll redecorate the city ...  
Put a lampshade around the sun  
and whitewash the clouds  
Hoover the streets  
and wallpaper the buildings

For you they'll convert  
crematoriums into supermarkets  
and graveyards into playing fields  
Ambulances into ice-cream vans  
and hospitals into fun palaces

For you policemen will take off  
their bruise-coloured uniforms and command respect  
by the width of their navels  
Policewomen will go to bed  
handcuffed to their teddy bears

Old-age pensioners will be allowed into  
lunchtime sessions at the Cavern for half-price

The Queen will head the bill  
at the London Palladium

Val Parnell will foot the bill  
at the London Palladium

Billy Graham will be the next pope

BJ Vorster will refuse to appear  
on coloured television

They will give Vietnam back to the Irish

The Red Army will devote itself entirely  
to show business

For you everything's gonna be all right