

# 50 x 50

useful poetry for troubled times

selected poetry  
by

Stephen Page

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dedication

for K, without whom I couldn't have understood what love means



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# Author's Preface

Poetry is a powerful means of communicating complex ideas and emotions. For many of us, it is a language we are unfamiliar with, even afraid of.

My decision to publish this slim volume arose from a long-held aspiration to see my own poetry published before I was 50.

Some of the poems have been previously published, in anthologies or in magazines, and some have been used in other contexts, such as *Lunch With Nicole*, which I used in the soundtrack of a short-film, commissioned by West Sussex County Council for the training of their social workers.

Perhaps the poems I have been most pleased to write have been the most difficult for me, because they have been used in humanist funerals, commissioned by a friend of mine who has become a Humanist Celebrant.

I have always been fascinated by the importance of rites of passage, and I am very conscious of the difficulties anyone must face in finding the right words to mark the passage of a life. Funerals, of course, are rarely planned in advance and I have discovered that my style lends itself to responding quickly to such a sensitive need.

I believe passionately that poetry can speak when words might otherwise fail us. For centuries, at times of crisis we have turned to the work of poets to feed us bread at such times when we need nourishment.

As I cast my bread upon the water, I do so with the hope that some of it may be of use in some form somewhere, and in such circumstances would have no problem in these poems being reproduced without fear of copyright infringement. I ask only

that if possible I can be informed of such use, so that this can be recorded, anonymously if required, in future reprints.

# Biographical Note

Stephen was born into a respectably poor family in the East End of London in 1960.

Soon after his father was made redundant from the West India docks, the family moved to Bournemouth on the south coast where he was fortunate to receive the kind of grammar school education we only talk about these days.

He studied for a degree in Philosophy at University College London, and spent most of the last two years of his degree involved in the practical management of a housing co-operative scheme in the East End of London.

After a brief spell of office work in London, he moved to Leeds to work as a volunteer for a co-operative conference centre, which he ended up running. He later joined Opera North as an Education Officer, where he met his wife and still best friend, before moving to Scotland to become Development Director for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

From there he became the Director of the Seachange Arts Trust in Great Yarmouth whilst taking on the renovation of a Georgian town house in Bungay. He was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in the year 2000, and continued working until 2003 when for a brief period he worked from home as a graphic designer.

In 2005, Stephen was rehoused to more accessible accommodation in Lowestoft, where there was little to do but to edit a lifetime of writing, poetry and prose and during this period several poems were accepted for publication in various forward press anthologies. He also undertook the first of a number of commissions for funeral poems to be used in humanist funerals.

In 2007, Stephen moved to Worthing in West Sussex, where he now lives with a bitch called Oscar, in a well adapted flat suitable to his physical capabilities. His gradual, ongoing physical decline has opened up a new career as an advocate for the development of more personalized ways in which disabled people can be supported and he is currently working on two, year-long commissions for national magazines targeted at care professionals.

He was also commissioned by West Sussex County Council to create a short film about independence which is being used in the training of social workers. An edit of this film was recently shortlisted by the BBC World Service as part of the It's My World competition. His next film project, A Short Film About Aspiration, is based on the project to create this short volume of poetry, and he continues to be involved in a range of projects advising the County Council on its social care work with disabled people.

# 50 x 50

Useful Poetry For Troubled Times



# A World of People





## **A Song For Marie**

Your hair is black, a backcloth to the stars  
in your eyes, a universe unfolds.  
Your voice gives harmony to move the spheres  
your heart a chalice to drink of love  
In tenderness your whole passion is for life  
in death I shall hear you for eternity.

*setting for baritone and piano by Richard Peirson, April 2006*

## An Angel On The Train

There was an Angel on the train  
as we pulled into Victoria,  
whose hands guided me  
gently to the taxi rank. Her name was Julia  
and when the angel Julia appears  
in the flirtatious way that memory works  
everybody makes their connections.  
We changed platforms at Clapham Junction  
the way that conversations do -  
father, daughter, grandfather  
arriving into London.  
A wheelchair and two carers  
for the taxi firm, two users for the ramp.  
I'm not on the list, and I can't leave the platform  
says the ramp man. He's on safety duty.  
The Angel Julia is on hand  
says we are all heading the same way.  
How so profound.  
Near Billy Elliot's theatre say I, she does not feel  
the glances of commuter crowds  
towards the taxi rank, I ask my Angel's name  
she tells me, takes my hand  
and asks me mine. In another life  
this might mean love, two lives that touch  
with a rush of blood that means so much  
in making my connection.

## Becalmed

".. a corpse in the cargo hold" Henrik Ibsen

Among my father's yellowed papers  
in our family vaults, below the photographs  
in the archaeology of our name  
rests an old man's diary, the hand unsteady  
drunken spiders over worm worn vellum  
bound by leather. A sailor's journal  
speaking of the trade winds and the ocean currents,  
the somersaulting porpoise and the whaling seas  
where horizons met the sky and shorelines fell  
into the void of sea, and the deepest quiet -  
that was the deck held in the heat  
*becalmed*.

My inheritance, this, as all that's past is mine  
in metal boxes marked with faded names in gold.  
A father's bequest, uncovered at ebb tide  
passed by calloused hands through generations  
a line held fast to wooden ships  
and to men with pitted, rusting swords  
well tempered by the blood of slaves and infidels  
(whose lives were nothing to the Popes).  
Whilst I, poor seaman, came ashore  
to weave a dry course in a broken hull  
through libraries and manuscripts  
never tasting a salt breeze. Now soon

within a mound of earth I'll spill my seed,  
drowned by a tormented *deja-vu*  
when all that's dead uncoils, unwinds  
as sandflies hatch their eggs beneath my skin -  
when time gives up my rotten cargo  
for hands to grasp as colours in the dune,  
the red of nails long rusted from a hull  
the ash of bones long wrested from the sea.

Though none should weep nor wave farewell  
as fair winds carry off this ship at last  
now loosing off its ballast from the hold  
the corpse I've carried in my father's name.

## **Lunch With Nicole**

I want to make a lunch date  
with Nicole Kidman  
because I like the sound of her voice.

There is romance in the death of a courtesan  
intensity in the life of a writer  
though I can't think  
what we would talk about  
beyond La Vie Boheme  
and To The Lighthouse.  
although I'd rather make her laugh  
if she would let me.

Dreams are vital to be human -  
the stranger and grander the better.  
Paths lead to mountains, passion to love  
and each step and each breath  
bring us closer to death.

Find your dream and choose life.

*Included in a film shortlisted for a BBC world service competition*

## The Chariot

Drive hard your chariot lest the horses falter  
the sun's journey is neither fixed nor certain  
in a world where nothing holds up the sky.  
Soon the archaeologist will see colour changes  
in the sand, where once was form will stand  
for nothing more  
than evidence of once what was.  
The tears I'll shed will be wax from wings  
that passed too close to life's true heart,  
and none shall turn away from that dark night  
when all life's memories, carefully boxed,  
will empty out and write the novel never writ  
to fade against the light of lives still to live.  
Now I no longer run with the pack  
but in my dreams I still climb mountains  
to touch the beauty of the universe -  
thus, whilst a heart still beats my breast  
the reins will never be set to rest.

*Included in a short film publicly shown before the  
Lord Mayor of Ipswich, in November 2004*

## Girl on the Train

I wait at the open train door  
and an angel appears, with waist-length hair  
offering help to quench my thirst.  
My place is close to hers when I board,  
and I ask about the text book on her knees.  
European law. I sympathise. She smiles,  
empathically, and I discover more by implication.  
I ask her to unwrap my food.  
Our talk  
reminds me of how normal life can be  
to speak and listen and thus explore  
the lives of others who may cross our path.  
She alights at Feltham, and an empty space  
remains where she once sat, throughout our chat  
my exercise in conversation.

## The Cold Waiting Room

A cold Waiting Room on Westbury station  
makes for conversation between strangers  
between trains. Enjoy the warmth, I say  
because it's illusory, beyond the wind  
a moment of comparative calm.

They've been to football  
and their team won, I think  
from their smooth spirits.

The train soon comes  
but I don't see the white haired stranger  
until we are alone. I don't know how  
we talk of crop circles  
of how much we do not know of nature.

I quote Wittgenstein  
and we just chat on, time passing quickly  
until he rises to catch his train.

Moments only must have passed  
but I still remember how we talked  
with passion as each listened to the other  
and then his train arrived.

He shook my hand as he went to leave  
just time to ask one question.

I am a healer, he replied  
nothing more as he then left  
leaving cold for colder  
and me to regret

I hadn't been bolder  
and asked him for his name.



## **My Given Name**

I can't walk the walk and I won't talk the talk  
but behind these tired eyes  
still beats the same heart as that of  
the woman that has raised her children  
then their children, loved and been loved  
in return. My memories  
may be broken, but they are mine  
please help me to keep them alive.

Don't call me Dearie, or Darling, or Du cks,  
give me back what is mine  
and what belongs just to me.  
It's the name my fiancée proposed with  
the one I married with  
and the one that will be given to the registrar  
one last time, all too soon.

Before then keep me safe, keep me warm  
in this place, use my name to my face  
please protect me from harm  
and to the end call me Grace.

It's my given name.

## The Messenger

I collected once, out in the woods  
with that jar and net and this soft pencil.  
Now it comes to me, not me to it  
like a spider pulling strings,  
so very many splendoured things.  
The lure tonight was Vermeer's maid  
the girl with the pearl earring.  
Three hundred years haven't changed  
the way love works. She came from Ghent  
where a soldier spent  
one week of leave at Liberation.  
just sixty years ago. His heart was taken  
at her first sight, and he made sure  
he was billeted with them.  
It took a year to reach Berlin  
then came peace, of sorts,  
for those that lived to see it. The soldier lived  
and his wife these sixty years  
but there was one that died as well.  
Returning home from Buchenwald  
with a scribbled message  
and some cigarettes  
a promise he would return.  
The soldier  
kept his word at last  
love at first sight, I thought  
and then I thought again.  
The hero  
was the messenger  
who came back  
to Ghent to die.

## Opening The Box

I tried to unpack, but failed  
at once, distracted by  
history, memory, love.  
I may have broken the seal  
only for tears to choke it up again,  
the first book a reminder of  
love lost and warring families,  
the second enlightenment,  
the third heroism. Now the box is open  
but a thirst has started, there will be no end -  
so many more to come.  
Three more boxes  
in the living-room alone,  
all of them books  
a lifetime spent in dusty old shops.

Knowledge escaped me when I sought it  
remained elusive when I bought it  
and is a burden now I've thought it  
might once have made a difference.

Eyes look your last, the days are numbered  
for these dear old friends  
with whom I'm lumbered.

## Trains Passing

You offered me Swiss chocolate  
a gift for grandma from a niece.  
You have a large family  
much love lives in your conversation.  
Archaeologists, anthropologists, oral historians  
interesting people and professions.  
Unsurprising  
it was a long journey made swift by contact  
your gift of the history that you own,  
an example I would gladly follow.  
You live  
at the heart of your family  
a gentle matriarch,  
you write incessant letters  
to right the wrongs of officialdom.  
You confessed  
you would have fought for peace in Iraq  
held the politicians to account  
unafraid  
to take a moral stand.

Once again  
I am in awe  
of what it is to be human,  
seen in the gentlest of things.  
This conversation a reminder of  
what we both held dear -  
your husband and my father  
both died the same year.

## Beneath The Surface

I've never before met you  
but we share a slice of history. Students  
in London, you a dancer  
with dyslexia  
studying Martha Graham and  
pushed by parents since childhood.

In adolescence you show great promise  
until collapse as a student  
split you open to remove a cyst  
the size of a grapefruit,  
along with half your ovaries.

Too many muscles severed  
by the knife to keep it up.  
All of this tumbles out  
a secret waiting to be told after two marriages  
you say you regret.  
This in ten minutes,  
and me still naked.  
You help me dry and dress myself  
for another day, nostalgia grips me  
as you reminisce  
the shops along the Tottenham Court Road  
from 30 years ago, and more  
dreams put away but not forgotten.

You had your moment  
and then moved on, becoming qualified  
in Chiropody. You make me promise not to tell  
the other carers, afraid of exploitation  
while you find your feet  
and pay for  
your son's education.

Such a story, and before my breakfast  
not even leaving the house to walk the dog.  
So many stories  
so many different carers every week  
each one unique, so much to seek  
just beneath the surface.

# Places in the World





## Thoughts On Visiting Coventry

Glass and brass and concrete  
are not godly in themselves.  
It is the hands and eyes of artists  
bring to life the spirit,  
give life to dead materials,  
voice to deep emotions.  
Out of fire and tempest  
rises something sacred  
when in the silence of a requiem  
new life grows green  
amidst the ashes.  
Words are spoken  
texts are read  
a liturgy is spread,  
and always is remembered  
what the Carpenter said.

## The Journey

Across the bridge our carriage steals  
percussion locks the grinding wheels.  
my neighbour glances, nothing said  
while both of us pursue the thread -  
As if the drawing of a sword  
was heard by every ear on board.  
Bright metal from its scabbard drawn  
and then - the braying of the horn.  
A trick of light, and tired ears  
join end to end a thousand years  
of listening to remembered sound  
sense deceiving, sinking, drowned

These dirty little diesel trains  
are all that cross these old remains  
of Devon's ancient forestry  
Northward to the Celtic Sea  
where underneath the ploughed up fields  
lie broken swords and rusting shields  
there waiting still with bloody wounds  
sleep Saxon knights in earth cocoons.

Across the bridge the carriage steals  
awakening, with grinding wheels  
on iron rails through blood red earth -  
red ochre for our second birth.

## Returning

Perhaps a crime had taken place inside  
the pier-head sectioned off by razor wire  
with salt sea peeling back the dark blue paint  
around a 'keep out' sign. Standing salt-lipped  
I'm seeing my own past, a prisoner  
forced to hear my old LP's all over  
just to know they haven't changed their words.  
I've come back again  
along the Chine In January drizzle  
overhearing voices, recalling faces  
I came back to see -  
I'm growing old because of coming here  
down to the sea  
to watch the tide roll in,  
another visit with my ancestors  
to feast on oysters in an estuary.

## Things To Prove I Am An Englishman

Where do I come from, what shall I become?  
What is my heritage, and where is my home -  
do I love the taste of warm beer and woodland walks,  
fields of wheat before the harvest, ripening  
and does the sea flow warm in my veins?  
In my heart I see churches in a landscape  
village memorials to the many dead  
young men with lives cut short to keep it thus  
and politicians none of us will ever trust.  
It is the many dead that make us what we are  
the brave and foolish and the honoured men  
the English Rose and the Jenny Wren  
that make us now what they were then.

*first published 2006 by Forward Press in Poppy Fields*

## Worthing Beach

What of the pebbles on the beach at Worthing?  
Do they contain a secret Worthing long surpassed,  
perhaps because they're here this has been a playground  
for the elderly, retired clerks and accountants?  
Whose wives turned down the covers  
on the plumped up quilt  
- an act of caring unrivalled in simplicity.  
The pebbles ensured there was no fear  
of sun-tanned flesh on a sandy beach,  
with a nonchalant resort morality  
offending the view from the sea-front flats  
paid for with a lifetime's service to a lost empire.  
These days the foreshore itself is shifting  
as if the pebbles have a life of their own  
when stroked by the tidal moon's embrace -  
they must be watched, the storm now passed  
by a pack of early-morning surveyors  
- heaven forbid they should be misaligned!  
Though the satellite sees each pebble  
they do not each have names  
poor lonesome Worthing pebbles  
- no human form has moulded to their shape  
and even my dog prefers the promenade.  
If they only had eyes like potatoes  
these Worthy pebbles  
we might ask what they have tried to see,  
in a century of ageing they have been  
just tilting to the steadfast stars  
trying for a change of scene.

## Norwegian Wood

A blanket of crisp white snow  
drifted overnight in the Slottsparken  
pure and fresh from the Arctic  
between the trees and the sentry boxes.

More snow falls. A range of flavours  
fetched overland by mercurial winds,  
from Norway's border with the East,  
exported from the furnaces of England,

lies adulterous with the Arctic snow  
white on the canopy of the Grand Hotel  
where Ibsen sat with Grieg  
passing the time of day as National heroes do.

The thaw will free the nickel frozen in the street  
to feed the water table and the forests  
through the needles on the sponge floor  
to the sources of Norwegian spa.

Hard fingers twisting, poking among gnarled roots  
in the layer cake of cast-off clothes  
where forest alchemists drink the fountain  
and heavy metals bind to spiral centres.

In the Spring the transmutation of  
base elements into needle towers  
slows and then forever stops  
when forests turn to mountain tops.

# A Natural World





## Asleep With Nana

Sleep with windows open to the night  
and keep the child within awake  
to hear the rapping at the window  
when the spirits come to call.  
Hold tight the duvet when the dog growls  
for it may be the Pirates' come  
or Peter, with his Tinkerbelle  
flying from the Never Never land  
where the Lost Boys still wait  
for a Mother's love to grip them tight.

Little boys do not grow up  
they only leave behind their youth  
to stumble over in the night  
when dreaming speaks a truth.

*first published 2006 by Anchor Books in A Bedtime Poem*

## Cipher

Beethoven might have heard it. The long note  
without a rest, never trailing off  
the pulse of blood in every organ breath  
as air becomes compressed and finds a reed  
invents a cipher, strained, sustaining  
like the drone of bombers over Dresden.  
I hear it in the air conditioning  
in the languid hum of conversation  
in the fluttering of pigeon wings  
when I walk the park.  
Madness amplified  
the sum of universes winding down  
toward the stillness heralding a storm  
the long, unending scream of those who die  
a shadow darkening the score of time.

## Grains Of Dust

We are born to die one day  
and never at the time of our choosing.  
Precious moments marking life  
remembered by our friends and lovers  
will be forgotten by the generations,  
it is an end we cannot master.

We must understand ourselves  
to harbour fears and passions unrequited  
which will be left behind  
in a vale of tears,  
until the dust from which we formed  
will one day catch the solar wind  
to surf a Universe we'll never own.

## **Dried In Memory**

The fly agaric, Amarita Mascarita,  
is dressed in red and white  
and lies at the foot of a magisterial beech,  
a cluster of pharmacological wonder  
dried in memory.  
Step inside the circle  
and your imagination is  
a book of revelation,  
like saying goodbye to your lover  
at a station which is in fact your own funeral,  
the crowds of commuters live recorded lives  
never to touch reality.  
I would like to preserve happy things  
like the smile and the greeting of a stranger  
when I ask him for directions.  
His concern is palpable, as he  
wishes me Happy Christmas. I will eat  
love apples and fruit salad  
as we listen to the sound  
of inner thoughts unexpressed  
the whispering of prayers to be heard only by angels  
uncluttered by the base charade  
of living, breathing, human life.

## Moments of Panic

Holiday nettles, fields full of green  
me looking for dock leaves to ease the pain.  
Only in childhood the holiday season  
carries the menace of jungled moments  
antidote and poison, growing together.

The dock relieves the nettle  
in a field behind the house.  
Moments of panic are photographic  
develop with age, a funnel to deliver  
the antidote for adulthood.

Those sun-filled days  
stones-that-cut-feet days  
lost in the sandy aisles of a beach supermarket  
between castles and costumes  
buckets and beach tennis  
Ambre Solaire and  
snapshots, so rare, of the family.

Then lost on a sandbar as the mad-dog tide turns  
me king of the sandbar, awaiting the antidote  
renouncing with a scream my kingdom -  
take me home to the mainland,  
home to the family  
the safe shackles of the family -  
water is rising  
up my legs on the sandbar  
- kiss me, embrace me, antidote to poison.

## Seedlings

How clever of the ancients  
to understand the limits of humanity  
to be the fragile boundaries to life.  
That knowledge is lost with each new generation  
born fresh and hungry  
like the seed from the flower  
seeking only the sun.  
The flower does not teach its seed -  
the message is unspoken,  
comprehensively written  
inside its dry husk.  
Water the seed and it will grow  
upward to the light,  
keeping its roots bound to the earth  
while raising its head to the stars.  
In the spiral arm of the galaxy  
the same secret is writ large  
just as in the shell of the Nautilus  
or the eye of the hurricane.  
Life is not graded by number  
it is what it is  
It will end when it ends  
just remembered by friends  
or by remaining seedlings.

## Soft Green Shoots

There is a life beyond these walls  
that is stranger and grander  
than the books or films  
I receive these days by mail order:  
too often, soft green shoots  
will be withered by an early frost,  
never exchanged  
for brighter memories,  
experiences to be remembered.  
Truth is always a stranger to fiction  
and death gives the same relief  
as paying off a loan  
having borrowed our life  
the interest is greater the older we become.  
Always be on the lookout for love  
though it is like looking for Narnia  
the wardrobe door  
is never open when you seek it.  
These, and other things, I am not an expert in  
and therefore cannot teach.

## **Dead Heading The Flowers**

Careful in the garden, be circumspect  
don't pull the weeds before you've checked  
what's living lives, what's dead is dead.  
The heat from these composted roots  
will drive this season's coming fruits  
when mother Sun will raise her head.

The Winter is a time of change, of resolution  
after growing time. Seasonal motions  
cannot maintain the flower-beds  
without the cutting-off of heads.

Fragile beauty and a dying sun  
how much we lose of what's begun  
before new life establishes  
among the brassicas and the radishes.

Be careful when you make a change  
check there's nothing misarranged  
before  
you start  
to dig.



## **If A Dog Could Speak**

You do not know me, though I seem familiar  
a companion and friend, a guardian  
when needed,  
A wolf in sheep's clothing, and a saviour at that  
I would give up my own life for yours in a trice.  
The secrets in my life are secrets in yours  
for I gave you magic, and faith enough to care,  
belief in the other world (as real as my senses),  
a masterful Hunter and a beacon for danger.  
Together by team work we saw in the dark,  
and out of the darkness you then saw the light:  
Through terror and torment  
we survived the dark night.

*first published 2006 by Anchor Books in Animal Antics*



# A Dying World



## Needlepoint of Edinburgh

The corpse sits high upon the sandstone steps  
legs crossed, head thrown back,  
as if to gaze at sky behind the City Gallery.  
His hands, palms raised as if in crucifixion  
blue with blood and cold.

No-one sees him  
on their journey up The Mound, though he lies  
as open as in life, now unprotesting.  
Station announcements trickle just this far  
across the Princes' Gardens, where even  
as this corpse grows cold a couple kiss.  
The smell of trains and perfume passing by  
bring me to sickness, not his reminder  
of my own short visit here, a holiday  
too brief for all of us.

*Inspired by Rosa Luxemburg, "die toten auf urlaub"*  
*quoted in Edwin Muir's 'Scottish Journey'*

## Cafe Society Relinquished

My senses fade with age  
the way of all things. I do not read  
the faces in a room  
as once I did, and then  
the glances of a youth  
were seeking something.  
Spectacles restore the sight  
but nothing will improve the light -  
and eyes that search with subtlety  
see twice the personality.

*Included in a documentary film made by SCIE and shown  
at the launch of Social Care TV in Harrogate, October 2009*

## **For Nina (1922-2004)**

It is as if we have walked together  
among the neolithic tombs on Orkney  
or in the red stone Cathedral in Kirkwall  
with music in the nave of St. Magnus,  
watched the sand at Scapa Flow alive with seals  
and the ghosts of Viking ships  
on the Island of the Picts.

We speak as if we know each other,  
the way that old souls do -  
and there are moments  
as you plan your end of days  
when I remember tracts of ancient forest  
close by the hamlet of Rackwick  
where the path to the Old Man of Hoy  
goes past the cottage of Sir Peter  
where your requiem has already been composed.

## If You Should See My End

‘Words move, music moves  
only in time; but that which is only living  
can only die.’

*TS Eliot, The Four Quartets, Burnt Norton (v)*

‘A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and  
having slain him, he retained office  
until he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier.’

*Sir James George Frazer, The Golden Bough (ch 1)*

Lay out my body for the ravens and the rooks  
leave me with nothing but my two favorite books.  
There is nothing to mourn  
I've been dead these few years  
no point in sadness, no reason for tears.

Tell my few friends I have just gone away  
do not spoil for a moment this valuable day.  
Give them something of mine to remember me by  
but don't mention the fact I decided to die.

Don't get me wrong, I don't mean to cause pain -  
I just couldn't cope with incessant rain.  
There's no hope of sunshine, nothing to gain  
nothing to live for, no reason remains.

At the end I will have nothing to say.  
A rare state of thought  
no words will be adequate for what I have wrought.  
Burn all my papers, leave not a trace  
no photographs, no clothing, no shoes still in place.  
Read my life, if you must, to remember me by  
but don't shed a tear for what has to die.



## Make Time For Remembering

We live our time  
and then only our children remain.  
In each of them memories  
of love, and colour, and texture  
the softness and fragrance of petals  
the warmth in the hands of friends,  
cheeks kissed in greeting -  
all bound in the seed of a coming generation.  
Look for the colours that signal the Spring  
and think of me. See a flower  
and think of me, read a painting  
and read something of my many parts.  
I leave to you all the lines I have spoken  
all the roles I have been  
all the love I have given  
all the beauty I have seen.  
Water your memories well, they will blossom  
remember and the sun shines  
on those that have loved life  
all the seeds we have planted  
nourished with a mother's blood.

*read at the humanist funeral of Jose Sross, 1921-2006*

## On Death

At the moment of your death  
do not allow regret to cloud your thoughts.  
Die a Hero's death  
whatever the cause,  
don't waste a moment  
thinking of the world to come.

This life is precious,  
its end important  
for your friends and lovers  
for whom remembrance matters.

Live well, whilst breath remains  
but with your death strike hard the reins.

## **Reminiscence of a Fire in 1985**

All the books I have ever read  
lay scattered by the winds,  
charred and burned out hearts  
recognised like old friends  
as leaves of text flutter in the breeze.

An accidental pyre in the cold of Winter  
leaves behind the body of my childhood  
to become food for new Spring growth.

The love of books is a love of life  
no less to be mourned  
when lost. After the fire  
home comfort to destruction  
what remains will be purged  
by Nature's waiting furies.

## Sacrifice

It is a box of personal effects  
letters and worn-out photographs  
a pipe, a rabbits' foot and a bright-ribboned medal  
up for sale in the fleamarket  
It is vespers sung in the Abbots' Church  
when a chant becomes the passion  
it is the bitter taste in an empty mouth  
as the memory stirs and sweetens  
it is the cold raw touch of a Winter stone  
where flesh returns to earth  
and the cordite smoke and the slow decay  
of horse-flesh out in no-mans' land

*first published 2006 by Poetry Now in Eastern England Poets*

## **The Door**

Every door leads to a room.  
This door we shall all pass through  
with trepidation. The room is dark,  
filled with fear and mystery,  
our darkest secrets scattered  
to trip the unprepared. If we are bold  
we shall be unafraid of the dark  
and of our fears, not confident but calm  
as all our forefathers in turn  
take hands across the generations  
to lead us onward into the dark.  
There is no light to carry, no lamp to burn  
no pit of fire to navigate.  
Only the comfort of a life well lived  
and the love we had to give  
when we ourselves lived.

## The Dream of the Refugee

*On the night 1-2 July 1940 the 'Andorra Star' bound from the UK for Canada with about 700 interned Italians, was sunk by U-47 off Mallin Head. Most of those on board drowned.*

White sea plucks up the furniture  
in a boarding house in Kent,  
on a tossed and turning iron bed  
a sick old man laments.  
Old worn hands hold linen sheets  
like the reins of a white-backed mare  
white-haired waves wash the bed ashore  
in a seascape made of chairs.  
With ailing sight he trawls the sea  
one frail old hand in the water -  
searching tide-worn memories  
for a sight of his mermaid daughter.  
The current, swirling, rises up  
wound round the old man's chest  
the scream of steam in a boiling sea  
dies choking in his breast.  
Tonight the pain is still the same  
though sixty washed-out years  
have seen the washed-up father drowned  
in the river of his tears.  
The night, revolving, calms and stops  
full tide begins to turn.  
The shipwrecked waiter waiting  
on the beach, and all alone  
climbing over driftwood spars  
from wrecks that came before,  
staring deep in rock-tide pools  
for a trace of the Andorra Star.  
From England into exile  
from an old Italian town  
a wife, a child, and happiness  
all lost as The Star went down.

Glass bottles on the mantelpiece  
return from sunbaked sand,  
the beach becomes a room again  
the sea restored to land.  
What were the sails plucked in the wind  
that were the billowing clouds  
now clasped within white fingers  
white linen for a shroud.

## The Moment Of Reflection

We place our shoulder to the wheel  
and the world turns. Some push harder,  
some will fall - there is no thinking  
comprehends the reason in the world,  
no solid ground where we can build  
above the confines of a simple love  
that needs no explanation.

I do not cease to wonder  
at beauty in the smallest things  
because I cannot live beyond my time.

If we are brave we shall embrace  
both life and death as one  
reflected in each other  
and in the race we choose to run.

Raise your eyes and see the sky  
at sunrise and sunset.  
Listen to the thunder and the rain upon the roof  
feel the grass beneath your feet  
and find a solitary place  
on which to build your truth.

*read at the humanist funeral of Gary Brown 1958 – 2006*



## **The Roman Way**

Don't shed a tear  
when I am lain in earth.  
Never the Roman way  
a glass phial filled with tears,  
bury nothing when you bid farewell  
express your love in a joyful way.

Save your grief - keep your passions strong  
for the world before you, not the one that's past.

Read the Sunday papers cover to cover  
wind the clocks to keep time fresh  
don't tire the dog but renew the flowers  
with a scent to please the stream of visitors.  
Read the novel of a life well lived,  
and never a melodrama with too many a twist.



# A World of Love



## The Weight

How much do I love you  
when I give you such pain?  
As the seed in the desert  
loves the touch of the rain -  
greater than I love myself,  
more than I shall ever love  
though I should live forever.

I would that I had shown my love  
in ways you would have wished,  
to know that I was yours in love  
that you were all I wanted  
though I never knew my heart  
when it mattered most.

What is lost is sorely missed -  
regret hangs heaviest with consciousness.

*first published 2006 by Poetry Now in The Love Bug*

## The Language Of Film

I'm never quite sure  
if birds taking flight  
means he  
has reached orgasm  
or she.

Waves pounding the shore  
fit directly  
experience  
or so I once thought  
when as a youth  
I knew it all.

But look what she does  
as he reaches  
his hand  
touches hers  
and her eyes  
say it all.

## A Wedding Sonnet

We had been dancing in a starless night  
without a sky to raise us from our sleep,  
a silent waltz in borrowed fancy dress  
between our pleasures and a precipice

We had already dreamed a place to meet  
and recognised at our first touch a face  
we knew at once, and sparked like flints when struck  
then lit like tinder dried in Autumn winds

Now we'll bank up our fires in a black grate  
against each winter, watch as falling leaves  
reveal a blue horizon mapped in stars  
and wait for Spring to lap against our shore;

We have like sailors in a sheltered bay  
found solid ground on which to make our play.

*Written for my own wedding in 1994*





# A World Out Of Sync



## **klaatu barada nicto**

Copenhagen has ended.  
Sold for 100 pieces of silver, says Sudan  
and nobody claims a victory.  
Where is Gort when you need him,  
an indestructible robot policing the earth -  
God knows we need some discipline  
before the waters rise, and nations fall.

## Ecological Plea

Rise up, you waters of the deep  
and cleanse the earth of all that's gone  
these past few hundred years of progress  
of reinventing wooden wheels  
have given humans little more to clothe them  
than a thousand years of pre history.  
Another flood is what's needed  
no ark to interfere with nature's way  
no German myths explaining why  
the Northern races trace to Noah

## Learning To Mourn a Suicide

I've danced your mourning out  
within a paradise of memories,  
kept lit a starbright fire in the hearth  
in case you wandered naked home.  
Dreams of you  
spilled early from the dusk  
I watched the Seasons for a sign  
wished I could fall pregnant to the moon  
but dried and withered as Autumn emptied.  
By Spring I'd learned a way I could forget,  
tossed aside my grief in hollow promises  
made screaming on the twisting fairground ride,  
escaping from darkness in electric neon light.  
I broke the crockery and I sold your ring  
pretending dead relations left it me.  
I showed the world a face I never had  
kept still what struggled like a child to be free.  
Some secrets rest with me. I store them up  
a box Pandora would have opened, but not me  
sealed by your fall, slender fingers parted  
for your last goodbye.  
What's gone is gone  
no forgiveness needed, none required -  
your truths were not the same as mine  
those anxious weighty parcels at your drowning-  
your life has ended just as mine begins.

## Gone Fishing

You will never grow old for us, nor weaken with age  
In our hearts we will tenderly speak without rage  
as we drink to your memory,  
to the man whom we loved  
who has given us memories no-one else could.

There's a place at the table, a bed without sleep  
and a silence downstairs when the pub empties out  
as all of them must. There is peace in the garden  
at the end of the day, and nothing shall change as  
the seasons hold sway  
soon to be bursting into life.

Check you've a full tank of gas, that your shades are in place  
no ointment's needed. Just your tackle  
- a rod and some ground-bait will do  
you've gone fishing, that's all  
and we'll join you, one day, in the restaurant  
at the end of the universe. Dish of the day  
fish, of course  
line caught  
and always fresh.

*commissioned for a humanist funeral October 2006*

## **The Day Of Falling Leaves**

A once-living snow falls gently without wind  
to cover the forest floor. Food for the spring  
and a rest from hanging around all Summer.  
The day is bright as December balances  
between past storms and the coming cold,  
just like any other at the fulcrum of the world.

Soon Winter will arrive. The ice queen cometh  
her chariot silver, turning gold by Spring.  
The sky may fall one day, the waters rise  
until we drown, to slowly fall like once-living leaves  
to form a sediment. Geology will weigh us down  
as some of us form fossils to be found  
one day, most likely, not.

## No Future

There is no place called the future -  
It is tomorrow's present, and a child of the past.

When I was young, it was all curves and silver  
automation and leisure, progress and pleasure.  
The truth, as ever, is as human as we remain.  
It is the product of imagination,  
of constant endeavour  
and just like a heaven, we all dream of surviving  
as we struggle for life in a matrix of power,  
conflict and balance, isolation and community  
attempting the resolution of problems we inherit  
and then just pass on.

Sometimes acceptance, of fault being human,  
fallibility, and for heroes  
such a short space to live  
give a true sense of value, a sense of our worth  
at the last we are mortal, and bound to the earth.



## **The Stress Junkie**

Loosen the binding on your soul  
before it is too late.  
Do not sign your contract in blood  
nor drink from the parting cup  
as you climb the steps to the cockpit  
for your suicide mission.  
Change your destiny  
and learn to walk instead,  
roll in the snow outside the sauna of your life -  
let go the joystick,  
glide a moment -  
learn not to fight the empty air  
save your strength for higher causes  
fill your life with better pauses  
to reflect its beauty and its worth.  
Feel for the wind under your wings  
and the pull to earth that is not gravity.  
Weightlessness is red wine for the heart -  
check your whole route before you depart.

## Practising Suicide

For seven hours on the train  
i've read my books and looked again  
at stations grey with industry  
from Yorkshire Southward to the sea.

By train and coach and car and thumb  
my visits home, an asylum  
where I'd still be, and certified  
if I'd not practised suicide.

Like murderers the same is true  
felo da se return to view  
the scene of their impassioned crime -  
now I've come back to visit mine.

A tale of first-love vertigo  
doubled all those years ago  
by guilt and the discovery  
of wilful infidelity.

We have to die to live again  
these little deaths, their mask of pain  
a costume worn beneath the skin  
to hide the cry of birth within.

For seven hours on the train  
I've closed my eyes and dreamt again  
of all the places I have seen  
and all the changelings I have been.

# Closing Words



Poets live in the real world, and to lose sight of this is to reduce the reach and impact of poetry.

In these closing words, I wish only to lay a challenge to anyone that should read this far, and who feels that my style is not too dense for public consumption. If you would like to have me render into poetic form something important to you, contact me, and without fee I would be delighted to be useful. Send me a simple e-mail, in the first instance, and very quickly I will tell you how and if I can help.

If this should appear to be a generous offer on my part, think again. A poet is always on the search for new material, and as I do not travel as much in the world as once I did, this is a very good excuse for finding material by making it come to me.

Be sure of my discretion, and I would never publish something created for a private purpose without first having the consent of those for whom I have attempted the task of the poet.

When I return an e-mail to you, you will be able to gain access to my homepages where more examples of my poetry can be found. You will also find links to be able to view how I have used my poetry in the context of film, for example by viewing my short listed entry to the BBC world service Myworld competition.

My e-mail address is **worthingsp@ntlworld.com**

