

The Second Book

And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God... But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short...

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A Love-Letter

*from the mariner Ulysses
to his beloved lady-physician*

ES

That you're still, in a sense, a virgin,
Drink like *George Best* and speak like *Charles*
Spurgeon

Are all the grounds for love a soul
Like mine can bear and still stay whole.
Two wretched things have kept me up of late,
Which bruise an honest seaman's trust in fate:
The young & winsome aged, or killed by traffic;
A girl like you beguiled by all things sapphic.

Alas, I'm more like *Mars* than *Venus*,
But does that have to come between us?
I'm told I'm gifted with my fingers,
And, though I've not tried cunnalingus,
You're welcome to compare my lips
To any temptress' tastebud-tips,
And summon cries of joy, not laughter.
(I'd even like to cuddle after.)

Although I cannot make my chest hair
Go, and put a plump round breast there,
Nor bid my size 10 feet farewell,
The same goes for my love as well.
Salt-laced hearts do not find in rejection
Grounds for loss of ardour or dejection.
Time will only say, I told you so;
And yet it suits me more than you know
To play *Tiresias* to your virago.

Auden

Another Letter

*from the king Ptolemy Physcon
to his beloved daughter-wife*

TM

Byron

That you are, in your way, one of my daughters
Means that I can forgive you your prattle.
You've a rosebud like music over the waters
And more shapes than *Quetzalcoatl*.
Satan called, the Devil sent me:
A horse is led
But never made to dip his head:
When the cat's away the mice do plenty.

It's no good this outliving *Buddy Holly*,
Growing bald of brow & round of gut;
No more trips to WAKEFIELD on a jolly
With ½ a lb of coke & some old slut,
No more younger sisters' teenage friends.
But in your eyes
I see where resurrection lies,
And how it comes to pass and where it ends.

There's time enough to consider eternity.
Put hell on the back burner; heaven can wait.

The Greek pharaoh Ptolemy VIII (he was nicknamed Physcon or “the Sausage” on account of his obesity) was surely one of the most wicked and repulsive men ever to have lived. He seduced and later married a girl who had the dubious distinction of being both his niece and his stepdaughter, and later murdered his own son and sent the corpse, piece by piece, to the boy's mother, who was also another of his wives and the mother of the aforementioned niece-stepdaughter-wife. Yet the poet finds something compelling, and, indeed, quite human in this supremely cruel and lustful individual.

Quetzalcoatl was an Aztec deity who appeared at various times as a rattlesnake, a crow, the planet Venus and a duck.

The love of God and my children's paternity
Are truths too dearly-held to abrogate.
For now, forever, my appetite
Is fixed on thighs,
Waists, fingers, heartbeats, cheeks & eyes,
Those lips, both wrapped in cloth and in plain
sight.

The Orgy at Earls Crescent

also by Ptolemy Physcon

The orgy at EARLS CRESCENT
Was not as I had hoped,
Nor making love as pleasant
As when we first eloped.

Laurie Lee

Rosie & her cider
Once went straight to my head,
But now her quim's much wider
And *Peaches Geldof's* dead.

The threesome with your sister
Was not so sweet a sin
As drunken late-night Twister
On the school trip to KING'S LYNN.

Epithalamium

It's not that she reminds him of his mother ES

(Though since when could *Jocasta's* comeuppance
Ever dissuade him from off-limits tuppence?)

But the way they are with one another:

In the wilderness of this world, which no man understands, Bunyan
She cupped a little light for him between her hands.

An Encomium

*in praise of the now much missed
The Rev Christopher Betson
once Vicar of St Mary's Tickhill*

ROME had her Caesars; Brandenburg, *Old Fritz*;
Now TICKHILL CHURCH can claim as squire & master
The crimson-haired clergyman we love to bits,
Our shield & broadsword, friend & pastor;
And should some peril loom, or grave disaster,
The parish wardens need no goads nor whips;
He's all over it like a fat girl on chips.

His preaching brings to mind those fearsome creatures,
Jan Sobieski and the Prussian Duke.
His writings rank beside the best-loved teachers':
Paul of Tarsus who – now please don't puke –
Might have had a soft spot for *St Luke*,
John Divine to whose strange works men soften
Once they're told he snorted coke quite often.

Should your parish lack a priest or vicar
And ours go southward in a puff of smoke,
I'd recommend you fill the absence quicker
Than a scot spends coin or gets a joke.
With whom? The ginger *Spurgeon*, God's top bloke:
Better than bovril, sturdier than a stetson,
The incomparably reverend *Chris Betson*.

Friedrich II, King of Prussia and Elector of Brandenburg (known to we English as "Frederick the Great") was nicknamed "Der Alte Fritz" by his people, i.e. Old Fritz.

Jan III, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania was named "Saviour of Christendom" by the Pope for lifting the siege of Vienna. Albert, Duke of Prussia was the first Protestant head of state.

Vlissingen

It was in an old dutch seaport,
 Pocked with dieso and caul,
And five loaves & two fishes
 One side of a warehouse wall.

In late september
 And summer going,
The waves past the breakwater
 To-ing & fro-ing.

The railings rusted,
 Weathervanes weathered away.
O my love, my fair one,
 I wish I could stay.

ER

Operation TELIC

I wake, earlier than I would like, while the day
Still lies in darkness – this dark december,
This snowless, christmasless mid-winter.
I work down at the base: purchasing, planning –
Tidal atlases, spreadsheets & tables
Of figures – declarations & forms
To be filled in, signatures gleaned – meetings
Sat through & stared through & endured. Then
I drive back down the same slick sodium-lit roads
Towards a house unheated & unknown.
I drive & drive but cannot help my dreaming:
Those febrile bodies, precious as us to themselves,
Cities & villages, 40 million souls. But death
Plants his boot-heels in the footsteps of *Abraham*.
Death tightens his cowl in the shadow of the ziggurats.

The same stars are burning overhead
As *Algazel* plotted in the House of Wisdom,
The selfsame lustrous moon – although
Death sips his wine from skulls of Al Anfal.
Death wipes his swords in the waters of the TIGRIS.
The axeman stands at the root of the oak.
Blood to be shed cries out from the ground – and yet
The skies are silent. Time alone will tell
Who was right and if it was all worth it.

Operation TELIC was the United Kingdom's contribution to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The operation was planned over the preceding Christmas, so that the planners joked bitterly that TELIC stood for "Tell Everyone Leave Is Cancelled". The poet imagines himself as one of the more lugubrious of said planners.

An Elegy for J R H Stoke

*whose ashes were buried
on Blacklyne Common*

I

When I came to see you last october
It felt like it was still summer. We drank
Warm guinness in a pub in HOLLY BANK.
You talked about growing old, the **Advocate**,
That year's lachrymose undergraduate,
How you'd gentle & disrobe her.

II

Later, we finished our drinks and *Bernie*
Drove us back into town. The rosy streetlights
Recalled lost prep school days and winter nights
Beneath a restless wood, and all the while
Your lapis blue big eyes & ½ a smile,
Like some ½ sweet lines of *Ivor Gurney*.

THE EPITAPH

*Earth, receive these ashes for safekeeping,
And him, like the BLACK LYNE flowing:
Always running downstream but never going,
With strakes & siltbanks & silver overlaid,
The handsomest of all beds ever made
For man or beast, but not for sleeping.*

Lucifer in Starlight

I've drank with darkness, shaken hands with sorrow,
Mapped out both hell's hinterland & borough,
Eavesdropped on anguish, glimpsed through grief's
 gilt lock:
Only the pain itself is too bright to look.

END OF THE SECOND BOOK