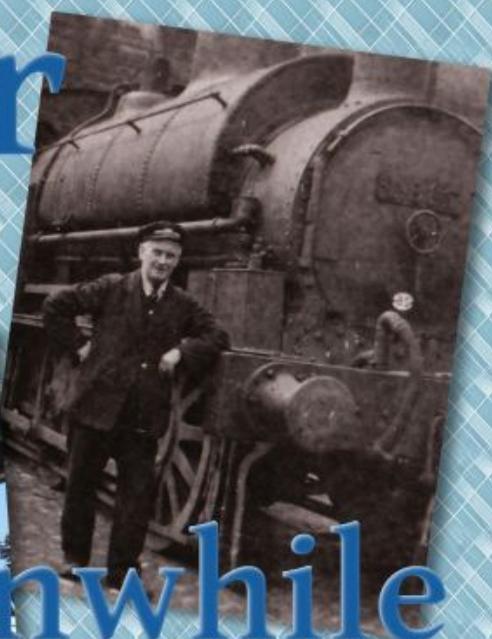


Peter FOX



Meanwhile back on the planet



Works 2012 – 2014

Meanwhile back on the planet

Works 2012 – 2014

A varied collection of 18
non-novel prose works
from flash-fiction to
eight thousand word
short stories with
thirty poems plus
interesting semi-
poetical experiments



Preview

The full version of [Meanwhile Back on the Planet](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 143 pages
- PDF A5

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This book consists of short stories, long stories, poems, poemish stuff and essays on writing. Here are some extracts

Meanwhile back on the planet

Short stories and poems
2012 – 2014

Peter Fox

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2nd edition. (New version of *Knight alone*) 25 Jan 2015
Reformatted 9 Oct 17

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INTRODUCTION

You must be really proud of it, it's a lovely planet you've got; but I'm not sure I'd want to live here.

My novel writing took a new turn at the end of 2012 when I decided to give Minda a rest after five books. 2013 started with a murder-mystery set on the Essex marshes. This was excruciating as I didn't know the plot until the last few pages but fun to develop the characters and atmosphere while waiting for the mystery to twist. Then onwards and downwards to science fiction which started in an underground survival colony on earth after some apocalypse. Learning from the previous book I wrote out lots of themes and possible plot developments... The story developed itself instead! As well as odd sex which I wrote for fun and trying to create atmospheres of bewilderment and power struggles I hit upon a the nature of leadership. *A weak leader is a good leader* is explored. I think it works very well. I don't know where the inspiration for the next 'see if we can make a time machine' novel set in the 1970s came from either. There is love together with horrible suspicions about the future. When that came to an end I sat at the keyboard, thought of a genre and started typing. Within a page I was in the world of 1920s gentlemen's clubs and weekend parties in the country with a whiff of crime. Within two pages my protagonist was a blackmailer, within five he was going to turn over a new leaf. So far (Dec 2014) it is practically complete for the time being at 240,000 words with the difficulty of trying to split it into two or three parts. My writing rate for novels is well over 1200 words per calendar day. At the same time as the current novel I've been writing a non-fiction book for gifted and talented children starting at 8 to 12 but taking them on ten years with amusements, ideas, ways of looking at things, being curious and organising results. This is at very first draft stage.

I need to relax and experiment so this collection of oddities is the result. I've had the pleasure of writing them and really enjoy reading them over, so I hope you will too.

SHORTS

Apple orchard

I like to sit in an orchard, but I'm glad I'm not a tree. An apple orchard is a place to be on your own but not a lonely place. It is a place to have fun but it isn't a funny place. Most of all it is memories of generations past, your generation passing.

In the spring the bee-skips send forth single-minded pollinators who dodge their way through the ranks of white trees then play amongst the flowers; unknown to them competing with the larger forces of April hail and May frosts. Through the summer the fruits grow without any help. Uniform hard green nuts turning to uniquely painted orbs. Now will the harvest make it to the barn and the cider press or will autumn's winds hurl the apples to rot amongst the grass? With any luck the picking gangs, chattering like sparrows, will burrow into the trees to bring out heavy pockets smelling of sweet and sour wax.

When trees get old and orchards neglected they still produce fruit but there's no harvest beyond what the birds and worms will have. Overgrown with grass tussocks, the once orderly and contained branches are now confused and crotchety. A place of wasps nests and rat-runs where the fox lies and the cat hunts.

The oldest apple tree in the most abandoned orchard will remember better days when its trunk wasn't surrounded by yellow wet grass, and the pruner would come each winter to smarten it up and slap on warm pungent Stockholm Tar where beetles and birds had slashed its bark. An apple tree has no choice how it gets old, who it's neighbours are, how it's looked after. I like to sit in an orchard, but I'm glad I'm not a tree.

Talking to Jessica

I approached this as an exercise in Alan Bennet-ism, but for me the reward turned-out to be the iceberg of which you can only see the socks.

I'd just finished my freshening walk along the prom watching the lean, end of season, pensioners braving the waves, and the other pensioners sheltering in the lee of the boarded-up ice-cream huts, and was on my way to get a few bits in the town when the commissionaire from the Apollo called out as I went by. Eric's got all the poise of an undertaker but they give him a worn plum-coloured suit and cap that makes him look like a lost tram driver. Anyway he asked if I was going to be patronising his establishment this week. I said no. Well I don't go much to the cinema nowadays. Too much sex and violence. Too much violence anyway. Mind you it's educational. My Harry was not one for all that jumping off the wardrobe stuff. Did you know the definition of a gentleman is he always removes his socks? Well I didn't like to hurt his feelings, he's got a wooden leg you know, and anyway he gets bored, so I said "I don't think I should Eric. I've swallowed a seagull."

Well you know how Edna Braithwaite was always inviting us for her salmon paste teas with one round between us and I've seen more fish left in a cat's bowl than was in those sandwiches. So I invented excuses, the doctors, measles, an invitation to the opening of the new Laundromat and so on. You must think me a terrible liar but I had to draw the line with Edna after the time she showed off her new hostess trolley with four plates, and doilies, cake tongs to place the sandwiches on the doilies. There was enough for two small triangles each! I said "Oh. Is this a special occasion? It's like the feeding of the five thousand." She paid no attention as she'd brought a lemon squeezer from one of those catalogues of useless gadgets for getting fluff from behind radiators, batteries not included. You know the sort of thing. Matching set of four coffee cup holders with views of Ben Nevis, say goodbye to rogue carrier bags with a three-in-one bag-tidy. She wasn't very pleased as whilst carefully cutting a segment out of a lemon she'd nicked her finger and it stung like... She nearly swore but held up the plastered finger for evidence. To annoy her I said "Shouldn't you get a dock leaf?" then the others joined in with baking powder, rubbing an old penny on it so I'm glad I made that silly remark to liven the otherwise dreary event. Anyhow it was her toy and so she asked each of us if we'd like her to squeeze some for us onto the sandwiches. We could hardly refuse. What a feast. No wonder her husband died. I saw him at the end, thin but bearing up. I think the hope in his eyes was there might be chocolate biscuits in heaven. So now I make up silly excuses all the time. Our teacher Miss Collard always said my imagination would get me into trouble.

Eric said "Are you alright Jessie? I mean a seagull? A whole one?"

"What did you think Eric? I've got a hearty appetite after my constitutional perambulation."

"How did it happen?"

"Well there was this horrible four year-old child screaming and complaining at the bus stop. One hand held firmly by his mother and the other alternately hitting her and picking snot. So I opened my mouth to make my rudest face at the nasty thing - when in flew this seagull."

"Would you like a mint humbug?" He offered me one in his gloved hand. I could hardly refuse.

"You're a real gentleman Eric." If it wasn't for his wooden leg I might have mentioned socks. He'd had a good job with the council looking after all the coloured lights along the prom until his accident. Before that he'd run away to sea and got a tattoo in every port. Everyone in our street knew Eric in the 50s 'cos he sold the evening newspapers to the men going home from work and he was saving-up to be a jet pilot. My mum told me to leave him alone as he wore thick glasses and could never be a pilot. I felt sorry for him, and maybe his older brother would let me ride on his motorbike. After unwrapping the sweet and the first rattling round the mouth I said "First a seagull and now a humbug."

"You're not the first Jessie. Oh no." I wondered what he meant for a moment. I felt a little shiver. "Thursday? Oh no. Tell a lie it was Wednesday, the manager of Barclays swallowed a frog."

"What happened?"

"He croaked!"

"You bastard! If I wasn't enjoying this mint I'd give it back. That was awful." We both smiled. Then I nearly lost the sweet with little laughter.

"How do you know it was a seagull not a pigeon Jessie?"

"I know the difference between a pigeon and a seagull."

"Well between you and me Jessie - and not another living soul - it could be a Snowy Owl. Very weird creatures. Turn their heads right round." The brisk September afternoon was lifting my spirits and blowing the cobwebs away. I made a burp with all the actions I could think of and really did lose the sweet. I bent to pick it up from the Terrazzo steps of the cinema but Eric held my arm and stopped me. "Dear lady, your discomfort is understandable." He was smiling. "The management in their infinite wisdom have endowed me with many devices for the joint and several

maintenance of this temple of cinematic art. Wait here." He returned with one of those American gadgets of a broom and a dustpan on a stick. "You see. Just what the doctor ordered." In a couple of seconds the sticky sweet had been gobbled by his ancient but efficient dustpan on a stick. "Shouldn't you see a doctor Jessie?"

Ha! One of my favourites. "Doctor, doppelganger, dusky-maiden or Donald Duck but what good would that do? I want the doctor to see me."

He leant on his dustpan and brush. "Alright you win. You always were one for arguing."

"I've never argued in my life! What a suggestion. Anyway I believe in natural remedies. Given to us by mother nature."

"Oh yes. What's that?"

"Brandy... Three times a day."

On Thursday afternoons Eric goes to the Darby and Joan at the community centre. He says it's a bit boring but would I like to come along to liven it up. I said yes so long as we could have some medicine later. I must rush now as I've got to get a 3-in-1 sock-tidy.

LONGS

More work and rewriting goes into these. *Dear Mrs. Parker* and *Pushing string* were the result of bouts of flu which made routine novel writing tasteless. I really worked on the sense of place for these even though I've never been closer to New York than County Kerry. I'm not a fan of the gothic ghost story and wanted to do something different for a competition to stand out from the crowd. Perhaps *Ghost story* was too subtle as it isn't really spooky in a cobwebby way but for me it works as a story where the weirdness is logical and the creepiness sneaks-in without being obvious. Finally in *Atmospheric railway* I wanted to explore confined emotions in what to many people is an environment as alien as a spaceship and make them understandable. Although there are a lot of technicalities and some real places, railwaymen will have to excuse some artistic licence to make the story flow.

In all of these the people are 'made' by their environment. The recipe is put a person of a certain disposition in a specific environment and see what happens as you write.

FYI 'Interlocking' is the mechanism for controlling railroad junctions.

Dear Mrs Parker

In January 1923 Dorothy Parker made her first suicide attempt. She was twenty-nine and had nothing permanent to show but a failed marriage, a recent failed affair and the resulting legal but distressing abortion. She dressed smartly but lived in a shabby apartment, was lonely, drank heavily in heavy-drinking company but wasn't penniless. Her work and social life consisted of the New York clique of journalists, writers, columnists, actors, musicians and artists epitomised by the Algonquin Round Table. While many members were extremely supportive of each other, when at the table brutal character assassination and New Yorker toughness bred from noisy swearing and insults was the norm. Dorothy couldn't get enough of that excitement.

As soon as she was fit after slashing her wrists with a razorblade she returned to the Round Table like an asbestos moth. Pale blue ribbons gaily tied on her bandages showed killing yourself was just an eccentric whim not to be taken seriously. What would I have done if I'd been at the Algonquin that day? I like to think I'd have sent this note across.

Dear Mrs Parker,

I'm concerned for you and wish you better. I have an ear to listen with but not a shoulder to cry on. I want to pick you up but not to hug you in your sorrow. You do the despair and I'll do the hope. Meet me. Yours sincerely Merlin Smallbone, Smallbone, Fox and Peters, Advertising Agents, 101 Madison Avenue

Fox and Peters were fictional and my office was three clerks and myself. If was any smaller it would have been condemned by the Kennel Club. I could have expanded but preferred to pay bonuses to Effie, Hettie and Mabel and be on hand to be the hand they held when they could do a deal for themselves with a little hand-holding. I was only half-kidding when I said the agency would have to be renamed Mabeffenhet and Smallbone. They liked me because I liked them, had fun when we could and paid them well. I liked them because they looked after me as sisters inviting me to their parlour. After the War I found it easier to boast with the boys to forget than cuddle with the girls. Any one of them would have been happiness in my empty apartment but I couldn't have one without betraying the other two. The truce we arrived at was they would find me a nice girlfriend, I would love them with equal ruthlessness, and if I introduced one or other to somebody famous that was just chance.

The highlights of my income came from product endorsements from famous people. If Noël Coward endorsed shirts the initial deal meant dollars and shirts for everyone then came extra rewards like 'would he endorse cigarettes' for me and envy from

lesser stars for Noël. Then 'Hettie the harpy' would let the client know Noel needed a box of new shirts to be kept sweet, and I'd arrange to have a photographer outside his hotel to see the gift arriving and 'Mabel the mouse' would rattle-off the invoice for services rendered. Our mouse was more of a mongoose when it came to late-payers. My girls were getting to be business-women in their own right, New Yorkers who could punch like Dempsey. Mabel was now pitching half as much as me to existing clients simply by mentioning names then leaving the rest to me. Effie was officially the telephone clerk but really the mistress of the housekeeping, a maid of all work with an imagination bigger than the Statue of Liberty. Taking herself off on one of our domestic laundry, shoe-repair or food errands she'd come back with a lead to a new customer found by chatting in a queue. She'd answer the phone first and see if there was any fun to be had. When someone calling themselves H-G-Wells rang she asked if that was 'Aych as in Urbert and Gee as in gee nice to talk to you Mister Wells. Merl ain't in but he said there's a photo-opportunity for typewriters at Macy's to be had.' I knew how the girls liked to talk to the great ones so that was fine by me and I knew 'HG' liked women very much from the drunken confidences of the night before. A punched thumbs-up to Effie and that was another two-hundred in our account with the promise of more to come. I really must do something about our success.

Having been a mate of Alexander Woollcott's in France I was eligible for occasional visits to his Round Table. He was a man with an E-F-G-H-Igo. There was nobody in America with a worse writing style or a better opinion of it. At first it was barbed boorish bullying and silly jokes but soon the entertainment value of Bob Benchley, and of course the Venus fly trap of Dorothy Parker, attracted an interesting mix of performers, artists and writers. Harpo Marx was one of the early ones. I got on well with him, his eyes were always watching and teasing in the way of a university professor who gets students to make a wild attempt then with a twist of the eyebrows tosses it to the other students to answer. Dorothy did the same but there's a world of difference between Harpo's kindly encouragement and being tempted onto the butcher's slab by a coquette. He could be as droll or spitting-flinty as any New Yorker news-boy from the Lower East Side but was mostly a urbane college don deciding between a Rembrandt or Rubens to hang in his study. I was an advertising tradesman and knew my place but my private sideline of writing dressed-up documentary pieces using the name 'Dandy Kannik' about the behind-the-scenes life of the New York transport system was beginning to get noticed. It was something that had to be done, but rather me than they. Like the people I wrote about, I played my part and could be useful and might get a nod of grudging respect. Reviewing plays was more exciting for them, congenial and gave opportunities for name-dropping - dropping into acid-baths - than talking to stokers on the ferries or boys who worked in the post-room of City Hall. I knew where I could sell my work but kept quiet about how much it made

because it suited me to have everyone assume it was a pay-nothing vanity. I was often asked about my secret access to the fraternity of East-side carmen and Greek-quarter warfingers to which I claimed I'd been lost in the woods and raised by Miners. That was ample to deter the writers, actors and cartoonists but the artists and playwrights wanted me to take them to observe these strange creatures sweating in the firelight or peering into the dawn fog on the river. Harpo, bless him, knew the taste of dark-bread and work with beatings. The two of us had a bond that was kept secret at the Algonquin and perhaps for our future's would be best denied, but we shared underdog in our blood.

Although I'd seen the waiter hand her the message scribbled on the back of my business card she didn't look at me. After fifteen arid minutes I was about to sort of ask permission to get back to the office when a flapjack with cream was unexpectedly placed in front of me. Underneath the napkin was a curl of pale blue ribbon. My first instinct was to play the viper in the viper-pit and haughtily ignore her. After a few seconds of adjusting to the new equilibrium I was stable in my own world again. I smiled and nodded in her direction and she beckoned me over.

I have a rule, I don't know where I learned it, that when talking to someone sitting down crouch down to be on their level. Perhaps the war made me brutal. Perhaps the Table made me brutal. I said into her dark eyes hiding behind her fringe "Is this your funeral wake?"

"It might as well be."

"It had better not be."

"Have you come to view the body."

"I won't climb into your grave but if I stretch a hand down will you hold on?"

Her brunet flop-fringe covered one quarter of her face but the rest of her broke through the severe mascara and blood-red lipstick to plead patience while conflicting emotions were unknotted. "I'll call."

"I'll wait."

After returning to my food I had to eat it. Shell holes were round. They sported sculpted barbed wire with the bonus of unexpected unpleasantnesses to go with their general circus of the macabre excitement value. Mud, bits of boots and roots, buckles and bare bones of mangled men. While collecting my coat in the lobby I heard the

trap-trap-trap of a hurrying woman and her arm appeared through mine. She looked up to me so I bent my knees to come to her level. "When and where?" I asked.

"Your office in a while?"

"Come and meet us at four thirty."

"I was thinking six thirty."

"I'll be there until seven then. Not a minute later. Now you go and talk to Harpo about selling papers without shoes."

To my amazement she took this order without question. That was a good sign.

Back at the office I reported my morning's meetings and lunchtime surprise. In between calls the girls told me what I was doing this evening. My evenings were always vacant. Until thinking about Dorothy in the elevator it had never occurred to me that the girls might have empty evenings. She was obviously lonely with no shoulder to lean on. Perhaps she was on drugs as well as booze? Why was I a Samaritan? Never anything else. I really meant my offer of my eye to my brother Charles when I shot his out while we were playing Robin Hood.

My evening's free tickets were to *Pawnee Parade* which promised the intellectual stimulation of a blown fuse stretched over an hour and a half. The prize was about as interesting. 'Indian chicken steaks' whatever they were. The girls assured me that the chorus line was full of legs – just what the blue collar workers liked in their papers and who the client wanted to get at. 'Full of legs like turkeys' was my line. I kept that Algonquin thought to myself and promised the girls we'd have a meeting as business man and women together next week. I told them about Mrs Parker and what I'd written on my business card and what happened. I must be the worst boss ever.

Effie said "God help you Mer! She'll bite your head off! You know like those Playing Mantises."

"No? Something bad?"

"One kiss and she bites her partner's head off. And he still loves her."

"Screws her headless?"

"Yes. But I didn't like to say."

"She's a bitch but she needs my help. Slashing your wrists is bad."

Hettie said "Stop wasting your time Merl. Why chase a failure when we need you to pull yourself together. Don't go back to blaming yourself over Florence again. We gotta expand while we can."

Mabel said "Don't you get a man-friend who knows nothing as a partner. But most of all don't you dare get a woman-friend to boss us around."

"I want to help her not go to bed with. I must at least try."

« »

The girls left together at five in high spirits for a Friday night full of entertainment. Flappers! Good for them. Hettie had arranged for invitations to a pre-release viewing of *Down to the Sea in Ships* with their latest idol Clara Bow. They were film-mad, dance-mad but as Hettie said "You do the toffs and we'll stretch our legs with the rest." I couldn't help put a coarse meaning on that. I'm sure she didn't mean to hurt me.

I was nervously watching the relays of the Harold Interlocking as they chattered like showers of falling shrapnel to referee the complex routing of the trains fighting to get into and out of Penn Station. Beside me war veteran 'Sparky' Nicky Noelquist poised with meter and probes in the cable festooned gloom. He watched over those racks like a mother-hen – mother? – Hospital matron? – Matron at Lenox Hill maternity ward. The office door opened, she was there, quite tiny and beautiful in the centre of a huge fur. Overwhelming Chypre perfume caught me out for a moment. The etiquette for one writer interrupting another at a typewriter is to let them finish. Whatever it was I'd been writing was yesterday's dreams. I didn't really know what to do but we were writers weren't we? I pulled the paper out of the typewriter and lined up another sheet.

I am an ear to listen not a shoulder to cry on.

Ha! That's what the relays sounded like. Safety messages typed in a hurry. She looked over my shoulder as writer's etiquette allowed. With disturbing closeness she reached across me and typed. There were a couple of swear words when the machine wasn't like the one she was used to. The back of her neck was stretched out from her fur collar enough to silence me with remorse of abstinence. When she stood up I saw

**You are you like the other BASTards?
or a quer? or liar?**

I wanted another glimpse of that white neck. I typed

(1)No (2)No (3)To myself.

Hungry? N Damn! ice perfume.

She squeezed in front to perch on my knees, battering the keys while I gently kept her safe by holding her tiny waist and gazing with realisation of regrets at her neck. She zipped the paper out, turned then thrust it at me demanding my understanding.

Empty not hungry.
My diet doesn't suit me.
What good is food to a woman
who has nobody to feed?

"That's shrapnel in my stomach Dorothy. The sort that spreads guts out on the ground beside you like a split sack. I promise not to cry on your shoulder if you won't cry on mine."

Later we left the office together hoping our partial confessions would be the first of a column. We arrived late to *Pawnee Parade*. In the theatrical business I was nothing more than a hoodlum but Dot was a boss. She glided into the foyer of the 'Olympia' with me on her arm and was so polite and understanding it was joy to watch. Like somebody taking twenty minutes to eat a stick of celery. I tried out my new Harpo impression. Slant questioning lips alternating with a tense smile while looking with raised eyebrows for happy answers. As I caught the first bits of this I developed it with cricked head when Dot needed a break from being fussed by dollar-an-hour staff. "I'm a liar" I whispered to Dot when we left after twenty minutes. She'd reviewed it before and I got a good deal from a desperate producer so why stay? I'd have to ask the girls if *Pawnee Parade* was a hit. I insisted on seeing the convalescing Mrs Parker got home early and safe. She fought against me but I used my talisman to subdue her. An East River ferry boat stoker, Spook Erstein, he must have been well over seventy, so sparse you could see every tendon in his body whether glistening in the red flare of the fire or playing the piano of the Salvation Army hostel like every note was a stitch in a holy firmament. One drunken night soon after I returned he gave me a talisman. It was a silver wire ring. 'Look inside that Merl! You see the 'O'? That's a woman's kiss and all a woman's love.' I didn't quite understand him then or now but it was too sincere a gift to ignore. From the doorway her apartment was dishevelled, battered by the noise of the El and contained two sulky dogs that at least had the decency to wag their tails for show but otherwise might as well have been floor mops. Before she could drag me into her lair I was spied from across the hallway. I recognised illustrator, sculptress,

SOMETHING ELSE

Before we get to the celestial cascading cornucopia of poetry I'm going to sneak in some poetical prose and other bits and bobs. (Free verse is called that because 'crap' was already taken. That might be slightly unfair as there is plenty of crap traditional poetry as well but no tree should die for the drivel presented by modern 'poets'.) I can rate prose or poetry as fit for purpose but intermediate stuff is hard to judge, so please take these as experiments that inspire you to do better.

The two 'norse' experiments work well even if they fail on technicalities. Notice how the 'punch' is at the start of the line when you've got plenty of air in your lungs. Perhaps that's the Achilles' heel of the genre; it's fine for deeds of valour in sagas but not so much softer emotions.

Short pieces lend themselves to having their words burnished or making a point with a particular structure. *Knight Alone* was too easy to write but people seem to praise it so here it is.

Norse experiments

Your moods are too much

When **N**orth is blowing
You **gnaw** my inside
Your **st**ormy cold wind
Destroys my home peace

Steady from the east
Strong I wish you were
Constant in my life
Not **instantly** new

From **w**est your buckets
Are **tossed** by your rage
With hard **s**pite possessed
And **s**pume launched unthought

Even **f**acing south
You **l**ace with fearsome
spears a zephyr's breeze
Speaking fitful heat.

My **m**ill needs your wind
But **w**ill be broken
By **cl**aws of lightning
or **s**qualls of anger

Disagreement

Silent looking
Sighing breathing
God's heaven knows
The venom grows

The frog he croaks
The bog it sucks
The fog it seeps
The dog he sleeps

The storm it breaks
The stable creaks
With stabs of pain
and streams of rain

My homestead heart
Your steady part
Have bested fear
My trusted dear

The row is done
So now the dawn
Our rage is gone
Our love is warm

These experiments in alliterative poetry in the old Norse / Old English style are technically spoiled by five beats and end of line rhymes, but you get the interesting idea .

Home front

On Monday I went out the front door. Angry posters commanded gas-masks and steel-salvage. The smoke-stained shell of the Co-op had only the sky behind its window holes. Bomb-cracked patches in the cobbles made dark puddles. Tramlines rusted waiting for bonfired cars. Gaunt baulks of timber, feet planted in the pavement, like giant bookends shored-up pretty wallpapered buildings.

On Tuesday I went out the back door. My neighbour asked if I would like anything from his allotment. There was the usual gossip at the bus stop. Yes I'd heard the news Mrs Jones, yes wasn't it terrible, yes some have it worse than us, yes we're lucky, yes we must keep cheerful, yes we must all do our bit, yes the army needed strong men. No I wouldn't be joining the Conservative's committee for victory. No I wouldn't be attending the Communist's solidarity with the Soviets campaign meeting. No I wouldn't be collecting scrap for the street.

On Wednesday the news items on the wireless fell like wet leaves being thrown by a statue in a bowler hat into a midnight pool. Some flashed in the moonlight, mocking the sunlight warmth of a real victory. Eton-voiced government ministers made believe that because stoicism was shared equally so was suffering, made believe that because their lives were continuing with a degree of normality so were ours.

On Thursday I went out to the front.

Autumn in Sussex

It's like a storm here. Being packed tight with the others on the boat was bad enough. Having spent all my life in the peaceful woods near Rouen I wasn't expecting to be bundled into a war. There's flocks of confused men and horses swaying backwards and forwards, twisting and falling. Shouting, screams, groans. Now it's my turn to go forward. I'm nocked, drawn, loosed. I'm flying over a hurricane-broken tangle of battle. Now I can see a target. A horseman turning his face towards me at exactly the right moment to catch him in the eye.

Knight alone

I'd slain the two-headed lion.
I'd drunk the witch's broth.
I'd climbed the spire of ice,
to get the ring of certain love
from the eagle's nest.

After being shriven
In the chapel of black granite
By the only monk
I was rowed across the lake
Towards the dark island
By the only monk

My heart foams in anticipation of my reward
from the golden-haired maiden
Who waits for me in silence
to take ownership of her island
To rule together like swans
With our necks entwined.

I see in the monk's face
Sad duty not rainbows.
The creaking of the thole-pins
is our only conversation.

The grating of the bows upon the pebbly shore
Brings meditation to an end.
Baptising feet and ankles in clear water
is my final pain.
Pushing the boat back out onto the misty mirror
is the point of no return.

Striding across the silent green stones
to the dry roots of pine trees
making sandy fortifications
against the chattering lake-waves.
I refuse to look back.

The castle here.
The lady here.
Is to be mine.
I have done the deeds.
To win her heart.
And be her lord.

After a brief prayer
as is my custom
I wash my face
and comb my hair.
Wishing the barber to attend me is no use now.
I shall have to ask forgiveness for my travel stains.

~~~Ankle-deep the mud sinks to suck  
Hip-high the thistles stab and prick  
Navel-high the nettles stand to attack  
Head-high the briars reach out to scratch

Ahead I see a castle of granite stone  
The roof has a few skeleton beams  
All the walls are ivy-grown

I've no other place to go.  
This dismal kingdom is my reward?  
What have I done to deserve decay?  
Am I abandoned like these stones.  
Do I simply give up my bones  
to a false fantasy of chivalry?

~~~

A week and then another pass.
I have nothing else to do
But survive and wait until my love returns
Whoever she may be.
Owl or mist or Robin asking worms of me.

I have fish to eat, wood to warm.
Shelter made dry by simple guile.
Stones and slates have been fixed here before
so a sturdy Knight has no cause to fear
As long as he learns from predecessors.

Who pre-deceased me?
Not my love!
Oh no!
Surely she will come
when I have proved myself steadfast.

Tomorrow I shall cut and trim a tree,
scale the tower,
erect it as a flagpole,
and at the top will nail my shield.

She will come.
I know she will come.

Part II

I'd slain the two-headed lion.
I'd drunk the witch's broth.
I'd taken the ring of certain love
from the eagle's nest.
I'd found the silent castle,
but amongst its ruined stones
no maiden waited there.

What might
what greed
what power
would I need
to conquer my sad fate?

Each pain had been a task
to face and then prevail.
But now the tables turned
in searing realisation.
I owned my castle and island
Lord and master of it all.
Yet there was no mistress waiting
For a worthy, claw-scarred knight.
it was some bitter gall.

Was this the cruel end I deserved?
No! There must be a way ahead.
What must I do to win the maid
whose legend pulled me here?

I'd walked harsh desert sand.
I'd stumped angry glacier ice.
I'd fought fanged tigers snarling loud
and been swept into gyres of brown flood.

POEMS

Autumn

Shall I walk with thee through the woods today?
Thou art quietly golden and not yet grey.
Solitude amongst summer's damp debris
need not be loneliness were you with me.
Bullet acorns crunch softly on the ground.
Horse chestnuts fling prickly grenades around.
Soon each tousled leaf will turn to honey
then fall tumbling on its final journey.
Chill snows are yet to ice tree limbs to break
and blanket sleep from which we will not wake.
Lip red, eye black, berries to be tasted.
Russet apple skin to be smelled and touched.
Come walk with me before the winter bites
and I will love you through our future nights.

Controversy

Word is a self-example word example
Are there more we can add to our sample?
Abbreviation is obviously too long
Palindrome and anagram do not belong
But there's at least one other we can find
Which is itself as it's defined
Pronunciation wars end in bitter contest, as
Controversy starts rows about how it's stressed.

Extract from Who Killed John Crowe

There's a hole in the mud where a boat came to rest
It's all that remains of the folk we loved best
They've gone down the river and out to the sea
There's a hole in our hearts where our friends used to be.
The seagulls are crying our loss all aloud
The banks of cold fog provide a pale shroud
The flap flap of halyards clang out their toll
As the incoming flood fills in the hole
Our stay here won't last, that we all know
Once the ebb tide is flowing we'll just have to go
Now when I too am gone, just think of me
Chasing sun-sparkles on a tropical sea

Circle and spiral contrasted

A perfect even balanced circle of delight.
Two lovers orbiting with promise to excite.
Their faces glowing with the other's reflection.
It's nice to see the perfection of affection.

Then the two saddest words of English that I know.
Asbestos Moth. To watch her spiral hurts me so.
Don't do it! Fly away! The flame will bring you pain.
But each night her tragic life-death replays again.

More

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.