

## Past and Present and People

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## PAST

### **Deep below**

I have told you before, of the trolls  
that live deep in the ravines,  
below the high pastures.  
There they bide their time while we shepherd our animals up to their summer grazing.  
The cows are happy with rockrose, salad burnet and wild thyme.  
More particular, the goats seek the gentian and alpine bistort amongst the mountain springs.  
Dormant below, behind the waterfalls, deep in the caves, the trolls sleep fitfully,  
dreaming of autumn meat, and a midwinter feast.

## **On the forest floor**

Beetles creep,  
perplexed yet helpless,  
Embedded amongst leaves and moist detritus,  
They seek some thing but I know not what.  
Clambering, climbing each monstrous twig, each vast leaf,  
Journeying into unknown lands, that stand inches apart.  
Antenna gently weaving, sensing, tasting, they secretly delight  
In the subtle rot of the forest floor.

## **Beneath green oaks**

In torpor deep, below a golden oak, I sleep in mud, 'neath root and sod.  
While overhead the sky wheels by, above an ever-lasting changing land.  
My acorns, found by hog and jays, have grown a wood  
of other mighty oaken graves, where slumber deep my noble band.  
Their swords and armour now just antique rust. The dragons that still live today.  
no longer threaten maidens fair, nor breathe their fire on castle walls.  
Now newer monsters borne of other fires, dance their deadly aerial ballets  
on battlefields that once were ours. Yet still both innocent with the guilty fall.  
I am of future and the past, and though once dead I linger still alive,  
spread out across a place of time and space. I feel the thrills of worldly thunder  
and shiver in my buried bones. They tell me that I must soon revive  
my slumbering band of knightly friends, to ride again in righteous wonder.  
Through our past that once was done, we seek a future not yet won.  
Would that we could change the one, and never know the other.

## **The melted heart**

When Jan'ry's chill brought glistening fields of ice  
and February laid down carpets deep of snow,  
a frozen man we made, a bower to our bliss,  
with carrot nose and buttons of the blackest coal.  
Oh, purest body, how we loved our toil.  
Our hearts besought you Snowman, will you stay?  
But, soon friends part; Then whither goes your soul  
when March's rays so kiss the snow away?  
Then dog, in loss, did wail and pant, and ate the carrot anyway.

## The Mismaze<sup>1</sup>

While fields submit to winter's white campaign,  
clouds kiss and bruise the hills with grey,  
the wind pins the sky to earth's window frame  
and I flee the town to climb my favourite way.  
Atop the hill the hard and frosty sward  
is cut by dark and winding lines. I ask what strange,  
mad maze is this, with only but a single path?  
No answer heard, just winter's wild refrain.  
You could not know whose feet would trace your craft.  
But now my steps between the frigid turf  
decode your labyrinthine cryptograph  
and bring me to the centre of your work.  
And though you're gone, I still remain, a mourner  
To your death below, in cold and tender water.

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<sup>1</sup> To the east of Winchester, on the top of St Catherine's Hill there is an area of narrow paths, exposing the chalk under the downland turf. This is the Winchester Mismaze, one of eight historic turf mazes still remaining in England. This is not a maze in the modern sense but a labyrinth, cut into the chalk, with no junctions or crossings. It is laid out in nine nested squares, similar to those used for the traditional game of Nine Men's Morris. Although mediaeval in design, its origins are obscure. A local legend suggests it was carved one summer in the 17th century by a boy from Winchester College who had been banished to the hill for bad behaviour. To occupy his time, he recalled a lesson on classical maze design and carried out the lonely task of laying out and cutting the maze. The story ends with the boy sadly drowning in the river below on the last day of the holidays. There is a similar maze at nearby Braemore House - perhaps the boy had seen this and used it as part of his inspiration.

## PRESENT

### A life sentence<sup>2</sup>

I had been warm and calm and comfortable, just one hour ago, cocooned in aluminium, unready for the world below. Across the divide, from LA to JFK, I had boozed and snoozed, wined and dined, fed and pandered to a splendid sprouting lassitude. Martinis dulled my thoughts until the thump of wheels upon the runway cleared my gin-fogged mind. I take a rental and drive north on Broadway where the billboards whisper secrets to me in the darkness of the night. Their persuasions and promises are written in compelling rainbow stripes - No PowerPoint needed, they pitch their deal in fonts of pink and neon, their USP a desperate intimacy amid the city's millions. I leave my rental in a lot and move toward the seductive sights where other raffish moths, dazed and confused, also flutter in the light. The hard, dry heat of day lingers in the cracks amongst the concrete sidewalks. Liberated, it drenches me as I walk from car to restaurant, from bar to hotel room and then on to some uncaring customer - a journey that will end only with the beginning of another. Drowning in my everlasting business trip, I swim between Hiltons, and dream of strawberries with cream and the scent of rain at Wimbledon.

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<sup>2</sup> The [American sentence](#), defined by Alan Ginsberg, is one that contains 17 syllables.

### **Pendine Sands<sup>3</sup>**

That sweet, lugubrious scent  
of hot rubber and even hotter oil,  
Sticky in my lung,  
Passion, then the speed  
Sweeps the scent away.

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<sup>3</sup> In 1922 the annual Welsh TT motor cycle event was held at Pendine Sands. The firm, flat surface of the beach was ideal as it made a track that was straighter and smoother than many major roads of the time. At the time, Motor Cycle magazine described the sands as "the finest natural speedway imaginable".

## **The sunken garden**

This garden is twice hidden.

Encircled by rhododendrons and camellias,

its paths are coffin deep below the main lawn.

We have left the big house, and walked across newly mown grass

to find a subtle path meandering through tangled larch and birch.

Their fractured fingers point urgently, reaching for the unseen light.

We ignore their imploring, preferring to move on amongst damp ferns, moss and decay

to find our secret place where we can no longer smell the greenness of the distant lawn

and our tongues can taste the moistness of the shadows.

There is no bird song here.

No summer sun falls on the grey sandstone flags under our feet.

We sit on an oak bench in the arbour.

It bends softly under our weight, its slats rough and weathered,

bruising your skin as you crumble the wood between finger and thumb.

A lonely carp floats on the surface of a pool, horizontal, its mouth open and eyes wide but dull.

I look into the dark browns and greens of the ferns - even they are not blameless.

Shadows shelter conspiracies as each leaf takes sides in our arguments.

Here too our thoughts are twice hidden,

once within ourselves and once buried in the rough brown soil.

## **The gull**

You think you are kind, tossing me a cold chip,  
For me to swoop on, as I soar the sea wall.  
Maybe you feel some guilt, for taking that cod  
From out of the sea, and yes, out of my beak.  
The batter looks so lovely and yellow and crisp.  
Stuff your face full of chips, I really don't care.  
Come hell or high water, the gulls will still soar,  
but somehow I doubt I'll be seeing you there.

**And is there honey still for tea?**

There are 25 times more cod in the North Sea  
Than rats on land in Britain.  
So much more pleasant to have fish and chips for tea  
Than chew on politicians.

## **What does the rainbow taste of?**

What does the rainbow taste of I wonder?  
Do the colours just fizz off your tongue?  
Do they smell like the rain when it thunders?  
And why shouldn't these colours be sung?

And why are the blues and the violets  
so far away from the reds?  
Would the people get up and riot  
if the green was a yellow instead?

So why is the world made the way that it is?  
Why can't it be made to our whim?  
Wouldn't the world be a much better place  
if we asked more questions of Him?

## **The Elms' Decree**

The September breeze bends the slender, elm trees.  
Tested, they rebel. We see them weep.  
We entered the cemented recess, where the beetles creep,  
perplexed yet helpless.  
Relentless, yet here they rest.  
We left them then, where they dwell.  
We seek the elms' secrets, where they swell.  
Gentle seeds sleep bedded deep, heedless  
even when held there where these shelters freeze.  
They never express resentment, never seek revenge.  
Yet beget reverence when sleep's sweet spell ends.

## **Conglomerations**

The pigeons bluster,  
bullying robins and sparrows,  
pretending their gang  
can call the shots until the starlings  
come and sweep them all away.

A rook, shoulders hunched,  
scans the lawn with hangdog eye,  
as morning's gentle rain  
caresses each glistening blade,  
summoning worms to teatime.

A pair of blackbirds  
proudly promenade their chick.  
Insolently they  
stare back, greedily gobbling  
husks from the feeder above.

The trembling finches  
seek asylum with cuckoos.  
Magpies cease mischief  
and sparrows mend their quarrels  
when murdering crows pass by.

## **How can you touch your nose with your tongue?**

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?  
How can you make just a one word pun?  
How can you make a potato crisp bounce?  
How can you make a leotard flounce?

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?  
How can you quiet a bell till it's rung?  
How can you bend a Jacob's cream cracker  
and how can you unpluck a harvested apple?

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?  
How can you cry before you are stung?  
Why can't you laugh when you tickle yourself  
and how can you dance when you're up on the shelf?

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?  
How can you catch a hare with a drum ?  
How can you smile when you bite on a lemon  
and how can you hide a secret unspoken.

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?  
How can the old become once again young?  
How can you keep two magnets apart  
and how can you put back the laugh in my heart?

# PEOPLE

## Things

I once loved many things.  
Wooden bricks, and chews,  
a comforter in baby blue,  
nipples to suckle and  
breasts to nuzzle.  
Carpet seas to sail  
before I could toddle.  
Each day an adventure  
and the warmth of a cuddle  
I loved leaves in the garden  
and the worms and the snails.  
The blackbird's song and  
the red robin's coat tails.  
I loved the walk to the school,  
through the row of chestnut trees,  
and the cool brown gloss  
of conkers gathered with glee.  
I loved the wrapping at Xmas,  
the baubles, bells and lights,  
and marzipan icing  
and the gift of a bike.  
But now that I'm old  
I have discarded these things,  
and my only desire,  
is to once more begin.

## **That wasn't all she saw**

She sees the Mongols on their monstrous rampage -  
a firestorm of blood through the streets of Beijing.  
She tastes the wounds as the arrows bite deep  
in soft French flesh as they fall at Agincourt.  
Her chest throbs to the thunder as the cannons proudly speak  
from the English oak castles in Aboukir Bay.  
She chokes on the taste of the musket's soft smoke,  
standing shoulder to shoulder with the Emperor's guard.  
She hears the sharp crack of the ricochet above  
as the Eagle is crushed under Wellington boot.  
Entrenched then, her feet feel the hard bones beneath  
as she wallows in the mud of Flanders' foreign fields.

She cries out - speechless and silent;  
unable to voice her despair for her fallen friends.  
All this she saw on the library shelves.

## **The fruit of life**

I like apples .  
Their cold, firm, sumptuous flesh  
Golden Delicious  
Aptly named.

I love pears.  
How they yield in your mouth as you bite the crisp skin  
and the sweet juices run down your chin,  
from the secrets within.

I love the bag of cherries;  
So bitter, sweet and sour,  
stoning my mouth with a reddening frown.

But bananas are so sad, as they squish in my mouth.  
There have been so many banana skins, all through my life

## **A Eutectic Entanglement**

Peter wants to kiss Charlotte.

Peter wants to move in with Charlotte.

Charlotte needs a flatmate to help pay her rent.

Charlotte does not like coming home to her empty flat.

Peter holds Charlotte's hand when they go to the cinema.

Peter asks Charlotte if she is lonely.

Charlotte says she does not know if she is lonely.

Charlotte takes Peter to the park and they feed the ducks.

Peter throws breadcrumbs while Charlotte just watches.

Peter asks Charlotte if he can cook her supper that night.

Charlotte does not like fish, but Peter cooks her fishcakes.

Charlotte wonders if ducks would like fishcakes.

Peter kisses the soft dimple at the base of Charlotte's neck.

Peter licks the fat flesh at the base of Charlotte's thumb.

Charlotte says it tickles when Peter nibbles her ear lobe.

Charlotte says yes, yes, yes but she wishes she had not.

Peter meets Charlotte in the coffee shop later that week.

Charlotte tells Peter, she has got a promotion.

Charlotte tells Peter she has bought a chinchilla.

Peter and Charlotte both walk home alone.

## **The Lady**

One summer day, my lover and I  
walked hand in hand, around Hampton Court.  
We came to the maze and entered within  
following no plan, just steps without thought.

Our path was ushered by cool laurel walls,  
our voices were silent, but our minds were entwined.  
At each branch in the path, with arm around waist,  
we chose as if one and walked as if blind.

We came to a clearing and sat on a bench.  
My head on his shoulder, we dozed in the heat.  
Did we dream that we heard a murmured exchange,  
as a couple appeared and stood by our seat?

The lady wore pearls on fine gold brocade  
while the man had a doublet with rapier at his waist.  
'My sweetest Jane, you must no longer delay'  
and with the palest of cheeks, she accepted his embrace.

The breeze chilled my skin as the couple turned away  
and faded from sight into corridors of green.  
I looked to my love, and asked him to say  
if he shared my dismay at all that we had seen.

As he kissed away the tears that ran down my cheek  
my heart ran wild like a young girl betrayed.  
Then his lips softly touched the nape of my neck  
with the loving caress of the executioner's blade.

Often I think of the events of that day,  
and I hold my love tight in a desperate embrace.  
And though we returned many times to the maze  
our steps never found the path to that place.

## **The girl in the blue costume**

Blue. So many blues.  
That's what he remembered.  
Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky  
that quickly deepened into ultramarine  
as dusk fell across the woodland valley between the moorland hills,  
nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air  
as they bathed in the valley stream,  
washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume of horse from their bodies.  
No, it was the deep azure of her costume and the silvery cobalt shadow of her hair.  
It was the dark cherry blue of the bruise on her thigh  
where she had cantered under an unseen bough.  
And the cornflower blue of her irises,  
with their little flecks of steely blue determination -  
these prizes he held fast in his memory.  
These, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen,  
flashing and flaunting their blues and purples as they swooped and dipped over the water.  
Now, so many years later, the viridian and emerald greens,  
the burnt umbers and siennas have all faded into distant greys -  
but still the blue remains.

## **A faithful friend**

I only popped round for a cup of tea  
but you were no longer there.  
I knew you were going soon,  
but I had not thought to be prepared.  
Even though we knew that day would come,  
Still, I was surprised that you had gone,  
Your dog had sat watching by your side  
a trusting guard, puzzled by the lonely night.  
But now, his duty half-forgotten,  
he looked accusingly at me.  
His dinner bowl lay empty  
filled to its brim with memory.