

GOING HOME

It isn't there, the big wheel at the pit head.
They changed its name, the lane up to the school.
It just fell down, the Methodist tin chapel.
What was is gone, and change is now the rule.

They closed them down, the yards along the River.
They went for scrap, the cranes that held the sky.
It's quiet now, where noise went on forever,
Leaving skilled men to curse and wonder why.

They've gone, the kids you used to play with.
They took with them their lives and memories.
Like you, they left their hopes and daft ambitions
Behind, and faced the cold realities.

She isn't there, the girl beside the bus stop.
Perhaps she got fed-up, or her bus came.
Or did she just grow old enough to see it,
That you and Dick and Harry were the same.

He got his cards, the mate you used to work with.
They said he wasn't needed any more,
And when he felt he truly was redundant,
He left, accepting what we all foresaw.

It isn't there, the house, the street, the township.
Forget about the past, who else would care?
You've been away too long to find the answers.
Before you start, you know it isn't there.

EULOGY FOR A NOBODY.

December, but they had no heating on,
Nor was there anyone to play
The organ for the tuneless hymns
We sang. The service petered out,
Then everyone just seemed to drift away.

Some of us trooped back down through the churchyard,
Out to the hearse and one posh car
For family, followed by his mates
Crammed in an ancient mini-bus,
Minds focused on pints lined up on the bar.

But there was something sticking in my throat.
The sermon had been one dead loss,
Mealy-mouthed garbage off the shelf,
Smooth, Brylcream gloss delivered by
A dog-collar who didn't give a toss.

Why didn't one of us stand up and tell
Them all about the things he'd done?
Like when he won the Christmas draw,
Or when he made the highest break
And then sloped off to pawn the cup he'd won.

The fact he'd hardly had a day off work;
That smashing goal he scored at school;
The day he spewed up on the coach;
The song he sang on New Year's Eve,
When we'd join in and he would play the fool.

If only I had had the guts to speak,
We could have given honest thanks
For his one honest quality.
Which was - that he was one of us.
Then you'd have heard real singing from our ranks:
"Geordie lad, bonny lad,
Nivver nee good, nivver real bad,
Nivver nowt special, ordnery bloke,
Nivver nee different, aalways stone broke.
Nivver had nowt but work, beer and bed,
Nivver took notice of owt that ye said.
Nivver mind Geordie, ye'll hev nee mair strife,
And thanks - for just livin' an ordnery life."

VALENTINE FOR A BONNY LASS

If I lived in a castle tall,
And had a servant at my gate,
Was lord and master over all,
And supped from off a golden plate,
Possessed all knowledge now possessed,
And skill to make great beauty live,
Was loved and honoured and blessed,
If happiness were mine to give,
I'd give it all, your heart to move,
And ask for just one smile my love.

(Any impoverished Geordie who can't afford an expensive fancy card for his sweetheart is permitted to pass this poem off as his own work on St.Valentine's Day.)

OF OLD ROMANCE

He thinks about the girl most days, although
He knows he should have packed old dreams away,
And yet he hopes she cares, as he does still,
Now that he understands she chose to stay
Close to a destiny she could fulfil.

She chose the one who'd be reliable,
The one who would work steady in his trade,
The one who'd build a home for his new wife,
And be content to keep the home he'd made,
And never want to change their secure life.

She looked through him and saw a wanderer,
Not altogether lost, whom she might save,
If she could hold a youth's raw energy.
But why take such a risk when she could have
The thing she dearly wished, security.

Choices made long ago: should he feel sad,
Or glad he lost a game he never played?
A paradox, though distant, never dim.
He starts with anger at the choice he made,
To leave because she was too good for him,

And ends with guilty feelings of content,
Because, should she remember him at all,
It would be as the boy that she knew then.
She could not close her mind up with a wall,
To block temptation to compare again,

The two who begged her hand so long ago:
The spirit of a young, strong, ardent lad,
Versus reality, an ageing man.
A man she has been with through good and bad,
And who has loved her since their bond began.

Yet, what love can withstand the gnaw of time,
Whose passing gives the dream a warmer glow,
And dull reality a duller face?
Which would he choose if he could join her now:
The thrill and challenge of a new, old love;

Or priceless memories kept safe, in place?

WINDY NOOK

So quiet here in darkness, standing high
Above Tyne's silent yards, searching to trace
Crane silhouettes against the sky
And sensing vastness in the depths of space.

A fine rain settles on the roofs below,
Where town shuts out the night with curtains drawn,
And only lines of street lights glow
To map odd fragments of its skeleton.

Night's creatures spin and swirl, drawing my eye
From town's decay to catch their circling flight
Into a spangled velvet sky
To consummate and celebrate the night,

Knowing that soon our darkness must give way
To grey dawn infiltrating to embrace
The bleak reality of day,
Denying us the mystery of space.

A mystery that is an endless rain
Of energy attempting to disperse,
Held fast in the unyielding frame
Of time, the boundary of Universe.

A mystery that tempts my aching mind
To climb beyond these streets where I took form,
Beyond the thinking of my kind,
To follow instinct with the rising swarm.

HIP! HIP! HOO-BLOODY-RAH!

Who rallied the regiment's scattered ranks,
Blinded by sweat and smoke?
The Gatling jammed, the Colonel dead,
Lost in a square that broke.
We'll never know who raised the cry
"Play up and play the game!"
But we can guess the social class
From which the idiot came.

The true blue aristocracy
All sound the snotty same!

Who was it made the Empire great,
Britannia rule the waves,
Sailed mighty ships to foreign shores,
To fill their holds with slaves?
Who won monopolies in trade
By bribery and war,
Then shipped home to their grand estates
The loot they'd murdered for?

The true blue aristocracy,
And they came back for more!

Who was it held the status quo,
Protected Church and Crown?
At Tolpuddle and Peterloo,
Who knocked the upstart down?
Who fought to save the monarchy,
Kept the Old Order true?
And when reformers threatened,
Who ran the poor sods through?

The true blue aristocracy,
The Epper Clarss, thet's whoo!

Who will protect our foreign trade
Now that the Empire's gone?
We can't just send a battleship,
That sort of thing's not done.
Skilled diplomats are needed now
To keep the plebs in line.
What kind of breeding can produce
That sort of cunning swine?

The true blue aristocracy,
Those bastards will do fine!

Who can resist their cultured charm,
So debonair and gay,
The polished manners that enhance
The most select soirée,
The modulated voice that gives
That certain *ambiance*?
Just never turn your back on them,
If given half a chance,

The true blue aristocracy
Will steal your underpants!

How can they still hang on to power
By pulling family cords?
They hold no posts in government;
They've lost the House of Lords.
Yet they still wield their patronage
Where privilege holds sway,
And those who wish to join their club
Will have a price to pay.

The true blue aristocracy,
Those pillars of hypocrisy,
Will always thwart democracy
And find a way to stay.

A poem written in sincere gratitude for our wonderful National Health Service.

BACK THEN

He suffered rotten with *the pains*
But saw it as a part of life
For men, and never did complain.
Nor did his poor long-suffering wife,
Who had *the sickness* off and on
But tried to cope, as women will,
And cared for their ungrateful son,
Who hated them for being ill,
Not knowing the slump years they'd seen,
Not having had ambitions killed
By poverty, as theirs had been.

The doctor was a last resort.
They always got *the bottle* there,
But not the alcoholic sort,
No way could they afford such fare.
No, they would get *the bottle*, red
Or, failing that, *the bottle*, white.
The one to get you out of bed,
The other one to keep you right.
"There is no ailment, to be sure,"
(Or so our learned doctor said)
"*The bottle* (red or white) won't cure."

That's how it was for 'unemployed',
No cash to pay a doctor's bill,
No hope of work, respect destroyed,
The penalty for being ill.
And what a help their son was then.
He didn't mean to be unkind,
Cajoling them to try again.
Not that they ever seemed to mind
When he denied them sympathy.
They always seemed so damned resigned;
At least, back then, that's how it seemed to be.

DOPPELGANGER

"Change? Any change, mate?"
Instinctively my hand moves to find coins,
But change for what? The question is half asked
Before I look toward the voice
And understand, too late.

A tangle of wool hat and wispy hairs,
Sand stubble on receding chin,
Pale eyes, deep-set in sallow skin,
But with a twinkle still,
And ready grin when 50p. appears.

I pass the coin, although I think it strange
That he should choose this street,
In this dull Tyneside town,
On this bleak drizzle afternoon,
To seek the daunting challenges of change.

"Thanks, mate, Ah've had a bloody awful day.
Ah just this minute pulled me hanky oot
And lost the tenner note Ah'd wrapped inside."
I smile my finest sympathetic smile.
"A crisp new tenner, must've blew away."

We stare down at bare paving stone,
In order to confirm reality.
There is no crisp new note, no fairy gold,
But, in our mime, we choose respective roles:
The streetwise loser and the well-heeled drone.

Why feed me with this crazy fantasy?
Why bother when he's got my 50p.?
Perhaps he really did believe
That fate had cheated him of what was his,
Because, for him, that's how it had to be.

And why ten quid? Is that all he dare dream?
Or did this modest make-believe provide
Enough to give a man who didn't have,
And didn't ask for, much, somewhere to hide
The fragile remnants of his self-esteem?

Change? Any change, mate?
What kind of change would he now wish,
If wishes were within our gift?
Would it be sweeping, bold and radical,
To shake the firm foundations of the State?

Our eyes meet as I turn to walk away,
And I well understand what he would change.
Places with me, that's what he'd change.
And though I sense the fairness of his case,
I think I'll leave it for another day.

It used to be said that there was a Geordie on every ship afloat. Sadly, this is no longer true but as boys my brother and I were both determined to go to sea; he did, I stayed ashore. The following two poems concerning a love of the sea were written in memory of my brother Fred who died of cancer aged only 57years. To the end, he loved tales and talk of the sea and in these poems I have tried to speak with his voice.

OFF VALPARAISO

Sun shimmers on the swell off Valparaiso.
Salt crystals glint upon the drying deck,
That dips and rolls with every pirouette
The great bow makes into the foam flecked green.
The helmsman swings her into a fair wind,
And men, riding the motion of the ship,
Fly on bare, calloused feet across bleached plank
To swing up through rope rigging to the yards,
Where hardened fingers clutch at flapping sail,
And crack of canvas catching the wind's swirl,
Drowns the gulls' cry and shouts of men below.

All this I hear, smell, see from long ago.
Now old bones groan, shackled in time's dark hold;
Yet when I sense the sun across my face,
And feel the deck move under where I lie,
My spirits climb to join seafaring men
Up in the highest yards, where pitch and roll
Swing us together, as we stood before,
Strung out along a spar where we would ride
The sharp salt air, like soaring frigate birds,
And laugh into the bluest sky you've seen .
There in a cherished dream, off Valparaiso.

SEAFARER

When first I breathed the blown salt spray,
My boyhood sailed across the bay
To where ships in the offing lay.
I fell in love.

I felt the shingle neath my feet,
Ran in the surf's white-foaming sheet
And thrilled to hear her hiss retreat.
I met my love.

I longed to be in timeless space
Where clouds merge with her tranquil face,
And heard her call me to embrace
My one true love.

When I was old enough to sail,
I took ship on an endless trail
To find my dream, to win the grail,
A hope to love.

But when I'd sailed my seventh sea
And found she still eluded me,
I knew that she would always be
A dream to love.

I've seen her drifting grey, green, blue;
Watched dawn's streaked scarlet breaking through
And gentle rose of evening hue:
The lights I love.

I've heard the mewing seagulls' cries,
The warm southeaster's gentle sighs,
The flap of sail when fresh winds rise:
The sounds I love.

I've felt spray flying from wave crests
When oars dip deep and our bow breasts
The rising swell, then falls to rest:
The thrills I love.

I've found true peace on windless days,
Beneath the blanket calm she lays
To lure me with her siren ways:
The peace I love.

I've known the terror of her storm,
The pride of sailing out alone,
The wanderer's joy returning home:
The home I love

But I'll not linger long ashore,
I'll sail in search of dreams once more
And find the life I've found before:
The life I love.

The following two poems concern the principal Tyneside regiment, The Northumberland Fusiliers, in the First World War. 'Somme 1977' was written in that year during a visit to my uncle Jack's grave near Thiepval. Jack volunteered for service in the Tyneside Scottish Battalion of the Fusiliers when only 17 years old. He was killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in the attack on the village of La Boisselle. The attack failed and eight out of every ten men were killed or seriously wounded. The poem takes up the disturbing words of one of the survivors recorded in the Battalion Diaries: "We tried, just didn't make it. Sorry sir."

SOMME 1977

Dear Jack,

It took us more than eighty years
To make it to Thiepval and your grave,
To see your stone and mark it with our tears
For a lost uncle we had never known,
Who died for telling lies about his age.
This year you would have had that telegram
To mark your century, if only you had grown
To make the man you promised to become,
You would have waved it like some honoured sage
At my grandchildren, and perhaps your own.

Your generation may have passed away,
But they will live in memory, always.
Stories about you from your kin will stay
With us to be our children's heritage.
And rest assured, we'll do our best to show
Them who you were, and what you did, and why.
We'll tell them how you wanted what was true
And decent to survive, for all of us.
But more than that, I want to let them know
How you were loved by all those close to you.

It seems so weak that we can only say
We're sorry that we let you and your pals
Down so: not that we forgot to pray
For you and all those who did not come back.
No, we remember when we pray aloud
Each year and give thanks for your sacrifice.
But did we mount that final mass attack
To put an end to war at any price
And build a world of which you could be proud?
We tried, just didn't make it.

Sorry Jack.

*For my father, Private 19/926 Fred Hartley 19th BN Northumberland Fusiliers
Volunteered Nov 1915 – Discharged Feb 1919*

A PRIVATE SOLDIER

Did he win medals? No,
Nor rose to higher rank.
He went with Kitchener
Without a reason why,
Just knowing it was right
To go with all his mates
To march and cheer and fight,
To fight, perhaps to die.

Only when death came near,
So close that he could smell
The mix of cordite, blood,
White rotting flesh and fear
Did he begin to ask:
“What are we doing here?
Can this do any good?
Who got us in this hell?”

He found no answers there
But he survived and lived
To question and to care
About society
And the ideals that rose
Again from Flanders mud:
The rights of common men,
The power of brotherhood.

On Tyneside he began
To fight the workers’ cause,
Raising a union
To help the working man
Achieve some of the aims
They brought home from the war:
Class-free society
And justice for the poor.

Did he win medals? No,
Nor accept campaign gongs.
I think he rose above
All military show.
He won respect and love
From all who knew him well
And he won gratitude
For fighting social wrongs.

He was a quiet man,
Strong, steady, sensible.
He was a man to trust
Who stood by those in need,
A man of principle,
A fighter for the just.
I think he was, indeed,
A very private soldier.

(On 11th July, ten days after uncle Jack Roberts was killed at La Boisselle, Fred Hartley was digging communication trenches through the 1st July battlefield to the new front line a few hundred yards further forward. One of the officers recorded in the Battalion Diaries that "The dead looked like a battalion lined up on the parade ground." One is left to wonder how close Fred was to Jack's unburied body that day.)

The following four poems have in common a rather disturbing subject – take care.

GOOD NIGHT VIENNA

Have I imagined it,
Or does everyone move much faster now?
Everyone but me that is.
Or am I moving faster too, somehow,
Since our velocities are relative?

That can't be true can it?
I'm sure that I've not changed, so there must be
Something obvious I've missed;
One of those things I now find hard to see.
Perhaps I'm dead, and no one has noticed.

They would have mentioned it,
I'm sure. Although I don't hear all that's said
These days, even when I'm told.
But take comfort, if this is being dead,
It's really not much worse than being old.

WHAT COUNTS

There comes to each of us a thoughtful age
When we start questioning what life's about
And if you've reached this rather painful stage,
Perhaps it's time you took a long hard look
At your past life to find events that count.
Start with the work you've done, perhaps mundane,
But, nonetheless, if you worked honestly,
Gave something of yourself for others' gain, that counts.

There must have been a time you helped someone
Without the hope of any selfish gain.
It may have been a small thing simply done
That didn't cause you any grief or pain,
It's still a kindness you may justly claim.
But, what about the plausible excuse
You made when you ignored real suffering?
We know you're sorry now but, all the same, that counts.

Do you remember old friends at your door
To ask a favour that was so much more
Than friendship ties could reasonably claim?
You asked yourself, "Would they do this for me?"
But helped them in their trouble just the same.
If you have ever stood by friends or kin
When they were down and ready to give in;
If you were loyal then to those in need, that counts.

When you fought your own anger, and you won,
And expressed rage with no more than a frown,
Though friends were telling you to strike a blow
Against all those who'd tried to pull you down,
If you forgave, that was a deed well done.
But when you gave your fury its full flow,
Then basked in a self-justifying glow,
That's also one the record has to show, that counts.

Yes, you may add the times you wished to help
Someone who was in need, in need of you,
When you knew there was nothing you could do
But try to understand their private pain.
You may believe that you did nothing then,
But tender feelings are important too,
And in compassion we may find again
The essence of our own humanity, that counts.

Cont.

Perhaps you stood your ground once in the past,
Spoke out against the crowd when they were wrong,
Or challenged someone who had power and wealth
When you felt helpless, weak and they seemed strong.
If you can claim this, add it to the list.
But you can't hide the act of shameful stealth
When you thought it was best not to be heard
And justice died for want of a brave word, that counts.

You say you haven't done much with your life,
Too busy caring for the kids and gran,
Just guiding them through squalls of family strife,
Just being there and giving all you can.
If this is true, you have no more to prove,
For caring wins, not only family love,
But all the credit anyone can give.
If you gave of your best, forget the rest, that counts.

"Why be concerned with things long gone?" you say.
Perhaps not for the fear of Dante's hell
Or promise of some heavenly reward,
But to redeem a debt we need to pay
For all that we have gained from human good,
The privilege of walking in man's way,
The opportunity to leave behind
A footprint that will stay for anyone
Who seeks to find God's image in mankind, that counts.

THE LAST DAY

The last day would have been like any other day,
Different in only one unique way,
It was the last.

You would have noticed how the first light came,
Diffused above a distant silhouette,
Rolling quickly, gently on,
Feeling out faint shapes until each field, each tree, each hill
Would stand bright-lit in all the hues
Of morning, just as they always did
At first sunrise. And you would have held
That vision in your mind, if only you had known.

You would have heard the sky sing out that day,
Filling the rising dawn with glorious sound
Of speckled thrush ringing bright notes
Above the common choir singing from every bush.
And perhaps you would have been aware
That all around familiar voices, gentle tones,
The sigh of wind, the sound of leaves, the splash of water rush,
Were waiting to be heard, if only you had known.

You would have felt the roughness of the oak,
Smoothness of porcelain, softness of spider web.
You would have known the thrill of bitter wind,
The warmth of sudden sun, the wet of shower rain,
The shock of sharpened steel, the calm of silk,
The pleasure of a lover's touch.
All that flesh would know of sensual pleasure, pain,
You would have felt that day, if only you had known.

You would have breathed sharp morning air,
Filled with faint, tingling, tempting smells,
Filtering secretly into your consciousness.
How sharp the tang of sage and thyme,
How sweet the scent of wild moss rose,
How soft the smell of fresh turned soil,
How good the taste of oven loaf and honest wine.
You would have cherished these, if only you had known.

So much you would have tasted, touched, heard, seen,
If only you had known,
This was the day.

WHO'S NEXT ?

We wait and watch and worry now,
No cynicism, no *schadenfreude*,
About who's next.
One thing's for sure, it'll be one of them.
Only God knows which one, I'm glad I don't.
I only know that we will miss him/her,
The rest of us, the hangers on.
Ah yes, we know it all too well,
That's what we are: the hangers on,
The ones who cling to that most precious thing,
The only pearl of any price that's left,
Now that they've gone,
The ones we loved the best.

Perhaps the time has come for honesty.
Is this the way it's meant to be,
For us, the hangers on, the very old?
Long gone the fear of sudden crash,
The blinding flash that ends it all
For the unlucky ones who go too young.
Only the cold, slow-dawning truth,
That though death always hurts those left behind,
For us who feel its breath, it's not unkind.
Now that we've enjoyed a good long ride,
And seen the best of it,
Why should we sit and watch the show again
When there's a queue outside?

Roll up! Who's next? Who's next? Now let me see.
It can't be him, he's gone and so has she.
So who the Devil can it be?
I know.
Oh! Bloody Hell!
It's me!