

The Word's the Thing

The Poems

Episode 1

Background

These poems were written in deliberate attempts to cover a range of lengths and styles. Some are meant to be taken quite lightly; others are meant to be lingered over. The people involved in bringing these poems together have donated them for use in the Year of Reading in Birmingham.

The Lost Theory of Complete Happiness

There was, in ancient times,
a total theory of complete happiness
passed on orally
written in Arabic
transcribed into Greek
illuminated by monks
bound in leather
sacked by Vikings
traded by Goths
and hidden, for safety, by a small religious sect
living deep within one of many forking valleys
in a remote part of the central European landmass
whilst centuries of wars raged all around,
finally to be accidentally left by fleeing peasants
who no longer understood its value.



His Last Map

His last map
stretched out before him,
he looked at his hands:
The blue veins all but disappeared
in their search for a truth of sorts.
He believed others
when they said that one day
he might stand by a squat memorial
and think about ruling the country.
He laughed a little (if I remember it
correctly) and slowly moved on.
They fed him at every twist
and put him forward at every turn
until, finally, there he was
washed out by ripple lines
and a fear that borders
in on itself, mentally
creating the last map
the routemap
the causeway
to a future
of his
own.

19.24 pulling into Manchester Piccadilly (1)

It's just at that moment,
as the train windows
offer more internal reflection
than external perspective,
that you find yourself
noticing the young woman
diagonally opposite
on her mobile
not realising that she is being watched
doubly out of kilter.

19.24 pulling into Manchester Piccadilly (2)

The office block
Shutting down for the night
Cleaned out on a minimum wage
Overheads buffed up to perfection.
Blinds drawn.
Desks at dusk.
Floors stored tightly.
Facades lit up a treat
A multitude of pretences
All done and dusted.

An Old Woman's Tale

Hanging in the dankness of the cave
is a tale we are not privileged to hear.
Long treks of time catch the light
and mark the place with shards of stone.
Breathless, children are bound
with spells and legends, holding their voices.
The old woman talks with eyes quietly closed
and pants of breath frosted as they come.
Tales of broken rules and narrow escapes
told from precarious angles.
Realities and subtleties stirred together
her words don't go in straight lines.
The very last image as fire flickers down
is of things that can come in the night.

Lost for words

There was a time
when I would happily
have been absolutely
lost for words.

My soul ransomed for a richer vocabulary.
My passion bursting for strict punctuation.
My spirit traded for a table of verbs.
My insanity pledged, forever, in words.

I prod them. I beat them.
I wrench them. I stretch them
into metres of rhymes
and thread them endlessly,
knowing that there will come a time
when I will sadly
be absolutely
lost for words.

Its sentence is sealed ... this curse of mankind?

(25th March 2007)

Industrialisation forging
slaveowning into slavetrading.
Condemned to be stored
economically
from hull to stern.

Chiefly war trophies and kidnaps,
a well-rooted going concern.
Slave rivers flow on
to fortified exits.
A leaking of darkness.

Just think of the maths of it all.
Fully one third off in transit.
Another third
spread over three years
of plantation.

Complicit complexities.
Sugared triangulations.
Out of Ivory
and the Guinea Coast.
A future enchained.

Numbers tagged and receipted.
Shackled hard to a history,
chained to a past
that smells of tobacco.
Scrubbed up for sale.

Opulence rooted in seasons,
trademarked tools and handwrought sundowns
on the bonegrown crops
and the passing of ports.

Past histories have been stolen
to turn up again in the present.
The journeys and the cultures
the companies and the legacies
the bargains and the feelings
in a question
that might last for two hundred years.



Malaise

I fell over in the street the other day.
I wonder if I could have Instant Collapse Syndrome.
And I've developed this fear
of always being ill.
Oh ... my ... God!
I've only gone and contracted
severe hypochondriaphobia.

Poetry

Free-range
state of the art
lines and phrases.
Depths of feeling
carefully lashed and harnessed
into a million words.
Militants on the march.

Sorry to announce

(Bing bong):

Hello. This is Gerald,
your Life Manager,
speaking.

We are very sorry
for the current delay
to your life.

This is due to a number of things.

There has been:

- a failure on a number of points
- a lack of clear signalling of intent
- various unscheduled arrivals and departures in your life
- a delay in the life before this
- carelessness in minding the various gaps
- a report of vandals and thieves of your time and energies
- time wasted awaiting connections from the lives of other people and being coupled to things that have no real driver at all.

We hope that this delay
does not cause too much inconvenience
in the rest of your life.

We hope that you have a pleasant
and fulfilling journey on from here.

(Bing bong):

Hello. This is Gerald,
your Life Manager,
again.

I'm extremely sorry to announce
that this life
will now terminate
at Coventry.

We are very sorry for any inconvenience
this may cause.