

## A selection of poems by Ian Whybrow

**July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

### **Your bathwater**



It isn't simply economy  
that makes your bathwater such a joy  
but perhaps that I am normally  
an amateur of the shower.

I find it takes the weight off me  
and ripples me into strange and interesting shapes.  
Sometimes a brunette sea anemone surfaces  
between my pale old-chap breasts  
and the islands of my knees.

My shipwrecked toes  
rise like a warning  
to the ghosts  
of our children's floating bath-toys.

I love to pull out the plug and feel  
myself slowly flattened to the thickness  
of the non-slip mat  
which in our case we have not got.

**August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

### **Anemoi (The four winds. After William Cowper)**

The modest pea, fresh-picked or canned or split  
becomes when swallowed,  
orchestra to pit.

The bean, the sprout, the huddled broccoli;  
all metamorphose  
into a symphony.

Your cabbages, your onion & your grain -  
Each have their dying fall...

That strain again!

Yet for the wittiest intestinal tune  
rely on fig or  
apricot or prune.

## **September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020** **Ideal**

You are perfect, o banana!  
Daily this is how I feel  
about the way you fit my hand,  
about the easy way you peel.  
No artisan makes artisana  
to equal thee, ideal banana!

## **September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020** **Horse Chestnut**



Close your eyes and run your fingers  
through a bag of them.  
Listen and feel  
rumbling silk;  
one living, moving muscle.

Stubbs made  
Whistlejack  
of conkers, surely:  
across the barrel,  
on the point of hip;  
that vegetable gaskin,  
silky fetlock, hock.

Conker-shine  
on the shimmering  
smoke of mane;  
from the skirt of his tail

to the white fire at the dock.

He's up, forelimbs raised to take a shock,  
the swung sling of his mad blood steered by that rolling eye!

## **October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

### **The Plate**



My brother-in-law was drowned a few years back  
on holiday in Perth - just swept away.  
I see him now as evening grew black  
out in his Sydney yard, oh, long before that day,

sipping a beer and telling me about  
the possums in the branches overhead.  
They ate the bulbs in every single pot  
he planted up. *Live and let live*, he said

and shrugged and smiled. Quite unexpected, that  
from someone I had thought to be worldly  
tough-minded, unforthcoming, closed, at least  
(as people are you don't see much) to me.

\*

Having just slammed the door to scare a squirrel  
and caused an ornament to smash a plate  
I hear his drowned voice, soft and aboriginal:  
*That's how Death gets you. Live and let live, mate.*

## **October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

### **Van Gogh with Carer and Irises, 1890**



I said to him *Vincent*  
but he was, like, silent  
so I didn't raise my voice I said  
*Mr Van Gogh*  
*don't you think that's enough?*  
but he kept right on stuffing  
irises into the jug  
that little white one.  
I said *That's enough!*  
*You'll spill the lot*  
*all over your nice white cloth!*  
He took no notice  
carried right on  
jamming them in.

Poor silly bugger,  
painted that white cloth green!

## **October 30th, 2020**

### **Small jobs to do in the garden this week...**

Check in the shed for things you do not need;  
dig them well in and let them go to seed.

Think about seeds you'd really like to grow  
and let them flourish in your mind right now.

Scrub out the pots that grew resentments.  
Plant up some bulbs that promise you fragrance

ideally in re-usable bulb planting trays.  
Seek out some of the many handy ways

to use up beetroot and the chunks of hake  
you freezered in the days of Hereward the Wake.

## **November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

### **And God created jam jars.**

In that one

with the gold lid  
stabbed by the kitchen scissors  
there are unnameable leaves and some grass.

He is sleeping now,  
the furry caterpillar that is happy  
to walk your finger  
and the green sticky one.  
that plays bridges  
is hiding, too.

Where the glass thickens  
at the bottom  
a magnified beetle in three parts  
shiny black with wicked pinchers  
goes round and round.

I have finished the jam  
in this other jar.  
I shall make a lid for it with paper  
and a rubber band  
and fill it with grasshoppers.

It is good having light in the daytime.  
You can see them better  
and make them hop.

On Daytime Five I shall let  
the waters bring forth abundantly  
and introduce frogspawn.

## **December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020**

Just now  
I raised the blinds to see  
the moon caught in the chestnut tree.  
Lit from within  
it shows its embers through its skin

and now again

up and to its right  
another miracle of light

sits in a twig's fork  
like a puffed-on spark.

Soon,

when smouldering star  
and glowing moon ignite  
they'll scorch away  
this rumpled papery night.

## **Mrs God and her hobbyist husband**

He's in the shed,  
shouldn't be long.  
He's got some stuff  
he's working on.

He calls it Time.  
Yes, hard to explain.  
Think of weather  
with no sun or rain.

Or a lavender bag  
without the lavender  
tucked away  
inside a drawer.

Only he's made  
a bigger place  
to keep it in.  
He calls it space.

I call it the cart  
before the horse.  
Bang! Here we go –  
another universe!

## **December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020** **Breakfast with Michael Caine**

This morning I was Michael Caine.  
Again.  
Just for a while,  
making my coffee in *The Ipccress File*.

Except I didn't have his beans  
or grinder,  
or, waiting in the wings,  
an irritated minder.

No sleeping-over office beauty  
either, snooty

and neglected, looking slightly hurt  
and obviously naked underneath my borrowed shirt.

I keep my black-rimmed glasses in my drawer  
but can't see clearly through them anymore.

## **Boxing Day, 2020**

### **Midsummer Common before Storm Bella**

It's out like Yeats in a big hat, striding  
along by the boathouses, mouthing and muttering.

Under a tin sky swans are fidgeting,  
nervous on the river with their goslings clamouring.

Weir water whitens, not quite thundering.  
The barges are rising, their docklines tightening.

On alder and willow the branches are stirring  
A dog lifts an ear and ignores the ball bouncing.

Motionless gulls button grass down like quilting.  
Wind fists are clenched to give somebody a pounding.

## **January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

### **Ghost**

That man in the mirror  
his hair growing thinner  
is surely my father.

Dad, did you see your father  
at my age in your mirror?  
Or would you rather  
not talk about it, ever.

## **January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

### **Hello, Alloe**



O cactus,  
with more legs than an octopus;  
we never liked you but you've stuck it out here.  
So after what we've been through together  
- you on just the odd spoonful of water -  
We want you to persevere.  
Please count yourself one of us

## **January 7th, 2021**

### **On the Hill**

*(Matthew 27:24) "I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it."*

When the president saw  
that he could prevail nothing,  
but that rather a tumult was made,  
he took water,  
and washed his hands before the multitude,  
saying

I am innocent.  
We love you.  
You're very special.  
You've seen what happens,  
the way others are treated,  
that are so bad and evil.  
I know how you feel  
but go home  
go home in peace.

Also  
fight like hell Okay? and  
don't any of you abandon hope.

Thank you for the water  
and the very beautiful bar of soap.  
So special. Thank you, you're fabulous.

## **January 16th, 2021**

### **Chesterton Heron**

Bilgewater-grey, the rising river  
trembles the shadow of the Winter Comfort Shelter.

His back to the boathouse on what ought to be the slipway,  
waist-deep in it a heron stands, a piece of Gormely statuary.



Nothing he knows of the buses running empty  
over the bridge on their way to the empty city;

nothing of flooding or homelessness, or misery.  
He looks along his spear with an eye fixed on butchery.

**January 17th, 2021**

**How to be a proper crow**

1. Before a proper crow  
learns swimming  
easily through air  
fingers spread just so

or executing an elegant roll  
off the top  
of a telegraph pole  
he or she must first

attend  
to how an oily rag  
lobbed underarm  
falls in a high wind.

2. If you are intent  
on being part of a proper murder  
you must learn never  
to dip your beak in chalk

and get involved in talk  
with a raucus parliament  
and so misrepresent  
yourself as a rook.

3. You should look unhurried  
not clatter about calling *Jack*  
with clamouring daws.  
You are not that sort of corvid.

**January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**Sudden snow**

One moment, the sky is a grey wash only

then out of it a thin bit of rain  
barely falls, then more and more slowly

till each streak slides in twos it seems, heavier  
and wavier and thickens into flakes  
that swing broader and whiter.

The paving shines wetter as it warms every caller  
but the cold green leaves reach for them;  
twigs bend in surrender.

Then each shrub, a little hill, rolls into another,  
the last of the pavours pulls its white cover over  
and now come the shouts of Matilda and Rita.

## **January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021** **Being Breugel**

When I lean and look up,  
what I see most days  
against the brightening sky  
is the black tracery  
of our line of trees:  
an ash, two chestnuts  
a birch  
and two cherries.

Today they're painted.  
Still as scenery,  
calm as repose.  
I know that if I wait  
and gently lift my gaze,  
a pair of crows  
will soon materialize  
and make me Breugel  
watching from his snows.

## **January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021** **My vegetable love**

If I were ever desperate  
to choose a vegetable  
to celebrate  
- as now I am because the hour is late

and lack a weightier thing to contemplate-  
I might forget you,  
racy, sleek courgette.

And yet.  
tonight  
laid on your bed of wild rices,  
butter-glazed with a shaken smite  
of olive oil  
with roasted onion slices  
you urged my slippery  
supper to its crisis.

Your chunky dices,  
mingling their shine  
with lemon-marinated thigh  
of roasted hen  
led to a sigh.  
Away went cucurbit's remembered vices -  
of bitterness or insipidity  
or prickliness or rigid skin -  
None here! All gone.  
How you have shone,  
my sweet, my succulent courgette.

Now. Shall we share a cigarette?

**February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021**  
**Nobody's perfect.**

While one can picture Byron  
supersensitive and vain  
attempting to blow up his headmaster  
for being too humane; \*

or Shelley,  
scarred emotionally  
playing experimentally  
with acid, gunpowder and electricity  
and blowing up a tree,

it's hard to imagine gentle Keats  
giving himself up to such mad fits  
or to imagine  
what did in fact happen -

he and Brown out in their shared Hampstead garden  
taking potshots at blue tits.

*\*Byron and his fellow monitors at Harrow objected in 1805 to the reforms of Butler, who replaced the popular Drury as Headmaster, and in particular to the ban on monitors beating other pupils.*

## **March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

### **The Frog Princess**

*For all the child amputees helped by Elizabeth's Legacy of Hope*

After the explosion I liked it in the dark.  
I liked the drip and plop  
and the river smell  
you get from being down a well.

I didn't call out.  
Alone, I was content.  
I felt I deserved  
my punishment.

The dark was my shield  
I would lie under it and stare  
feeling my safety  
in despair.

I heard you sing  
of an end to pain,  
how I might be beautiful  
and useful again.

You dropped a rope  
and told me not to worry.  
If I'd let you, you would pull me up  
but there was no hurry.

I did not believe a word you said  
but that was a start.  
I began to feel around in the mud  
for the pieces of my broken heart.

## **March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

### **Ted Hughes, Collected. Hay 1996**

Now that the wind's dropped again  
I find myself thinking of Ted Hughes,  
his big face bent, the sweat off its paleness running down  
from his streaked hair, dripping on to his open  
book of verses, down over his long probe of a nose

under a dangerously swaying array  
of crazed stage lights, chains rattling,  
with that vast marquee swelling in a Welsh squall,  
swelling then sucking like bellows at his last Hay Festival.  
Dying, he clung to his lectern, shouting

like Captain Ahab at the wheel,  
daring anyone to jump ship,  
run for shelter.  
Nobody moved, how could we in that welter  
of wind and words? We could not choose but hear  
you, you bloody-minded Ancient Mariner!

**March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021**

**Priapic**

When blackbirds lance  
across the fence  
and tiny wrens come bobbing;

when ash trees bud  
black drops of blood  
Spring's taxi waits, a-throbbing.

When bits of green  
shout to be seen  
and seeds in drawers want planting;

when pigeons push  
from every bush  
their bubbles for enchanting;

magnolia,  
camelia,  
with thorn and cherry busting,

attention call  
to one and all

that Spring is up and thrusting.

**April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**In the graveyard at St Andrews, Histon.**

The clutter of twelve centuries  
leans to the south. A straggled avenue,  
pollarded untidily, of willow trees  
divides the primrose-scattered graves on view.

Bent to the inscriptions we crept on.  
You by the yellowing church were gleaning  
what loved ones had to say. I was leaning  
to those down by the gate. Then you were gone.

I felt the horror of the quite alone.  
Frozen, I couldn't breathe, I couldn't call.  
A shadow moved where you had stolen  
behind a tree.

Only a rehearsal after all.

**April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**No cuckoo**

Out early with my cup of tea;  
the birds call out from every tree  
but no cuckoo.

Warbles and whistles, faint to-wu;  
delight from every point of view  
but no cuckoo.

Woodpigeons bubble throatily  
*I'm NOT Wayne Rooney.* So I see.  
Still no cuckoo.

The collared dove's sad triple-coo  
is in the vein but will not do;  
it's no cuckoo.

A cockerel without a clue  
trumpets until his face is blue,  
yet no cuckoo.

A distant cow heaves out a moo  
as if she's yearning for you, too.

*Come on! Cuckoo!*

**May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**Recreation on Midsummer Common, early**

Out of the mingled mist and sun by Fort St George  
the red-polls, chocolate, uncommon  
common cattle, silently emerge.

They slide unhurried, straight-backed, quite at ease  
across my path  
to browse the chestnut trees.

No dog to turn their heads, no teasing fly;  
only the chocolate, uncommon  
common cattle, the trimmed chestnut trees  
and I.

**May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**An ungreening**

This morning I was shouted at  
by a wild-eyed man in a woolly hat.

A quilted junkie on a seat  
watched a small flame between his feet.

The pop-up circus having popped,  
its gantries slumped, its music stopped,

its plastic guts spread far and wide  
by its explosive suicide.

Un-recreative is the scene.  
It's not your fault, but Jesus, Green!