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WINTER IN BISHOPDALE

Contrasts sharp as the bitter wind appear
When winter's coat settles on Bishopdale.
Straight hedges straighten and bent branches bow
More in hard outline against frost-white ground.
Ash trees, stripped naked at the end of year,
Now spread their black cobwebs against the sky
And black-faced ewes are framed against fresh snow
As they descend where fodder may be found.

The lapwing too, moves down from near the crag
To join gull, rook and crow foraging fields
Below, where ground is not too hard for beak
To break and even roe deny their fear
To feed when hunger drives them from the Rigg,
And tracks of fox near scattered feathers prove
That there are those who thrive when days are bleak
And frosts too hard for some small birds to bear.

Above the fields, the scars of ancient walls
Run in straight lines directly up the fell,
Drawing the eye into a grey-white sheet,
To where the Dale's horizon line should be.
But ground and cloudbank merge when winter falls,
And on the fell at this stark time of year,
You could believe that earth and heaven meet,
Out there beyond as far as you can see.

ELEGY FOR A CLOWN

Wet feathers straggled on the lake
Close to the shore, where water laps
In a slow, bobbing trance -
Like parody of living dance;
A cruel twist, too hard for me to take.

For I recall your wagging tail,
In black and white, your comic stance,
Your call "Hi look! It's me!
Roll up my friends! Roll up! It's free!
But please leave any bread that may be stale."

How many laughs did you inspire
In that parked-car audience,
Who came just for a change
Of scene and found instead a strange,
Pied, dancing bird fulfilling their desire

To shake off the dull work-day grind?
They saw how you enjoyed the role
They wished they could have had,
In place of the humdrum, pale, sad
Reality they tried to leave behind.

And when they pack car boots to go,
Reflecting on bright images
Of crystal lakes, clear skies,
A few might even realise
You gave them so much more, old pierrot.

For all the pleasure they would find
In that lakeside tranquility,
Would, nonetheless, not lift them clear
Of work-day worry, doubt and fear,
As did your laughter bubbling through the mind.

No doubt we'll have the dance next year,
Performed by brother, cousin, son,
And picnickers will love the show;
You'll not be missed, but I shall know,
And in my laughter there may be a tear.

THE MEADOWLANDS

Keep safe the meadowlands; find them in May,
June or July when you may catch
Their fragrant breath on summer breeze, and see
Their fragile blooms wave in the restless green,
The Cowslip, Heartsease, Sorrel and Selfheal,
Speedwell and Meadowsweet, Clover and Vetch.

Keep safe the meadowlands, the ancient ground,
The founding soil of settled ways,
The land our ancestors reclaimed from bog
And bracken scrub for Fescue and wild Brome,
Ryegrass and Meadow Oat, Cocksfoot and Bent,
Vernal and Darnel and soft Yorkshire Fog.

Keep safe the meadowlands, a gift from heaven,
A bounty that is double given.
In summertime enjoy their beauty, free,
And hold that precious memory in store,
That you may gladden dull, cold, winter days
Walking the sunlit meadowlands once more.

Keep safe the meadowlands, the quiet calm;
Treasure their humble flowerings
And guard their innocent, unworldly ways,
For all they ask is rain on a poor soil
And time to set their seed before
The reaper takes his yearly toll.

Keep safe the meadowlands, if they should go,
Our children's children may not ever know
To care about
The loss.

DUNNOCK

I now believe that she was sheltering there,
Not trapped at all, just resting in the warm,
Away from the sharp cut of frozen air
Swept from the arctic in a late spring storm:
A dunnock perched content on outhouse beams,
Plump-feathered in striped brown and misty grey,
That I disturbed from drowsy dunnock dreams
To startled flight. Away! Escape! Away!

I tried to grasp her gently, but in vain.
She flew straight for the freedom that she saw
In a false hope, a death-glass window pane.
Neck broken, she lay twitching on the floor.
I deeply mourned the life gone from this thing
Whose beauty seemed too fragile to be true.
How had the tiny foot, the slender wing
Survived the winter she had struggled through?

And yet she had survived, and thrived, until
A thoughtless human, acting on a whim,
Assumed that nature would respect his will
And leave the choice of life or death to him.
But nature does not follow mortal plan,
She works in subtle ways that are her own;
She does not follow paths laid down by man,
And wise men learn to leave her ways alone.

SEMERWATER

Seeing it now in winter sun,
It seems so far removed
From the dark tale
Of a cursed village drowned and gone.

Only a line of clouds remain
To cast forebodings on
The lake and leave
The faint threat of a squall of rain.

Out in the water's shimmering,
A raft of bobbing gulls
Goes floating by,
Then rises in a flickering

To form a swirling silver cloud
That breaks into a wave
Of silhouettes
Which stoop back down weaving a shroud,

That falls again upon the lake
And settles as a raft
Of gulls once more.
The fresh wind veers, the cloud bank breaks

Sending a bolt of light to rise
In fierce reflection from
The water's face
To dazzle unsuspecting eyes.

A lonely grebe slices a wedge
Through the bright bar of light,
As clouds close up
To form a fading halo edge.

Shadows lengthen and folds appear
On the surrounding hills
Clothed in rose haze,
And I am held in bondage here,

Watching the low, slow-fading sun,
Listening to the gulls' screamed
Promise to remain,
And hearing my own promise to return.

HUNTERS' MOON

The cries of curlew on a distant hill
Call us to join the creatures of the night,
Creeping in shadows cut by a clear moon.
We must go soon, for we have far to go
To meet with those who keep from sight
Of man, and dread his burning lust to kill.

Now open wide the cage of decoy crow,
For days held starving captive there.
Now cut the wire noose of hidden snare.
Now spring the gin that's set to maim the hare.
Now find the poacher's line and steal his hook.
Now mimic vixen's scream to lure the fox
Away from lampers by the brook.
Now smash the stakes that bar the holt.
Now bury deep the poison bait.
Now loose the trap that holds the stoat.
Now seek the men who dig the set
To cheat them of their evil sport.

We must make haste, for we have much to do
While others sleep and there is perfect light
For Devil's work to be revealed.
But first, we thank the spirits who
Watch over stream and wood and field,
For giving us a hunters' moon tonight.

To Marie Hartley

IN GRATITUDE

The Yorkshire Dales, these simple words
Evoke soft rolling, sombre fells
Scattered with trees and lined by drystone walls;
Cow pastures, field barns, cottages,
Smoke rising from lone farmhouse fires,
Slow gentle streams and plunging waterfalls
And moody skies pierced by church spires.
Such images have many roots, not least,
Those springing from the artist's hand,
The guide who finds the essence of the scene,
The eye that looks beyond the layman's glance,
The mind that grasps the inner dream.

The Yorkshire Dales, these simple words
Evoke one artist's name above the rest,
A presence who embodies all they mean:
The nature of the place, the feel, the mood,
The people and their country ways.
With graving tool she has cut sharp
In boxwood blocks an image of the Dales
That holds their quiet beauty fast in time.
With line she has teased out their mysteries
And given warmth to walls of cold grey stone,
With word she has set out the histories
Of Dalesfolk and their lives long gone.

The Yorkshire Dales, these simple words
Evoke in those who truly care,
The thought to say a simple thanks
For all the skill and time and toil she gave
To frame for us in word, woodcut and line
The beauty of the Dales she loved.

THE VILLAGE SHOP

Under the brooding presence of Pen Hill,
Set on the patch of grass we call 'the green',
Our shop sits at the hub of village life.
The humble place of trade that it had been
For longer than our elders can recall,
Is now transformed to an Aladdin's cave,
Where shelves sag under tins of every kind,
The counter groans beneath crisps, cakes and cheese,
And books compete with apples on the floor.
Here you will find whatever you might crave
To satisfy your stomach, heart or mind.

Sliced loaves are lifted from shop scales to weigh
Letters addressed to Rome, Berlin and Nice,
And parcels to Macao and Mandalay.
For in its other role as Post Office,
The shop connects us to a busy world
(To make us grateful for our rustic way).
Here every Monday old folk gather round
To get their pensions, meet their friends and stay
To chat, where Edinburgh Woollen Mills
Blends in with M&S and C&A .
The village shop is built on level ground.

What is the magic that a village holds
That tempts the tourists back each year
To find that idyll called 'the country life'?
Is there a secret country folk all share,
A mystery that never will unfold?
If there is any substance in this dream,
You may well find it hidden here
Amongst the cornflakes, soap, peas, ham and cream,
Or in the local gossip in a shop
Which holds in stock: good company, good cheer,
Companionship, friendly advice and care.

To the common garden spider, Araneus diadematus.

ARANEUS

Within the hedge, back-lit by morning sun,
The web of queen Araneus is spun.
I marvel at her power to create
Something so exquisite, so delicate:
Dew-laden gossamer's soft shimmering,
A beauty that I can't forget.
Is it a jewel gently glimmering,
Or gladiator's weighted net?

I have a mystery that holds me here.
Perhaps, I feel the hypnotism of fear,
Or is it just the human need
To look for beauty that is ultimate?
I watch and leave the quandary to its fate.
And fate comes creeping slow and cautiously.
He starts a strumming on the silken net
And she then dances as a marionette,

While he approaches jiggling, strumming still,
Sensing acceptance, boldly enters in
To dance the final courtship reel,
Then swiftly consummate, fulfil.
Transfixed, I watch the final act begin.
He is transformed, stripped of his sexual zeal,
He is no longer gallant troubadour,
Merely a small post-nuptial meal.

She now has all that she desires, and more,
The prospect of a seething spider brood
Who'll sail away on gossamer
When their time comes to search for food:
To spin and weave, to kill and feed,
Eventually to mate and breed.
And for this endless morbid carousel
The fearsome mother, murdering wife
Will give her tiny, precious life;
A history almost too sad to tell.

And yet, I must remember that she gave
A vision of the beauty that we crave;
For this we thank Araneus,
And crown her diadematus.

MY DALES ROOKERY

In autumn days they hold their 'parliaments'
And haggle fiercely face to feathered face
Trying to settle ancient arguments
About each precious nesting place,
But winter brings an end to animus
And they all roost together without fuss.

In spring nest renovation starts once more.
Fresh twigs are brought from the far distant wood
And, in accordance with rooks' ancient lore,
When neighbours fly away in search of food
Twigs may be stolen from the vacant nest
For all rooks know that stolen twigs are best.

So, once again, the arguments begin
And every dawn throughout the early spring
I am awakened by their raucous din
Before the morning lark begins to sing.
I must confess I have been known to pray
For all my lovely rooks to fly away!

But anger always fades as sunlight spreads
And I enjoy their noisy company
Once I have risen from my restless bed.
I hear in the discordant symphony
A joyous call of corvid ecstasy
And add my voice to the cacophony.

In contrast, sunset brings a lullaby
That filters through the rustling canopy,
Rook murmuring that's softer than a sigh.
Oh, how I'd love to climb the topmost tree
And lie there high above the rookery
To hear what *they* are saying about *me*.

*To celebrate the restoration of the East Window
in the Church of St.Peter and St.Paul, Leyburn
in December 2010*

East Window

Perhaps the open outlook to the east
Ensures the leaded panes catch every ray
And part explains why on the dullest day
My eye is drawn up to the colour feast,
And my heart warms in its unfailing glow,
And my mind wanders in its mystery.
Who are these saints? What do their symbols show?
What is their place in our church history?

I see Saint Peter's keys and Saint Paul's sword
Set in bright patterns of new coloured glass,
Matched faithfully with ancient panes restored
With loving care and mindful of the past.
I see an artist in a bygone age
Reading her bible, searching every page,
To choose which saintly figures to include
To inculcate a calm, reflective mood.

But allegories fade with passing days,
New scholarship will teach in different ways.
We question legends that were once held sure
And symbols that were clear now seem obscure,
Perception then and now is not the same.
Yet, in her bold design the artist has,
By chance or inspiration, gained her aim
By holding the east window in our gaze.

For, when soft morning sunlight floods the glass
And falls in a cascade of coloured light
That dapples down around the altar cross,
It flows along straight aisles, increasing bright,
To spill into the shadows in box pews,
And gives each one of us the chance to use
Our inner eye to see in that new light,
Christ on the cross and the clear path he trod,
Revealing to us all a path to God.

*A poem dedicated to the memory of Louisa Cecilia Bolton (1837-1861) who
designed the original stained glass east window which was installed in 1854.*

SONNET TO A MAYFLY

Rest now, the day is gone, your task complete.
Though iridescence fades with setting sun,
You danced in brilliance, your day was sweet;
Your purpose is achieved, the prize is won.

I shall watch here until the dusk descends,
Knowing your beauty will not long remain.
A lifeless husk will fragment in the winds
And drift back to your river bed again.

I do not seek your settled destiny,
I know that I shall fight death to the end,
But I respect your sure tranquility;
You rest content, whatever night may send.

Throughout long years I've sought to find my way.
You found fulfilment in a single day.

FOUNTAINS ABBEY

The leafless trees in winter sun
Cast field-length shadows by the mill
And ripples in the River Skell
Glint in the light of closing day,
When Fountains' shadow arms reach out
To snare me in its mystery.
In chapel, presbytery and nave
I find a sandstone tapestry
Inviting me to touch the walls
And sense the stories in the stone.

Stories of Benedictine monks
Who sought to found an abbey here,
Where their old order held no sway,
To start afresh the *Opus Dei*
And follow new Cistercian vows
To live a simple life of prayer.
Through centuries of prayer and toil
Their Abbey grew and gained in wealth,
The bounty of a fertile soil,
Allowing them to build in stone
Magnificence in praise of God.

The Abbey's ever-growing wealth
Did not give rise to broken vows,
The monks maintained their pious way.
But this did not deter a King
Who had the debts of war to pay
From confiscating Abbey gold,
Removing roof-beams, bronze and lead
And selling off its pastureland.
Then Abbey walls were robbed of stone
To satisfy a vandal's greed
And this proud ruin left to stand.

Reflect on Fountains' glorious past
And mourn the grandeur we have lost
But celebrate the beauty here.
The tower stands enhanced by time
And ruined walls around it hold
A classic, quiet dignity.
Grand arches hang from open sky
And pillars carry empty air
Above high nave and humble cell
To give the sense of history
That underlies the Abbey's spell.

A spell that turns my thoughts once more
To monks who prayed here long ago,
From matins through to compline's close,
To give man hope to find God's grace.
A prize that each of us may gain
Through the great beauty of this place,
Where masons' skill and nature's art
Provide a peaceful sanctuary
In which the ancient prayers remain
For all who listen with the heart
And find God in the silence here.

WASP

Relaxing in the window seat,
Content, enjoying morning sun,
I find I have a new companion
Who just appears out of the air
To fix me with a basilisk stare,
Intended to intimidate.
He strikes a streetwise hard-man pose
(No gentleman would ever wear
Those black and yellow stripy clothes)
We have potential conflict here.

But why does he disturb me so?
I find it difficult to say.
I look into obsidian eyes
And see no hint of reason there.
I sense a brain that works another way,
That knows no fear, no pity, no remorse,
Only pre-programmed stimulus-response.
An armoury that our Creator planned
To counter man's intelligence
With weapons men would never understand.

And yet we have a common bond,
Inherited from ancestors
That crawled upon this Earth in aeons past:
Our mutual love of warmth and idleness.
Was it our search for these that cast
Us into conflict long ago,
When chance mutation in a nucleus
Began our anatomical divide?
Right now, watching you preening on the glass,
I just thank God you're on the other side!

NO RIGHT OF WAY

Late summer days in Deepdale Wood
Hang heavy in a surly mood,
Keeping close the humid air
Under leaf-lattice canopy,
Will-sapping air that holds me here.

But how I long to let my spirit swim
In that same beck through which I'd run
To meet you by the swirling pool,
Where I would shade my eyes to see
Your smile in silhouette against
The skimming sun,
And hear, or almost hear, forbidden words
Across deep water guarding you from me.

So long ago.
What could prevent my spirit now
From thrashing through that cruel pool,
To race up to the open fell?
There to lie deep in honeyed ling,
Listening and remembering.

Remembering the summers past
That lie behind the veil
Through which we see pure golden days,
When breeze and bird and bee would sing,
And we would join the singing host
To find true harmony and hold it fast.
Though that dear memory stays clear,
How shall I sing of summer now
That I must lie without you there?

Still summer's song beats in my blood,
And though the words I love the best
Come only in a whisper now,
I hear them well.
Is that your voice I hear above the rest?
Or is it just an echo from the past
Straining to reach me?
Crying, trying to make me know
There is no way. There is no way
To reach the open fell
Through Deepdale Wood.

A DALES RESTING PLACE

I find it strange that I should end my search
For somewhere I might rest in death, secure,
Here in the graveyard of a parish church
Perched on a hill above the River Ure.
I have no kindred here, nor am I bound
By faith to those who lie beneath these stones.
But can their church lay claim to all this ground,
Which was a sanctuary for pagan bones
Before its mediaeval base was laid?
Then men who in this soil had grown
Would know it was a place to lay their dead,
To be with those by whom they would be known.

This heritage, I trust, will justify
My wish to lie in consecrated ground,
And part explain to those who wonder why
A man not close to God should yet have found
The need to end his lifespan in this place,
Albeit by the wall that marks the edge
Of holy ground, close by the sheer cliff face
Above the falls. And to the church I pledge
I shall not lie here longer than I need.
No ghost will linger, and my soul will flee
From its mortality when it is freed,
Perhaps to find a place in memory.

The waiting may be long but I am sure
That nature will continue with her work,
Until my corpse no longer may endure
And what remains will pass into the rock
From which my chosen resting place is hewn,
Thence to be borne by rain and gravity,
Down through deep beds of sand and shale and stone,
Which offer purifying purgatory,
To filter through three hundred million years
Of rock, perhaps for centuries, before
All trace of me has cleared the limestone layers
And found a way into the river Ure.

Into that river of bright glitterings,
Released into new light, new energy,
To leap and sing loud as a thousand strings
Swirling in a thunderous symphony.
Each particle may in this joy respond
For just a day, but the deep limestone will
Ensure that joy continues well beyond
The time the church will stand upon this hill.
Yet time cannot be held, and there must be
A slowing as rivers join to meet the swell
Of tide and flow to an amorphous sea,
Which holds the dark oblivion of hell,

And the bright promise of eternity.