

*A few thoughts on  
how deadlines can  
help you be more  
creative*

And 52 short poems to prove the point

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# The year of living poetically

I started writing poems when I was in my late 30s, and for a few years, they flowed pretty freely. But over time, the flow slowed to a trickle, and two or three years ago, I couldn't help noticing it had dried up almost completely. I felt very sad about that, because my attempts at poetry had given me far more pleasure and satisfaction than any other kind of writing. But, for a long time, I took the resigned view that there was nothing I could do about it.

The main reason, I told myself, that I had found writing poems so immensely enjoyable was that it depended on inspiration; that the idea for each poem I had written seemed to have come to me as a kind of "gift" - without any conscious effort on my part, or any consideration for external constraints such as a client to be pleased, a target audience to be engaged, or a deadline to be met. (The exact opposite, in short, of the kind of writing I do for a living.)

So if that was true, it looked as if I would have to accept that

writing poems was - like playing guitar in a progressive rock band or trying to bowl as fast as Dennis Lillee - a pleasure belonging to a particular part of my life, now sadly over.

Then, at the end of 2010, I changed my mind. I decided that, at the very least, I would rage against the dying of the poetic light. So I set myself the task of writing one poem a week throughout the year that was about to begin, regardless of whether I felt inspired or not. And that, as you'll see in the following pages, is exactly what I did.

Understandably, as 2011 ended, I felt a sense of accomplishment at having written 52 poems in 12 months - a huge increase on my recent meagre output. But, beyond that, I think I learned some interesting and quite exciting things about the creative process. Or perhaps I should say my creative process, since I can't be sure that what I learned applies to everyone, though I suspect it may.

What was it I learned? If you can spare a few minutes before turning to the poems themselves, I'll try to explain.

## Inspiration redefined . . .

When I first set myself this poem-a-week challenge, I had two main concerns. The first was whether writing poems to order, rather than waiting for inspiration to strike, would rob me of the enjoyment and satisfaction I mentioned earlier. After all, my understanding was that the pleasure I had previously taken in writing poems was very largely about the lack of conscious effort involved; the sense it gave me, to risk exaggerating a little, of having almost discovered a combination of words that already existed.

But quite quickly, this concern evaporated. In the early weeks of 2011, I wrote two poems to mark particular occasions, New Year and my imminent birthday. I enjoyed writing them. Later, from time to time, I gave myself quite specific poetic briefs - for example, to write a two line poem echoing Robert Herrick's wonderful *Dreams*, or a poem in French (sans dictionnaire), or a poem based upon the *Ubi Sunt?* formula. Again, in each case, I found it a thoroughly rewarding experience.

On none of these occasions did I sit down to write because a gleaming poetic form had started to take shape in my mind, which I felt compelled to capture in words before it melted away. But again and again, throughout the year, I found that, at some point as I wrote, a moment would come when inspiration kicked in, allowing my poor weary over-stretched intellect to take a break, and put its feet up.

Which, in fact, led me to a rather different understanding of what inspiration means. For me, it now seems to be the part of any mental task performed by the unconscious mind. Or, to put it another way, the part of the finished piece of work that you didn't realise you were capable of doing. And of course, if that is roughly correct, then there's no reason why it has to be confined to the front end of the task in question.

I wouldn't take issue with Thomas Edison's well known belief that genius (or, to make it more widely applicable, let's just say creativity) is one per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration; but I would suggest, based on my experience, that it doesn't necessarily have to happen in that order.

And thinking about it now, I rather wonder why I ever believed otherwise. Shakespeare wrote his sonnets to raise sponsorship; Leonardo's well known painting of Lisa Gherardini was a commissioned portrait; Mozart wrote operas on subjects chosen by his patrons. If some of the world's greatest works of art have been created in response to a commercial brief, what made me think I could only write a poem upon receipt of a randomly occurring shaft of illumination, seemingly bestowed on me by some external source?

So, the first thing I learned: you don't need inspiration to start out on a creative journey.

Having said that, though, I soon began to notice that I was feeling inspired to write much more regularly than ever before. I can't claim that I discovered the secret of "on demand" inspiration; but the evidence strongly suggested that my self-imposed weekly deadline was helping to generate ideas for poems.

Put simply, I found I was starting to look at the world more

"poetically": pushing a trolley round a supermarket, watching a geriatric cat go about her business, reading a newspaper headline about a distant disaster . . . and finding that I was sensing the possibility of a poem.

They say that to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. My experience has been that to a man with poem to be published every Friday, everything starts to look like a sonnet - or, at least, a rhyming couplet.

Or perhaps a better, more accurate analogy would be with what might happen if you started carrying a camera with you, wherever you went. Suddenly, I suspect, you would start to see interesting images everywhere, just waiting to be captured and preserved in pixels.

## But what about quality?

My other big worry when I embarked on the project was to do with quality. In the previous 15 years or so, I had probably written no more than a couple of dozen poems that really

pleased me, and only a handful that I felt excited about. How could I possibly hope to match the standard of my best work, hammering out a poem every seven days?

The answer, of course, is that I couldn't. When meeting a deadline becomes our first priority, we have no choice but to relax our standards. The Quality Control department has to be given the day off, or the job simply won't get done on time. Which must be a bad thing, surely?

Not necessarily. Clearly, when we do any kind of work, it's useful and important to have a sense of how well we have performed: whether what we have produced is good, outstanding, or barely adequate. Without it, we might delude ourselves into thinking that we were a once-in-a-generation genius; or, more likely, fail to recognise that a 6 out of 10 piece of work could be at least a 7.5 with a little more time and effort.

But for people like me - and I suspect that, in this regard, I'm not at all unusual - the compulsion to impose rigorous standards on our own output has at least as many negative

consequences as positive ones.

Rather than spurring us to on to do something better, Quality Control often prevents us from doing it at all. We think, "If I can't write a poem/make a speech/bake a cake as well as Emily Dickinson/Martin Luther King/That Bloke off Bake-Off, I may as well not bother, and avoid embarrassing myself."

In any case, I am here to tell you that for me, writing poem after poem, free from my usual anxieties about whether my efforts might meet some externally referenced standard of excellence, was a massively liberating experience. For the first time in my life, I found was able to enjoy writing, completely free of the crippling inhibition that comes from an overwhelming sense of impending artistic disaster.

But the big question, of course, is whether banishing fear of failure enabled me to write any half-way decent poems? Or did the willing suspension of my usually ferocious self-critical instincts result in 52 small chunks of undistinguished doggerel?

I know I should leave you to be the judge of that. But, for what's it worth, I'm very happy with the year's output. There are, by my reckoning, around half a dozen weeks when the poem simply didn't work out. I may have had the ghost of an idea; but, on these occasions, I was simply unable to put flesh on it and bring it to life. Among the other poems, there is at least something I like about each of them.

## Not better or worse, but different

Are any as good as the best poems I wrote by the old "waiting-often-for-months-on-end-for-the-muse-to-pay-me-a-visit" method? Again, I should leave others to draw their own conclusions<sup>0</sup>.

But, putting aside the question of whether they are better or worse than my earlier efforts, I would say that my poem-a-week output is different in kind from what I'd done before.

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<sup>0</sup> Worth mentioning in passing that when I recently put together a collection of 50 of my favourite poems, I included 19 from my 2011 poem-a-week project.

Many, I can't possibly deny, are very slight - not just short in length, but lacking any great emotional depth or "big" intellectual theme. But, in some cases, that seems to me a strength rather than a weakness.

I've enjoyed the discovery that a poem can be a verbal snapshot of a small, incidental, almost mundane moment. And if I had to choose my three favourite poems from the year, I'd almost certainly include *6*, which some serious-minded people might well regard as a bit of verbal fluff. Perhaps I should already have known it, but I feel that I've learned it's OK to be un-pompous, un-portentous, even playful, in a poem. For me, slight is all right.

In terms of subject matter, too, writing regularly has made a small but significant difference to my output. Many of the poems here are on themes that I have long been interested in, but I'd never previously tackled politics (*32*) or sport (*25*), or what I suppose we might call philosophy (*39*); and I'm very glad I did.

The lesson here, I think, is that when you create a lot, relieving

the pressure on yourself to be brilliant, you can afford to be more experimental.

Another way in which I think these poems elude direct comparison with those I had written previously, is by existing as a sequence. I didn't set out to keep a kind of poetic diary, or to create the verse equivalent of a concept album, but inevitably, the poems I wrote reflected my changing moods and preoccupations and the major "plot developments" in my life, as well as (to a lesser extent) dramatic external events, such as hurricanes, financial crises, and riots.

For me, this lends the individual poems some added interest, and perhaps also a greater cumulative emotive power. (I rather like the way, for example, that some of the later poems return to subjects tackled earlier on, usually, I think, more successfully.) In any case, I'd argue that the whole is maybe just a little greater than the sum of the parts.

The other clear-cut plus of producing poems regularly may also be one that I should have expected. It turns out that the more you do of something, the better you get at it.

More specifically, what I mean is that I feel writing a poem a week has made me a more accomplished poetic craftsman, just as I would be a more skilful carpenter if I had constructed 52 tables in 2011. Poems like *34* and *43*, for example, are, I think, simply better made than anything I had written before (though it's important to recognise that isn't the same as saying they are better poems; the analogy with carpentry can only be taken so far.)

One last very positive outcome from freeing my creative mind from its customary over-self-critical shackles. During the year, I had a quietish period in my working life. With time on my hands, I wrote several short stories, and made a start on several more. I had never attempted the form before, and enjoyed the experiment enormously. I'm certain I wouldn't have done this if it hadn't been for the poem-a-week project. It seems a liberated creative mind is eager to explore new territory.

Most importantly, though, by many miles, the value of this exercise has been the enjoyment it has given me. By shaking off the sense that if a poem isn't *The Wasteland* it isn't worth the effort of typing, I have been able to stop robbing myself of the

pleasure and satisfaction that writing gives me.

I shouldn't, of course, have needed a system of self-imposed deadlines to do this; but I did, and I'm very glad I admitted it to myself.

## The relevance to you?

I'm not sure how necessary it is for me to spell out more clearly how what I learned from my poem-a-week project might be of value to you. But I would prefer to err on the side of being too explicit than leave you wondering why you have bothered to read this far.

So first, I'll quickly make the general point that everything I've talked about here can almost certainly be applied to your chosen field of creative endeavour, whether you are a novelist, a sculptor, a song-writer, or a baker of beautiful cakes. And second, I should underline that I'm not suggesting you should necessarily adopt a once- a-week discipline, which might not be realistic if you are a novelist, for example. What I'm advocating

is setting yourself deadlines, preferably quite ambitious ones, and then doing everything you possibly can to ensure you meet them.

Those preliminaries despatched, here's the bullet point summary of what I think you might be able to learn from my experience over this last year:

- **Don't wait for inspiration:** just roll up your sleeves and get the job started, trusting your creative unconscious to turn up and help, at some stage in the process.
- **Let your standards slip, liberate your creativity:** by focusing on meeting the deadline, you can free yourself from that inhibiting "this has to be brilliant or it's not worth doing" feeling.
- **Don't be afraid to be simple or slight:** if you are going to produce a lot of work, quickly, it probably won't be weighty, dense, complex. That may well be a good thing.

- **Create a body of work:** if you are going to produce a lot of work, quickly, you can afford to be more experimental, return to ideas that interest you, and have another crack at things that didn't quite work out as you hoped the first time you tried them.
- **Practice makes . . . well, slightly better:** writing 52 poems in a year, or baking a cake a day for a month, or composing a symphony in six months, doesn't guarantee you'll produce a masterpiece, but it will certainly sharpen your skills and improve your technique.
- **Free your creativity . . . to go where it wants:** you may find, as I have, that once you liberate your creative mind (paradoxically, by imposing constraints on it), it will surprise you by applying itself to new and completely different challenges.

- **Just express yourself** - there aren't many things more enjoyable or satisfying than creative self-expression. And, broadly speaking, the more of it you do, the greater the pleasure it will give you. Start work now and stop robbing yourself of the pleasure of self-expression.

## A poem a week: how I did it

Just in case you're interested, I thought I might quickly clarify what I mean, exactly, when I say that I wrote a poem a week.

The goal I set myself was to "publish" a new poem every Friday, but I'm using that word very loosely: all I did each Friday was to give the Word file containing the poem in question a name and number and put it in the "finished poems" folder that I'd created for the purpose.

But the poem published each Friday may not have been started earlier that same week. Throughout the year, I began writing new poems whenever a subject occurred to me. So quite often,

on a Thursday, I would look at three or four fragments and wonder which I could get into some sort of shape by the following day.

And, just as the poems weren't necessarily started in the week I published them, neither were they finished when I put them in the "2011 poetry project" folder. I've continued to tweak and fiddle with nearly all of them, and I'm sure that most can still be improved.

One rule I did set myself, and which I have observed, is that I wouldn't remove or replace a poem once it was published. As I mentioned earlier, there are (in my opinion) half a dozen poems here that just don't work on any level, but which I have left in as a record of the year's creative ebb and flow - and also in the hope that perhaps I might still look back on them and find a way of breathing life into their corpses.

Finally, a confession. During the year, I did twice, in successive weeks (*19* and *20*), pick up old ideas that originated before 2011, and develop them for publication here. Sorry. I shouldn't have done it. And yes, I know I was only cheating myself.

# In praise of walking

Since my aim here is to share with you anything I think could be of value in your creative life, I can't resist mentioning my evangelical belief in the power of walking, as a means of jolting, rattling and shaking the dormant imagination into life.

Most of the poems here were conceived on foot, and quite a few of them were largely written that way, too. On several occasions, I returned home after a walk with a poem complete in my head, just needing to be transcribed.

Obviously, I can see that the rhythmic nature of brisk walking makes it particularly conducive to composing poetry; but I'm convinced that for anyone in need of a fresh perspective and a bright idea, in any field of creative activity, putting one foot in front of the other, repeatedly, is the way to go.

Anyway, I think that's more than enough preamble. Come back with me now, if you will, to the frozen wastes of early January 2011, where a man is staring at a blank screen with an

almost equally blank mind, waiting for his fingers to start tapping out something resembling the first line of the first poem of the year that lies ahead . . .

# The poems

*1.*

## New Year

Improve my French,  
Increase my flexibility,  
Be firmer, yet more kind,  
Give more to charity.  
Drink less, seize  
every opportunity;  
through meditation, learn  
to gaze upon infinity.

And next year, and the next, and next, what then?  
Resolve again, again, again, again.

2.

## Supermarket conundrum

Why is it when, in supermarkets, we  
see somebody we'd rather not, and read  
in their averted eyes that they are no  
more keen to pass the time of day with us,  
our trolleys collide  
head on  
down every aisle?

3.

## Why I don't want this puppy

Because my mind's eye sees too easily  
the winter morning when, coming down  
before it's light, I find you, grey-muzzled now,  
lifeless and cooling in your basket.

(Or, worse, the other way about:  
you trotting down the stairs, me pegged out.)

4.

## All I ask

A portion of my life in which not much  
occurs. No endings or beginnings.  
Ongoingness . . . yet  
with a sense of possibility, and  
just a whiff of revolution in the air.

Is that too much to ask?

5.

## Fifty four

The birthday beyond which  
life's only consolation  
comes to be hearing of  
achievement remarkable  
for the age of the achiever:  
the sub-four-hour marathon  
run by an OAP; the  
fairly well reviewed  
first novel, published in  
late middle age; the egg,  
soft-boiled and eaten,  
unassisted, just shy of 93.

6.

## Sports Science: exam

"Field events, specially the throwing ones, lack the excitement and crowd-appeal of track."  
Discus.

7.

## Travel essentials

My father, on his travels, always carried salt and pepper, in twists of silver foil, for fear of being forced, in some far-flung airport café, to face the horror of under-seasoned food.

Whisky, too, but that's a different story.

8.

## Day and night

The brief: a two line poem, inspired by  
Robert Herrick's *Dreams*  
("Here we are all, by day; by night we're hurl'd  
By dreams, each one into a several world.")

We spend our days in search of words that make some  
sense  
Our nights . . . unending, random, meaningless,  
immense.

9.

## Dog psychology

Training this puppy, I have been learning  
to think like a dog.

Dogs like to know whose lead to follow.  
You have to be firm with dogs, but  
it matters even more to be consistent,  
using the same few simple words  
to mean the same few simple things.  
If you hurt dogs, by accident or otherwise,  
they'll lick your hand and want to be your friend.  
To stop dogs doing something bad, you  
have to make not doing it more pleasurable.  
Dogs will do almost anything for a tasty treat.  
Dogs are always, always hungry, for food or love,  
as if there were an endless void inside them.

Dog psychology: I wonder if it might  
have wider applications?

10.

## What happens when I meditate

My mind yips and yaps like a lonely puppy;  
it helpfully reminds me of things  
I've failed to do or buy (cheese, olive oil,  
- oh yes, and toilet rolls); it firmly  
but politely points out flaws  
in my character, my logic, my plans; suggests  
ways in which the meal I cooked last night  
could be improved (paprika - just a hint)  
it whispers . . .  
sweet nothings  
puts two and two together  
dredges up lyrics from songs  
I've long forgotten, lists adverbs I'm fond of  
but don't use often enough (vituperatively,  
fissiparously), and names  
of goalkeepers I once admired  
(though not, of course, as much as Gordon Banks)  
but haven't thought about for years -  
Springett, Macedo, Bonetti, West - and  
wonders whatever became of them;

continued . . .

it cogitates  
it calculates  
it speculates  
it adumbrates  
opinionates  
pontificates  
it projects blue movies onto the backs of my fluttering  
eyelids . . .

It's never quiet,  
never still,  
never,  
never,  
never  
at rest.

11.

## A watched clock . . .

14.28

I look away and count to 10

14.28

I look away and count to 20

14.28

I look away and let time pass, unmeasured

Still 14.28

I look away and let time pass,  
then think of all the things I need to do today, the  
phone calls I should make, the  
emails I must write, the  
the food I plan to buy and cook . . .

14.28

I look away and let time pass, then  
think of all the things I need to do today, and  
all the people I have ever known, and  
all the places I have been, and all  
the books that I have read, and  
every song I've ever heard . . .

Still 14.28

Your train is due at 14.31

12.

## A 60s boyhood

Home from school, change shorts for jeans  
then pedal hard down to the village green:  
always a kick-about waiting to happen, with  
older, tougher boys, who nod me wordlessly  
into their game, like barons allowing a peasant  
to enter their woods, and take a bird or two.  
Then "three and in", until the light fades,  
playing flat out, straining to sound not-posh  
straining harder to play not-posh  
a fingertip save my best hope of  
being rated posh-but-OK.

Then Saturdays, before  
the men arrive to play their match,  
the posts netted in readiness,  
bestowing a blissful latticed rustle  
on each toe-poked goal.

13.

## Sick and tired

I'll tell you whose face I'm sick and tired of.

I'll tell you whose ideas to me seem stale and flat these days.

I'll tell you in whose company I'd like to spend less time,  
whose jokes I'd rather never hear again,  
whose thoughts on life and death I'd love to live without,  
if I could choose.

Yours truly's. That's whose.

14.

## Old cat

She nests beneath our bed now  
and only comes out to eat  
(we leave her bowl nearby).

Her fur is dull and matted,  
that rough tongue no longer reaches  
where she wants to wash.

Her hips are gone;  
her back legs trail behind her  
(she hasn't been outside for weeks).

She wears a baffled air,  
as if no longer sure  
what being a cat involves . . .

Today I took her on my lap, and scratched her head. She  
purred  
and purred. That final visit to the vet may have to be  
deferred.

15.

## Whereupon

*A poem on the 35th anniversary of our first meeting*

Half a lifetime ago . . .  
before Lech Walesa and Duran Duran  
before flares went out, then came in again  
before Gazza's tears, and Botham's Ashes  
before Reagan, and Clinton, and both the Bushes  
before capitalism's triumph and communism's failure,  
before Gordon and Jamie and Heston (though not Delia),  
before Thatcher came in and the miners went out  
before Starbucks, and Costa, and Subway, and Pret  
before Madonna's first single, before Harry Potter  
before Google, and Facebook, and Flickr and Twitter  
before the last three popes and Princess Diana  
before global warming, Sting, and Madonna  
. . . a boy asked a girl to go for a drink,  
and she went,  
whereupon  
it all kicked off.

16.

## Benefit of hindsight

Looking back on yesterday,  
and the weekend before last,  
and 1986, I see  
how beautiful and blessed our lives were then,  
not knowing it would rain today,  
still to enjoy that picnic on the beach,  
yet to experience whatever  
1987 held in store.

17.

## A Scotsman gets his cholesterol test results

It's very, very high  
I'm going to die  
And pretty soon  
If I cannae get it doon.

18.

## One last kill

Three years or more since she last dragged in  
a fledgeling, she sits by the window  
watching a blackbird bob around outside:  
a baby - reddish, rough-edged, unfinished-looking.

The door is slightly open,  
the bird oblivious.

Instinct at least unblunted by age,  
she calculates angles and trajectories;  
tail flicking from side to side.

Might there be one last kill left in her?

19.

## Fade

Old friend

I think we've know each other long enough  
for me to give it to you straight.

You look like shit.

You move

arrhythmically; as if you're carrying  
a fragile load you mustn't break;

(your knees are shot).

You wear

loose-fitting trousers, and a baffled air,  
as if permanently locked outside

a door that's shut.

Your face

is pasty, puffy - like the rest of you;  
now everything that once was firm

is loose and slack.

continued . . .

You stand  
like one expecting to receive a blow;  
as if the weight of centuries  
is on your back.

And yet  
I feel for you a tenderness I never did before,  
watching from day to day your long  
slow fade to black.

20.

## Middle-aged man

See how he stands, his shoulders back  
to compensate for belly,  
his head slumped forward on his chest,  
his legs as weak as jelly.

Now watch him run, his gasping breath  
and funny shambling gait,  
oh middle-aged man, run faster  
or you're going to be late.

He's tired, and now it's time for bed.  
Let's watch him as he sleeps:  
he stirs; he wakes at half past two,  
and weeps, and weeps, and weeps.

21.

## Minus the wind

In Alabama, a mighty wind  
has blown whole lives away.  
Houses, streets and towns existed,  
no longer do today.

Places where people laboured to build  
meaning from nothingness,  
forged bonds to tether them to earth;  
swept into the abyss.

Five thousand miles away, the same  
has happened in my mind -  
devastation - all structures gone -  
(minus the mighty wind).

22.

## Ups and downs

Six weeks ago or so, I felt as if  
I had it in me to learn something new, be  
someone else, grow stronger and more flexible, help  
others find fulfilment in their lives, save  
an endangered species from extinction, stand  
an egg on its end, even write  
a poem worth reading.

These last few days,  
not so much.

23.

## Eggsplain this to me

When I break an egg to fry  
however hard I try  
I always break the yolk. Fact.

Yet when I scramble eggs in haste  
and smash them in the pan, no time to waste,  
invariably the yolks remain intact.

24.

## My failing powers

Heretofore

I've loved you immoderately  
with a never-failing ardour.

Henceforward

my love will remain undimmed  
but the ardour might get a bit harder.

25.

## Flow

*Roger Federer, Wimbledon 2011*

Seeing you float, suspended, weightless, just  
above this patch of South West London turf,  
for what might well be one last time, I bring to mind  
past champions: names from my childhood - Laver,  
Emerson, and Hoad; contemporaries  
of mine - Borg, Connors, McEnroe; then those  
who followed them - Sampras, Agassi, Becker;  
careers long over now. And, as I think of them,  
I watch you, young enough to be my son,  
retreat as if on rails, and rip a forehand  
you never would have missed three years ago  
a millimetre wide . . .

You win. Without the ease you would have then.  
And as you leave the court, I wonder how,  
when we look back on this, you will be rated,  
not just as a player of games, but a maker of beauty.

continued . . .

Not, of course, with Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Bach.  
But Larkin? Hockney? Baryshnikov? Who,  
in the accountancy of the sublime,  
will we reckon more in credit; calculate  
to have astounded us more often with  
the capacity of our kind, given  
us more cause to stretch our eyes,  
and laugh in disbelief?

Impossible to say. But this I know:  
that if I should be here in 20, 30 years,  
I'll still see, as clearly as I have today,  
your feet flicker above a scuffed white line,  
your soft racket snake around your body,  
your annihilating flow.

26.

## Glitter

This week's brief: a poem  
using the *Ubi Sunt* formula

Where are the platform boots of long ago,  
Where the embroidered velvet loons?  
Where are the girls in cheesecloth smocks,  
the imperfect kisses under perfect moons?

Where the patchouli-scented afghan coats  
that smelled of dog at the first drop of rain?  
Where are the boys with sequins on their faces,  
applied with care, removed with rending pain?

Where are the vinyl discs of yesteryear,  
the friendly drugs that drove nobody mad?  
Where is the knowledge that the things you loved  
were hated by your mum and dad?

All gone, the glitter of the way life used to be,  
Except in attics, vintage shops, and memory.

27.

## In transit

Right now, I'm in a transitional phase,  
a place where everything seems impermanent,  
a period when things, instead of being stable  
and secure, are constantly in flux.

According to my wife,  
it's called life.

28.

## Family legend

According to family legend, my father, separated from his parents for five years or more - having parted from them a boy on his way to school, and now a soldier about to go to war - approached a familiar-looking stranger on the platform at King's Cross, and said, "Excuse me, sir, I believe you may be my father."

Whether they threw heavy great-coated arms around each other, and wept wordless tears of joy onto each other's faces, family legend does not record.

But in the light of everything that's happened since, it seems unlikely.

29.

## Buying clothes at M&S, in one's mid-50s

Looking around, it struck me  
I was the youngest person there.  
For a moment, I felt elation,  
Soon followed by despair.

30.

## Poème

*Cette semaine: écrire un poème en Français  
. . . sans dictionnaire.*

Un poème en Français? Impossible!  
Mais voilà l'objectif que je cible.

Un poème en Français? Trop difficile  
(un dictionnaire serait bien utile).

Un poème en Français? Un vrai défi:  
un pays inconnu, un orage sans abri.

Un poème en Français? Mais sur quel thème?  
Bien sûr, sur toi, la femme que j'aime.

31.

## The most depressing thing

The most depressing thing about my life?  
That it can be in every way so blessed -  
as long on comfort as it's short on strife,  
so packed with all the things that I love best:  
dog, children, friends, oh yes, a gorgeous wife -  
and yet I get so easily depressed.

32.

## Anyone else predict a riot?

To surge, to be part of something  
seething, to run where no one runs,  
to see men bearing shields fall back before you,  
to hear above your head the whack and thrum  
of rotor blades, and, as the camera  
moves in for your close-up, to bend and lift  
some heavy object which, through your agency,  
will make plate glass explode . . .

Nope,  
can't imagine why that might sound like fun  
to a boy from an estate with no job,  
no dad, no plans, no place to be,  
and no immediate prospect of an  
interesting though sadly unpaid internship.

33.

## After the breeding season

Late August, walking by the Ley,  
we pause to watch two grebes  
perform their lovers' dance;  
heads electric, syncopated,  
eyes locked as if by laser beam.

"A bit late for that," you say.  
"It's long past the breeding season."

"Mm," I reply, pushing aside  
the collar of your waterproof,  
to brush my lips against your neck.

34.

## Those Dog Brand Values, in full

First, of course, **Unswerving Adoration;**

we dogs think nothing but the best of you.

We love the things - whatever they may be - you do.

When you walk through the door, no bounds to our elation.

In second place, there's **Eagerness to Please;**

We dance, we lick your hands and face, we caper,

We wait by the front door to fetch your paper,

Our highest aim, that you should lead a life of ease.

Then, third up, comes **Dependency** - on you,

our stars and moon, the sun our lives rotate around,

the one we're guaranteed to feel great around.

(Oh yes, you feed us, so we'd starve without you, too.)

Fourth comes **Anxiety**, the way we feel

when left outside a shop, or out of sight

of you for more than 30 seconds (never mind a night;

the thought's enough to make us whine and howl and squeal).

Last, **Doggedness**, a trait worth admiration;

but sadly, though it sounds as if we should,

we hardly ever do possess it. So it's good

there's always that **Unswerving Adoration.**

35.

## Merc

I saw a bloke with a bandaged foot  
climb painfully out  
of a car that must have cost him 50 grand  
(it looked like gout)

And I knew from his face that a great  
big black fuck-off Merc  
was worth precisely less-than-nothing to  
a pain-wracked jerk

36.

## Signs of maturity?

Driving to Heathrow earlier  
to scoop up our youngest  
off a post-gap year flight,  
you started down Whiteladies Road,  
which meant we got badly snarled up  
on the Triangle, where traffic  
always  
moves  
at a  
crawl.

I would have taken us down  
St Michael's Hill,  
which would have meant we reached  
the motorway a good 10 minutes faster.

Well, five.

But here's the reason why I feel the need  
to tell this story, boring as the weather.  
I didn't say a word.  
I kept my lips so tightly clamped together  
I thought my teeth might bleed.

37.

## One long holiday

This heat,  
That lizard skittering across a poolside rock,  
those cicadas ceaselessly celebrating  
something or other,  
the way we eat, under bougainvillea,  
tearing bread with our hands,  
drinking rough wine that never tasted so good.

It feels like we've been here before.  
No, cancel that.  
It feels as if we've led this life these last 30 years,  
with short cold grey interruptions for  
giving birth,  
building a career,  
buying and selling property.

38.

## Places I'm about to leave

Places I'm about to leave - holiday houses,  
hotel rooms, even home - smell bad to me.  
We've been happy-slash-sad within these walls.  
We've eaten meals, made love, fought, watched TV.  
But now the lease we hold on being here  
is running down, the landlord wants us out.

Let's go now.  
Let's leave while it's still a choice.  
Let's get the hell out before  
we're overpowered by the sweet, sad smell.

39.

## Green/blue

The Himba people use one word to mean  
the colours that we know as blue and green.  
Is that because they can't tell green from blue?  
Are trees and sky, to their eyes, of a hue?  
Or do quite different things that share a name  
in time become, inexorably, the same?  
If so, let's coin a single term for you and me together,  
then wait to lose our selves completely in each other.

40.

## Offering

While you were out  
I have hoovered the sitting room.  
I have hoovered it quite thoroughly,  
as well as I am able.  
I have almost certainly not  
hoovered the sitting room as well as  
you would have done yourself.

Accept this offering.

41.

## What we did earlier

Nice, wasn't it? (It was for me.)  
But, listening as you run the bath  
next door, I can't help wishing now  
we'd taken those few minutes  
just to lie in each other's arms,  
touching hair and faces,  
landing the odd butterfly kiss  
and laughing at things our kids  
and dog, respectively, have said and done.

42.

## My father's words

When he was dying, and bored almost to death  
with the doing of it, I asked my father  
why he no longer wrote. "No point," he said.  
"Who would publish me now?"

"But what about the satisfaction of  
putting words together well? The pleasure  
you might give to family and friends?  
I'd love to read a memoir of your early life."

"No point, no point," he murmured,  
turning to the wall.

He never wrote again  
(I never saw it if he did),  
going into the night believing that  
without reviews and royalty statements  
his words were worth nothing,  
nothing at all.

43.

## Counselling course

Today, we'll start with the basics;  
smiling in an insightful way,  
and saying "Aha!" in a tone that suggests,  
"That's just what I thought you might say".

Tomorrow, all morning, a workshop  
entitled "What it Means to Be Real".  
For the rest of the day, we'll be working on saying,  
"And how does that make you feel?"

First thing Wednesday morning:  
Strategies for Not Yawning.  
Then later in the day, an extremely pressing issue:  
glancing at the clock when the client takes a tissue.

We won't say a word on Thursday,  
till our silence resounds through the room.  
(If the client can't think of a subject worth raising,  
it's fine to keep totally schtum.)

On Friday, to finish, a challenge:  
(Don't worry, not as hard as it sounds.)  
We'll be practising saying, "We need to end there.  
That'll be 55 pounds."

44.

## Reasons to be cheerful

*The brief:*

*For once, to steer well clear of all that's sad and hateful,  
and list 10 things for which I damn well know  
I should be grateful . . .*

At number 1, my darling wife:  
my love, my life,  
and mother of my kids, who  
naturally, are numbers 2

And 3 and 4. New in at 5 - my god,  
I'd say quite unreservedly.  
(Sorry, unconscious anagram - I meant  
"my dog" - who loves me undeservedly.)

At number 6, a much loved sister I can talk to,  
and 7, the Downs, a place of beauty we can walk to.

At number 8, my friends:  
I don't have more than two or three  
But those I do possess  
are platinum to me.

continued . . .

And then at number 9  
my health; not great, but good enough  
to do most things that give me pleasure  
and finally, at 10, the English language;  
word-hoard; store of endless treasure.

45.

## He writes another poem about death

And when he's done, putting down his pen, allows  
himself  
a small self-satisfied smile;  
"Unless I'm much mistaken, I've said the last word on  
that subject, for a while."

46.

## Rock, music

### *Wilco, Colston Hall, 27 November 2011*

Now every gig I go to takes me back  
to every band I've ever seen. Tonight,  
I'm seeing Bowie on the Ziggy tour in 73,  
and REM at Glastonbury,  
oh yes, and 10CC.

The lighting brings back Bruce at Wembley (82?).  
And something in the way the singer holds the mike  
reminds me of the Rainbow, Finsbury Park, The Who.

Now Genesis at Drury Lane are merging with  
. . . yes, Crowded House last year at Hammersmith.  
And Cockney Rebel, Jimmy Page,  
the Average Whites, Neil Young and Man  
are jostling in my mind's eye on the stage,  
a super-jam.

It's late, your head is heavy on my shoulder,  
and I find myself recalling Caravan,  
the Civic Hall, in April 76: how, as we left with ringing  
ears,  
I put my arm around you,  
felt your weight lean into me,  
and knew I'd found my love, my rock, my music for the  
years.

47.

Apparently, 93% of all  
communication is non-verbal

(It must be true, I hear it all the time.  
So today, instead of writing a poem,  
I'm doing a mime.)

*47a.*

Apparently, 93% of all  
communication is non-verbal (2)

*47b.*

48.

## Care of the Soul

*by Thomas Moore*

It says here that we all have one,  
deserving our attention.  
To cater for mine's every need's  
my firmly held intention.  
But there's just one little issue  
that I think I ought to mention  
(I wouldn't, but my ignorance  
is causing hyper-tension):

I haven't found my soul yet,  
I don't know where to look.  
Perhaps location's covered  
in another self-help book.

49.

## Decision

I've made up my mind. Well, very nearly.  
How was I so blind that I couldn't see clearly?  
Why wasn't it obvious - glaringly so -  
that the choice I've made was the right way to go?  
What was it, I wonder, that made me unable  
to see Option A was the best on the table?  
It's true, I'd concede, that to follow this track  
means spurning all others; there's no turning back.  
And yes, it's a pity I'll never find out  
how things might have been; but no room for doubt.  
Though, oddly, I find I'm beginning to see  
there's a lot to be said for Option B,  
the one I rejected so cavalierly . . .  
But I've made up my mind. Well, very nearly.

50.

## Needless love

I've read that love attains its highest state  
when we divest it, totally, of need;  
become the gourmet gazing at a plate  
with admiration, but no pang of greed;  
the mountaineer who climbs for climbing's sake,  
not out of lust to own another summit;  
the guru who gains wisdom's highest peak  
and doesn't think to make a penny from it.

Could you and I, one day, be needless lovers;  
glide forward, frictionless, unhindered by  
desire's drag?  
Why not, if such a thing's achieved by others?  
But first, if you don't mind, before we try,  
let's have a shag.

51.

## Kissing in glasses

Last night, before we went to sleep,  
almost 35 years and seven months after  
we kissed for the first time,  
we kissed for the first time  
while both wearing glasses.

(Bit of frame-clash, when we went nose-to nose.  
Kissing with our teeth out next, I suppose.)

*A bonus poem for Christmas*

## Tinsel

Tinsel in offices, snaking round  
workstations, connecting cubicles, fringing  
sales charts and motivational posters, drooping  
twixt printer and water-cooler,  
helps make this such a joyous time of year

52.

## Annual report

This year, in testing conditions,  
against a backdrop of continued turbulence,  
and ever increasing competitive pressures,  
we have not performed outstandingly well,  
we did not continue to deliver steady-if-  
unspectacular growth,  
and we were not gratified by the resilience our business  
showed.

Neither did we conduct a major strategic review,  
or invest substantially in our brand (which is our most  
valuable asset),  
or maintain our spending on R&D (which is the lifeblood  
of our business),  
or take a decision to focus on key markets and core  
capabilities.

We did not make a renewed commitment to anything, or  
re-assess our priorities going forward, or redouble our  
efforts to squeeze maximum profit  
out of every sale.

No, this year we've done more important work.  
This year, we've been learning to fail.

Thank you for reading, now go  
and create something . . .