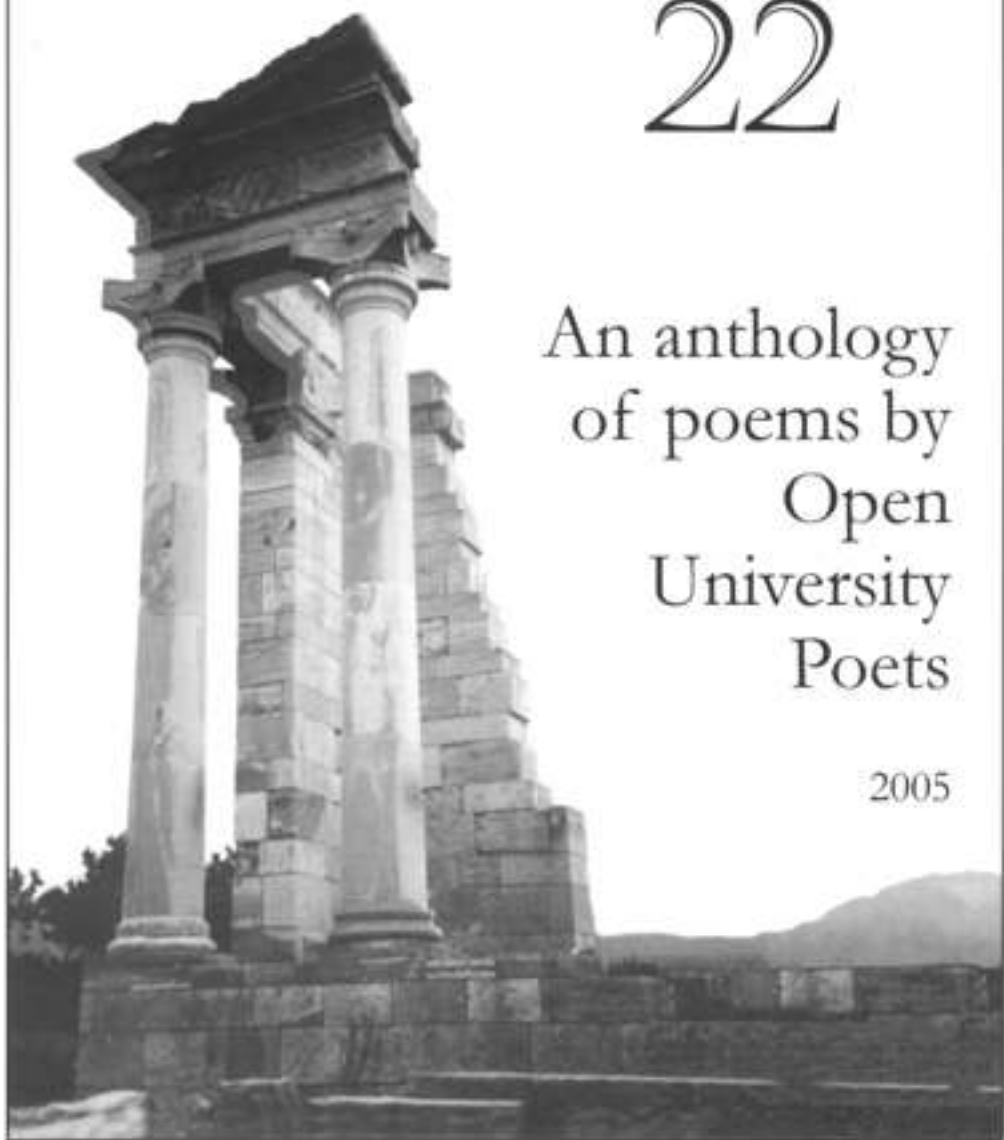


# OPENINGS

22

An anthology  
of poems by  
Open  
University  
Poets

2005



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## Introduction

OU Poets is a Poetry Society open to any student or staff member, past or present, of the Open University. At the time of going to press there are about 120 members from all over the UK, with some in Ireland and in mainland Europe.

Members of the society submit poems to a magazine, which is produced 5 times a year, each one having a different voluntary editor. The magazine is not a publication *per se* and is strictly produced by the members for the members. There is a section for comment and criticism of members' work.

At the end of the year, members are asked to vote for the 20 poems they most appreciated from the 5 magazines produced that year. Those with the most votes, allowing for no more than one poem per poet, appear in the following year's issue of *Openings*. The anthology is as broad-based as the society itself and reflects the varied backgrounds, interests and tastes of the members.

If you would like more information about OU Poets, please contact the Secretary: -

Steve Horsfall,  
45 Masons Road,  
Hemel Hempstead,  
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or go to <http://www.oupoets.org.uk>. (opinions on the webpage are not necessarily those of the society).

*Jenny Hamlett*

## **Writing Before Candlelight**

Sunset through the window brings sea in.  
I have hidden in this corner  
to watch a wisp of black cloud begin  
to mask the sky. I can barely see to write.

I'm pitched back into another's world,  
her apparition so strong  
that though I do not know her name  
her thoughts dance in mine.

Her long hair is braided. Her grey skirt sweeps  
the floor as she glides to my table.  
Quick as the green flash when sun dips  
below the horizon she begins. Ink splutters

in the struggle to link paper and thought  
before the wolf-dark gathers itself – to spring.  
This quiet is snatched for both of us  
from baking, washing pots, cooking meals.

Too fast, the outside colours change.  
The sea turns metal, black and grey  
as into this slit of day, after sun, before night  
she and I fight for self expression

*Cold in the earth – and the deep snow piled above thee...*  
she writes and I write this...  
Far back in time, far above me in skill  
yet in this last light effort we are sisters still.

*The line in italics is a quotation from "Remembrance" by Emily Bronte*

*Carol Washber*

**Castelleone: via del Castello**

A lizard bellies up the village wall,  
slides into a crack between old stones.  
Sun blanches a dusty street.

They arrive.  
Young, strong Roman gods  
displaced to erect smooth kitchens  
in rustic houses.

I stumble Italian to their indulgence  
and watch for a while  
deft hands assemble,  
legs taut against jeans as they lift.

Upstairs, I listen to strange voices,  
open-vowelled and languorous  
or sharp and quick.

The hard heat of the slow day pulses.  
My skin is flushed and damp.

And the wedding ring feels tight on my finger.

*Merryn Williams*

### **Going Gently, 2003**

The doctor asked, “Is he the sort  
of man to stand his ground and fight,  
reject my verdict, brace his foot  
against the dying of the light?”  
We hoped you would. But you did not.

I would have tried to squeeze the last  
drops from the grape. With all my might  
(I thought), I’d struggle. But you passed  
so gently, calmly from our sight,  
we sat in shock. You didn’t fight.

Rats in a corner fight. The young  
will brawl, or kill. Their blood runs warm.  
All spring, they fought. But you, a man  
who never put on uniform,  
declined to argue. And were gone.

And left our earth without the sun.

*Dennis Leckey*

## **Apache Braves**

We wore bright feathers  
(can you see them now?)  
and covered in war paint  
our near naked  
summer-browned  
seaside bodies.

We energetically whooped,  
fired arrows at each other,  
threw sheath knives  
within an inch  
of our bare toes.

We were a tribe  
of Apache braves  
bound by the blood  
that pounded as we ran.

We were not truly fearless  
but in play lost the concept of fear  
as we slid down cliffs,  
hid behind rocks, jumped from heights,  
lay in the long and short grass  
crawling on our tummies like adders.  
The ant, the ladybird, close  
to our panting faces.

We fell, like feathers  
in a dream,  
soft in our beds.  
Imaginary adventures  
flowed around us –  
games for all those tomorrows.

*Peter Godfrey*

### **Badger's Run**

Badger – a dog,  
Flies in warp drive,  
Spaced out between  
The dandelion stars.  
His is a universe of  
Happiness where the sky  
Is blue and bumble bee  
Spaceships circulate  
Strange golden worlds  
Seeking unknown  
Civilisations to trade  
For pollens.  
But Badger races on  
Now he is the Dog Star  
And his constellation  
He marks by frequent  
Pawses for others, later,  
To understand:  
Badger was here first!  
This space belongs to me!  
And they will chuckle  
Raise one leg,  
A false salute,  
A counterclaim upon this  
Counterpane of brightest flowers.  
Badger flies on, running fast  
Because it is good  
To be a member of his race  
When the wind is warm  
About black nose and ears.  
The trees sparkle unfurling  
Their Sun interceptors  
And we all feel  
The sap rising.

*David Blaber*

**At the Brighton Festival Wendy Cope Told Us a Haiku  
Could Have a Title As Long As We Might Fancy**

then the seventeen  
syllables following hers  
promptly slipped my mind

all I remember  
is thought dry as sand, flowing  
in laughter, awry

so few men among  
the centuries of women  
sipping subversion

admit it's gentle,  
they said, pressing me to try  
the Madeira cake

but that's not haiku,  
I replied, as immigrant  
waiters poured more tea

I was always told  
a haiku is quite worthless  
if divorced from Zen

they were not disposed  
to pursue the argument,  
laughing with Wendy

a minority  
and male, I thought of maenads  
and smiled in silence

*Gloria Moreno-Castillo*

### **Let's Talk of Something Else**

Yes, the house next door, it's empty now.  
This is nothing, you should see the back,  
More overgrown than this, more of a fly tip.  
What can one do? That's the council's business.  
Yes, she's in prison now, that's all I know.  
And him, the kids, her mother, all are gone.  
No, I haven't, and don't want to see them.  
Of course we were good friends, but now, of course,  
What can one do? Let's talk of something else.  
I'm off to buy some fruit, apples and that;  
It seems my Betsy wasn't getting enough.  
Oh her, the experts said she killed her child.  
Cot deaths, for them, are like a nursery rhyme.  
Three magpies in a row. One for sorrow,  
Two for horror, and three for a prison sentence.  
That's the sort of thing they're hired for.  
They're finding wicked mothers everywhere;  
They hound them out, they sniff them from afar.  
But our GP, the one who sorted out  
My Betsy when she downed the button. Yes him.  
He'd actually seen the dead child. So had I.  
She'd called me in. But that's beside the point;  
That's before the experts came along.  
Unexplained and unexpected, they said,  
No proofs, no bruises. Charismatic. Distant.  
But our GP, he looked upset and pale.  
Three times he asked if I had seen the corpse;  
Three times I shrugged him off, Why should I want  
To get entangled in a case of murder?  
Killing one's own dear child. A lovely child!  
What a crime to go to prison for.  
Gives me the creeps. Let's talk of something else.

## Grandfather

His full white moustache,  
like a Pekinese' ears,  
tickly. His eyes looking ever  
towards the horizon  
below the peaked seaman's cap.

“Is she coming this morning?”  
My mother glad to wave me off  
on the daily walk; always the same route,  
we didn't talk. The old grey donkey  
brayed for peppermints  
when he saw us coming.

We returned to his house  
and small white-aproned grandma waiting.  
A tall butterscotch cupboard  
looked sticky to touch;  
on the top shelf a dark bottle,  
only mentioned in a whisper  
in a teetotal household;  
“Grandpa's medicine.”

My fingers tracing the miniature  
furrows of the chenille tablecloth;  
bobbles round the edge, several missing.  
Embossed top of Grandma's tin workbox;  
more work for exploring fingers,  
thistles and roses.

Smell of lavender, overlaid  
by 'extra-strong' mints.  
How quiet it was; the fire crackled  
and a small coal dropped  
like a stone in a well.  
Then the sing-song voice  
reading a story  
from one of two books  
kept just for me.

*Stewart Earl Emmott*

## **Hypnotised By Bees**

The vivid colours and soothing grace  
of nature on a sun warmed afternoon  
and the sweet scented, heady intoxicating  
    fragrance of catmint  
drifting to me on a delicate breeze  
draws and holds my attention –  
    and suddenly, I am  
        hypnotised by bees, –  
lost in wonder and fascination to their world.

And it delights the eyes the varieties of bees –  
    fawn coloured and powdered  
    fragranced for their dance  
their softly furred  
    and saffron banded bodies,  
    warmed by the glittering sun  
are spangled in the streams of light.

They have been loading since dawn  
    gathering their choice of scents.  
Now they are honey laden and  
    pollen dusted;  
hoverers on lace sewn wings  
    visiting each pitcher of nectar  
and hanging for a moment upside down –  
  
intent workers in a perfumed world.

*John Starbuck*

## **C R O W**

Bound, bound, went Crow,  
Free, free at last  
With a gawky wing-flap here and there;  
Especially there, across the moorland,  
More land now open  
To life across the peak;

And here came more life, people.

Together, they sucked their tongues  
And cawed at gamekeepers.

The gamekeepers snarled,  
Pointing to corpses  
Strung up along the poles,  
Saying We're not beat yet.

Crow silenced, waited for the long roll-out,  
Holding in his metal beak  
The thin end of the wedge.

*With apologies to the late Ted Hughes, who might have written something at the news of the Countryside & Rights of Way (CROW) Act coming into force in the Peak District in September 2004, and elsewhere thereafter.*

*Sally James*

### **This Love Thing**

Never lets you go  
fierce as a whirlwind  
it curls you in its vice  
picks you up, throws you down  
broken up, you search for the pieces  
stick them together  
the best way you can  
let time do its healing  
but it's still there  
lurking, smiling,  
not letting go.

*David Gildner*

### **Silver Birch**

Of course root damage was always a possibility  
undermining foundations, pipes and sewers,  
and the cars and windows  
in summer do get covered  
in a thick goo of sap  
and in the autumn the leaves  
block the gutters and drains,  
but it happened so quickly, unexpectedly,  
from somewhere at the back of consciousness  
aware of a sound like an angry wasp, a buzz  
as the chainsaws began their slaughter  
and two tall and slender silver birch lay like  
dismembered corpses on the back of a flatbed  
the view from the window gone forever.

*Anne Allinson*

## **The Seasons of Creation**

Black clouds obscure a watery Winter sun  
and threatened rain hangs heavy overhead;  
depression darkens mood and work begun  
in hope is laid aside, for hope is dead;  
yet reason urges that as seasons run  
their destined course, the mind picks up its thread;  
when snowdrops thrust through frozen earth and snow  
and life awakens, poetry will flow.

When Spring enlivens all the woods with green  
and melted ice swells every rushing brook,  
when fragile wood anemones are seen  
the writer takes up his abandoned book  
and characters and themes that might have been  
rejected, rise, demand a second look  
and weave about themselves a gripping tale,  
in stimulating prose that cannot fail.

In Summer's plenty the creative powers  
flourish and with pleasurable ease  
respond to warmth and sunlight like the flowers;  
thoughts that drift at random on the breeze  
are captured and developed; so the hours  
are filled with meaningful activities.  
Ambitions are fulfilled and works of worth  
conceived and nourished well, are brought to birth.

There are, of course, the fortunate and blest  
who are immune to seasonal malaise  
who write the daily stint, produce their best,  
defy the rain to pour, the sun to blaze,  
and need no consolation, comfort, rest  
to help their novels, poems, stories, plays  
achieve the perfect ending and success;  
we all pursue it – but they suffer less.

*Jim Lindop*

## **Roadside Flowers**

These October mornings, once the tactile mists  
have smoked up to the slow-burn sun,  
(on their way sandpapering the greyed church  
and freeing a gossip of rooks to freewheel,)  
we fret about last night's leaf-drop  
but applaud the autumn trees.

Whereas, we should be remembering  
the impossible blue of cornflowers,  
the brassiness of the rogue sunflower  
eagerly guarding the field's edge,  
and the reckless surge of poppies;  
the studied bluster of oleanders  
and the ephemeral art-show of wild irises,  
of stocks, of feverfew, of loosestrife,  
improbable thumb-prints of colour  
smudged into the roadside banks.

Whereas, we should be recalling, too,  
(as we pursue unspoken rules of the road, – like  
‘Thou shalt make A to B with no stops  
nor thought for sad clumps of fur and flesh...’)  
the mossed tear-jars pressed into the verge,  
agape with disorders of old flowers  
and the roadside shrines of acrylic blooms,  
mute but raging substitutes for words of love.

*Jan Harris*

### **Skinning a Cat**

Two cats peer from  
one pair of sage eyes.

The first cat is fat. She spreads  
on the hearth like an old bean bag,  
whose stuffing rumbles with each caress  
of passing hand. This cat is lazy and doesn't  
care for distress. Sometimes she will tap  
an outstretched hand with velvet pad,  
or curl on a lap, like a parcel  
wrapped for posting.

The other cat  
turns her back  
while she  
preens  
her sleek  
black coat –  
Armani  
of course;  
the cut  
suits the  
catwalk  
where she  
stalks  
her prey  
and struts  
with attitude.

This cat  
has claws that slash  
and a cruel voice  
like pins  
in a tin,  
she is mean  
and thin.

Would it be a catastrophe if they came out together –  
two cats in one skin?

*Ian Campbell*

### **When I Was a Boy**

When I was a boy  
I ran on green hills,  
swung from tall trees  
and never knew the time of day,  
nor thought to thank a God  
for what I had ...  
... until it went  
and then I did ...

... and then I wore my knees out to that God  
and knew despair as black as sin  
and twice as sour.

When I was a boy  
you were my champion,  
my road to follow,  
I never thought about tomorrow,  
Nor what happens when tomorrow comes...  
... but now I do.

Now I do a lot of staring at the sky,  
a lot of thinking on the past,  
a lot of feeling very sorry for myself.

For once I was a boy  
who ran on green hills,  
swung from tall trees,  
sank in cold salty seas,  
who knows now he is man.

*Ann Alexander*

## **The Naked Poetry Reading**

The ladies of the  
Penzance Poetry Appreciation Society  
claiming inspiration from Byron and Burns  
decided to expose themselves  
for the benefit of  
the Distressed Poets' Benevolent Fund.

Breasts and buttocks shapely as a sonnet  
rude as a limerick  
round as a rondeau,  
natural as Wordsworth  
and as free as verse

were noticeably absent from the scene.  
Instead, a McGonagall of misshapen flesh  
was exposed to the pitiless scrutiny of critics

They did the reading twice.  
The first time to the usual audience  
of thirteen women and a dog.  
The second (word got round)  
to a packed theatre in Truro.

Learned gentlemen from Oxbridge  
asked the question: *Why?*

*It is a poet's duty to expose the truth,*  
declaimed the chair, naked as a newborn,  
sans even glasses, trailing clouds of glory.

*Adrian Green*

## **Empty Room**

The abandoned room  
and iron black grate,  
a warm forbidding place  
in memory.

A clumsy coupling  
one adolescent afternoon.

There are flowers, now,  
specked with chimney dust,  
where the embers used to glow.

*Mary Shiells*

### **Coffee Time**

One of our treats  
mid-morning, milky coffee.  
And I read the headlines –  
I read the back of The Telegraph  
as he devours the minutiae  
of daily news.  
A picture catches my eye,  
a section of stone wall  
entirely beautiful.  
I wish, instead of  
the flower arranging  
the water colour classes  
the Scrabble club,  
I wish I'd learned  
the art of Stone Walling.

*Alistair Scott*

## **Horse Manure**

I could always tell when Bruce  
the sad-eyed carthorse  
hitched to Barton's milkcart  
was about to do it. He would stand  
just so  
strapped in his shafts and raise his tail.  
For one brief moment his sad eyes turned blissful  
as the gleaming spheres were born  
to fall – splot! splot! – and gently steam  
squashed to the tarmac of our street.

Curtains twitched and Mrs. Harris  
eyes cast down  
and helmeted in headscarf  
scuttled, crab-like, out from chintz and china  
gathering the golden droppings for her hubby  
who grew cabbages the size of my dad's head  
and elephantine marrows that won prizes.  
As I watched her scoop and run  
I wondered if she yearned to grow her nails instead,  
and paint them red.

And I imagined Bruce  
trapped in his wooden shafts  
would dream of galloping  
tail flying  
over rolling fields.

*Anne Stephens*

### **Around the Edges of my Mind**

I feel the lapping of that greater ocean,  
Its salt smell brought inland  
On the wind that carries the cry of gulls.

Shelly sand between my toes  
And the flotsam of a wandering spirit  
Washed close against the sea wall  
I built without knowing that I placed  
Stone upon stone from the ballast  
Of many wrecks.

Still the ship in its cheap bottle  
Rides a wave of painted wood,  
Splinters of whalebone for masts  
That bend before an inner gale –  
Again I marvel  
But do not understand.

The land is here to be scratched  
Let others plough the sea,

Seed of green flowers  
Drifting to the depths  
Of a blue-shadowed garden.

*Steve Horsfall*

### **The Definition of Poetry**

“The music of what happens” is what Seamus  
Heaney thinks poetry is all about,  
Which is as much help – none – as the more famous  
Wordsworthian definition – which, no doubt,  
You don’t need me to quote. I’ve never found  
One which I thought was really satisfactory.  
Poetry is mercurial – won’t be bound  
By dusty definitions. It’s refractory.  
Its indefinability is what  
Defines it - and if that’s a paradox,  
The muses, one and all, care not one jot,  
Delighting as they do in jolts and shocks.  
No lexicographer has yet come near it.  
The truth is this - you know it when you hear it.

*Graham Knapman*

## **Retro Chic**

Someone should have said  
that our New World cooker  
and formica worktops  
clashed with that wallpaper  
featuring rustic shelves.  
The bilateral symmetry  
created by a string of onions  
hanging between the copper  
kettle and a pheasant  
made that design  
an obvious choice  
for the novice handyman.  
Money saved on labour  
bought a burnt chocolate  
bathroom suite  
with matching wall and floor tiles.  
The gold plated taps and fittings  
had been optional.

*J A Bosworth*

## **Imagery**

I draw in words what others sketch  
With pencils, and my draughtsmanship  
Must be as accurate as theirs  
To realise my images.

I paint in phrases details which  
Others embody boldly with  
Their palettes' pigmentations, full  
Of *nuances* precisely caught.

I frame my words with metres' forms  
And rhythms' complementing nails,  
To hold my pictures in fit style  
To match a master-joiner's arts.

Though all my scenes are drawn in black and white  
Vivid imagination colours them.

*Dave Etcbell*

## **A Chiasmus**

The rules were made, who made these rules?  
Which poets forbade, forbade the poets  
To write in rhyme? Lush rhyme to write  
In former forms; forms former seem  
So often to be right, to be right often, often right.  
Dare to disobey – disobey and dare!  
Perhaps a sonnet sing, sing sonnets everywhere  
Pour pentameter, metre pent up pour  
Upon the golden page, leave gold upon the stage  
You strive for evermore, soon nevermore you'll strive  
Through life's restless rage, thus rage restless on life's page.  
Eschew the dismal herd, heard dismally they view  
The old, for only new, new only permit you.  
Aim high a Swinburne flawed, be flawed in aiming high.  
Be guided by the muse, which muse guided Hughes?  
I'm bothered and beguiled, bewitched beguiled am I.  
I think he had it right, think I that song wont die.  
Be bard and ever try, a minstrel bard to be  
Inversions loudly cry, cry loudly please use me!

*Brydon Bostock*

## **Embryo to Foetus**

A miracle  
For sure,

That cells  
All know

What they  
Must do,

Where they  
Must go,

Which team  
To join

What they're  
To be,

And when.

*Peter Alton*

## **Eternity of Silence**

I sit and wait  
for an eternity of silence,  
never fearing  
what will come or when,  
watching the  
days as they pass me by,  
knowing that  
they will not come again,  
all I have  
are my memories as reminders  
of the lonely  
life that I once chose to live,  
enclosed by  
a few tokens and comforts  
of the sweet  
love that I once had to give.

I sit alone  
now staring at these four walls,  
a prisoner  
in this my very favourite chair,  
wondering if  
there is life outside the door,  
and if  
there is anyone left to care,  
I watch  
the slowing of the hands of time,  
and see  
the dust accumulating around me,  
I feel  
the touch of the hands of fate,  
and hope  
they have come to set me free.

## **The Pipal Tree Kingdom**

Dusty path rides in thin veined ruts  
towards rolling foot hills that shadow  
tangled noisy spread of town below,  
lost in smog stoking tuc-tuc traffic  
twining between dodging charm bangles  
worn by the bright sari robed women.

Men and goats walk dusty narrow streets,  
calling greetings to crowded old cars,  
painted lorries honk loud their urgent  
warnings with their worn smiling frontage;  
long, laden procession of people  
crawls like ants up the path to worship.

They swarm grilled shrines to local gods,  
tie their paper prayers and fine hopes  
on the pipal tree, messages blown  
in the breeze to the ends of the world,  
overlooked by gurus claiming gifts  
offered with wafting sticks of incense.

Pipal rustles prayerlike the requests,  
some with bells attached, tinkling, tempting.  
Hindu paper whispers are wind blown,  
drifting on coloured ties as day shifts,  
silhouetted in closing sunset's  
darkening, but not yet forgotten.

Soon wild monkeys come in growing dusk  
to the pipal tree, steal manky food,  
fight for scraps, scatter paper prayers  
along the road and steep mountain side.  
Higher, up the mooned darkness of night,  
hungry jackals howl their hunting song.

Back in the town the weary slumber  
with their dreams; the cold monkeys huddle,  
flat-roof top sleeping; fading perfumes  
pass into the night. Time ticks into  
the unknown. In deep starred stillness,  
sacred pipal tree – stands all alone.

*Nick Baker*

## **Blackbird**

You won the prize  
For what it's worth.  
Middle England thought  
You were the best.  
And yet, what is your song?  
I know when it says Blackbird,  
Yet it is never quite the same.  
Yet, is always understood.  
And there you are.  
Always on the highest tree.  
Saying, all I see is mine.  
Never quite the same song.  
Always trying something new,  
Yet with a squawk at the end,  
As if an erasing, with a view  
For better effort next time.  
I'll get it right someday.  
Well, I didn't really mean that,  
But here, I'll try again.  
Your notes rebound off green leaf  
On warm, spring days.  
But in that winter twilight,  
Only your alarm is heard,  
Simple and always the same.

*Beryl Myers*

### **Meeting Place**

We walked down to the place  
where the two rivers meet,  
silently we sat close on the bank  
to cool tired feet in the water.  
We watched minnows as they swam  
hard against the current  
to stay in one place.  
Weeds showed the way of it,  
waving.

This is the place where two rivers become one.

The water seemed to sob and sigh  
as it passed.  
We stayed still and silent, listening,  
wishing to hold the moment  
but knowing we could not.  
This was the place where two became one.

*Alice Harrison*

## **The Exquisite Melancholy of Dusk**

the sand still hoards the day's heat      promenade  
railings make little cooling ticks      blue is  
deepening the sky      draining from the sea      a  
shiver runs across      a lone gull broods on a post  
others fly up and away      fade into wisps of  
cloud      still tinged with sun      litter glints and  
rustles      thrilling the last wandering dog      street  
lights flicker on      along the coast road      drawn  
curtains glow      faint cries      from the fairground  
half-heard music      a smell of chips on the air