

Poetry Series

Keith Shorrocks Johnson
- poems -

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Keith Shorrocks Johnson(9th June 1944)

I am an Economist and Public Policy Analyst by profession who has worked in over 25 countries during a 40-year career. In 1991, I settled in Wellington, New Zealand, having lived and worked in the Philippines for the previous seven years. Nowadays I am largely a house-husband and the principal carer for 2 small sons. As I am semi-retired from policy work, I write extensively in my spare time.

"All Shall Be Well - And All Manner Of Things Shall Be Well.

I pray my rosary in feeling, touch, sight -

Three properties of God's revelation -

The sensations of Life, Love and Light

Come to hand, come to mind in meditation.

In life is marvelous homeliness

In love is gentle courtesy

And in light is endless naturehood.

These properties are within one goodness

To which I hold fast wisely and mightily:

Night is the cause of pain and our distress

And light stands against it discreetly - needfully

In life is wonderful vitality

In love is gracious redemption

And in light essential clarity.

Our faith is the dawning of endless day

In sweet accord as our blindness is lifted
And by that light we see the sovereign way
By which our unity with God is gifted.

In life are all things created one
In love there is no separation
And in light we see the source.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

12 Hours

by Alexander Blok [a bespoke 'translation' for my friend Olga Kolokolova]

When you are trapped
or driven down by people, cares or longing:
when the casket lid seems to close -
all that you want is to be able to sleep.

The city is deserted
And desperate and sick you need to go home -
your eyelashes are heavy with frost -
Stop for a moment -
listen to the silence of the night
that sound is strange -
separate and apart from the noise of daytime.

Glance with fresh eyes at the snowy streets,
the smoke of a fire,
as night waits quietly for the morning above the whitened garden -
and the sky is the cover of an open book -
you will find the soul is ready for a story from your childhood.
And in this incomparable moment
when the frost patterns the glass of the lamp but chills the blood -
love will flare up into gratitude and blessings for others.

You realize then that life is more than simply taking your fill -
that the world itself is inherently beautiful.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

20th January 2017

Too old to cruise in bars
Or wait for a booty-call,
I am past clever hopes
That flirting in dives
Is other than dishonesty
Or that obsessing
In poetic pretense
About the darkening
Of our public discourse
Will serve a sound purpose:
I only note the half truths.

If scholarship can explain
The myths and trauma
That undermine sanity
And drive a polity to cruelty
Linking 'being your own priest'
To the sham and shame
Of Theresienstadt,
I have to ask: Who is to blame
That America, so much used
As it is to success and luxury,
Is so blind to separation?

Thucydides warned
Against democracy
Being subverted
By poets and orators
But he was unexposed
To the trite rubbish
Of twittering and trolling
And the formation of tribes
That promote discrimination
Spreading hatred and division
Making light of others' suffering.

At the centre of things
Where money talks
There are silences

As the price of dissent
Is factored in to stocks:
If taxes are lowered
And regulations laid aside
There will be profits,
So that integrity
Becomes an option
For mendacious henchmen.

Estranged from quiet conviviality
Out for a good time, up for it,
Getting the rush, posing the self,
Posting a squeak of presence,
Oblivious to the thinning crowd
In a garish, decaying fairground,
This is how things fall apart -
The pussy-footing at the dismantling
Of the reciprocities that kept us safe -
Vermin foraging the crumbs of decency
That could lead the lost home.

But it is true that love is dangerous
And that we all crave adoration
Aspiring to centre-stage folies de deux:
It seems that Nijnsky wrote
About Diaghilev:
"I loved him sincerely and,
When he told me that
The love of women was a terrible thing,
I believed him'.
This is then the task, to hope for love
But set aside distinction and perfection.

In the darkness that is gathering
Ethics have become footnotes
And those who care for the future
Intone "I will be true to myself,
But let me rest before the test"
And those in authority ignore
The welfare of the weak:
"Cursed are the meek
For they shall inherit a deficit

Of understanding and respect
And retain not even the little they have".

And Auden later repudiated
The voice in which he folded
The romantic lie that
We must all love one another or die
Because he sensed the reality
That we do exist alone, filed away
In suburbs and skyscrapers
Trying to find our voice
But unable to push away the gag
Stuffed down our throats
By a calculating culture.

For sure, there is stupor enough:
We don't love each other
Well or even at all for the most part,
And raising a glass of rye
In irony and a nod to empathy
Is a poor substitute for
Seeing others as we would
Want to be seen, or shaking
Off the dust of negation
And the confusions of lust
To extend a helping hand.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

27 Days

On Friday 24th September 1943
My father wrote a letter
To his brother in which
He described how my mother
Had joined him during the previous weekend
At Silecroft in Cumbria
As he took a few hours leave from
RAF Millom where he was
Training on Avro Ansons
To join a Lancaster Bomber Squadron
That would take the war home to Berlin.

I was born on 9th June 1944
And the babyMed Calculator
Puts my conception date as
Around Friday 17th September 1943,
With sex likely no more
Than a week earlier at the most
So I think we can pretty much agree
That it was the Friday, and incidentally
In the following June I was also
Born on a Friday - 'with far to go'.

So here's the sad part
He was killed 14th October 1943.
This means an overlap
Of 27 days which is hardly a blink.
Just now my third and fourth sons
Who are eleven and twelve years-old
Have come in for cuds in their jimjams
Having interrupted my musings
Lucky me, lucky them
But it's good to remember those 27 days
And let the four of us share looks and hugs.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Bond For Summer Versed In Bonuses

[Another Poem for Clive James]

These I will celebrate:

The searching bursts of crocuses

Daffodils that spring to sunny hours

In promise that the primrose flowers

Maia's gerbils and the garden's squirrel

An impish acrobat and thief named Cyril

The migrant birds the welcome ground receives

And those who lingered winter long in clefts and eaves

A bond for summer versed in bonuses.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Brief Heads-Up On That Maori Fella J.C.

I saw your mate again today J.K.
He was on the quay near the TSB arena
And we had a brief chat - he's looking well -
Hair in dreads with a lost front tooth.
He tells me he's working for J.T. Crouch
The foundation and construction outfit
On replacing the wharf-side piling
That was totalled by the last earthquake.
He still looks more than good for a few beers.

I told him that you had written a poem about him
And that like as not I would write another
To put you two back in touch.
It seems that he's got his life back together
With a new woman who has a couple of kids
And apart from the odd fracas
In the Zoo Bar in Newtown, things are looking up.
As for the twelve disciples
The call-girl met an old fella who set her up with a shop
In the arcade off the Left Bank in Cuba Street
But the housewife who forgot the Pill
Is working her arse off providing cheap-thrills
For pick-ups somewhere behind Courtenay Place.
He's lost touch with the queen and the alky-priest
And most of the others, apart from one who
Just got elected to Parliament under Labour.

That'll be a bloody miracle:
I'll sing along with that one!

Behind him the harbour was still glorious
It was kind of crisp and bright and luminous
And as the conversation trailed
He shrugged his broken-tooth killer smile.
I had meant to ask him about persecution
And redemption and revelation
And shock-treatment and the end of the world
And the mile-deep civilised dystopia
Where the flickering light in the void

Is being snuffed out by mountainous darkness
But the option was closed by his 'Nice One - See You Mate'.
He went back to his white van and climbed in
Saying to his offsider: 'I tell them to keep it simple
Just one day at a time. I will never be lost.
E kore au e ngaro he kakono i ruia
Mai I rangiatea - for I am a seed sown in heaven'.

But he says to tell J.K from J.C: 'Neh mind eh bro?
Turn and face the sun
And let your shadow fall behind you:
E huri to aroaro ki te ra tukuna to ataarangi ki muri I koe.
E iti noa ana, na te aroha:
Although it is small - it is given with love'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Brief Visit To Mellor

Expecting a call from distant ancestors
I had checked in at the Millstone Hotel
In Mellor on a warm autumn evening.
After sitting in the snug nursing a beer
And wolfing down a Lancashire Hotpot
I wandered out to the churchyard.

There sure enough was a Shorrocks grave
And in the morning I drove to Shorrocks Hey
Stopped by the gate and watched the cows.
When he fled Salford to escape a debt or a girl
My grandfather, who was a bit of a lad,
Ditched the family name for anonymity
But his male-line chromosomes betrayed him
And I tracked down old deeds to Pendle Hill.

My father, who was killed before I was born
Had died a hero flying in Bomber Command
And I willed him to be with me now -
The two of us beguiled by history
Taking our journeys with false papers
Come home to clear our names.

I wanted us to smell the air of old haunts
Be stung by the nettles, eat the blackberries
Feel the stones of the old cottages
But taking a last look at the village
Someone made that call and I saw him
A tall blond youth so very like my own eldest son

I had seen that same boy in Jerusalem
Among a detachment of Israeli conscripts
The others dark and unfamiliar, he blond
And as he looked towards me I owned him.
That makes three sons of killing age.
And now I hear the ram bleat and a still small voice.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Cheshire Lad

Young Mike Dutton

Blew his head off with a 12-bore shotgun
At Moat Bank Grange - late at night -
After a Young Farmers' Dance in Tarporley.

His parents heard an argument
In the yard below their bedroom window
After he had been delivered home
To the farm - worse for wear.

Everybody said that he went off his rocker
After he had had a skin-full
And then fought and lost a fight
With John Ashley over a girl - Janice Vickers.

At first, he wouldn't get out of the car
And his friends had to shove him out
But then he went to the tack room
Broke open the gun and loaded a couple.

'Don't be such a silly bugger Mike
Point the gun down or put it down.
It dunna matter that much' said his friend
From the backseat, 'plenty more fish in the sea'.

But there was more to it than that.
His parents had off-loaded the farm for a small fortune
With the land sold to the Kinseys across the twenty acre
And the buildings planned for conversion to houses.

And they had just bought a spanking-new 4-bedroom
Detached in Little Budworth with a conservatory,
Intending to live high and fancy on the proceeds,
With Mrs D getting the Volvo she had always wanted.

Which for Mike meant leaving Moat Bank with its
Old-beamed farmhouse, round-windowed lofts,
Its fields, and the brook and its willows
And becoming a Farm Labourer.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Dedication For The White Seat

Orangi Kaupapa is cut into three strings.
The shortest – from Glenmore Avenue –
Is a 'No Exit'.

The second is a perilous ride down
From a junction on Northland Road
'One Way' only.

The third is a stretch of real road
That rises towards Telegraph Hill
And the path through the pine trees.

I have conjectured that the name
Means 'Steps to the Stars'
Or 'An Audience with the Sky God'.

I may well be wrong.
Another interpretation is
Native Potato Gardens.

But the three snippets
Pretty well sum up
Much of life and its ups and downs.

'Theirs the bickering lives,
Rough husbands, cotton aprons, draggled wives,
Children brief beanstalk flowers...'

'If I move down, I strike the starlight pitch
Of houses lapping in the molten drink
Of moon beams in their gutters run to loss'.

'Meat and drink is the moon: but if I wait
Till dawn unveils the hills, I feast my eyes
On tossing gorse and broom... and the windy skies'.

Iris, the girl who lived at 92 Northland Road
And who became 'Robin Hyde',
Lived a thing or two, learnt a thing or two.

How desperately sad to see her pictured
On the steps of her caravan 'Little China'
In a bleak November in England in 1938.

She stands mid-steps, half-turning
Wearing a shapeless and hopelessly small
Quilted jacket closed with a large safety pin.

Outfitted by the Winter District Relief,
Her gaze is far-sighted in respite of the next attack,
Pain within and pain withal.

I know that feeling Iris:
'Drawls the blue cart by the quarry:
The waggoner's words melt into gloom'.

Would that I could have brought you home:
'Where the hedgehogs run in the grass, with no more sound
Than will scare the sleeping skylarks, half awake them'.

So that you, back on the white seat half a mile from the top,
'Could rest for a moment, lean over a cup of mist,
And the wrinkling harbour water curdled in moonlight.'

[For Iris Wilkinson / 'Robin Hyde': NZ Poet 1906 - 1939]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Good Yarn

'Life is like a tangled ball of wool
That begins with nothing and ends with nothing':
Be sure then that these threads
Are knitted into the headscarf and socks of infinity
With humility, humanity and good deeds
And if you can unravel at times
To entertain a kitten, do so.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Hymn For Veritas

Do not go gently into this dark age,
Of loss of justice, decency and right:
Write - ignite to kindle virtuous rage.

Though rogues testify a path to bondage
Their words die at the dawning of the light:
Detest, protest, contest their language.

That the good are scarce is an old message
And until they act, right gives way to might,
As falsehoods swagger on the twilit stage.

Hold out for heroes, for their advantage
Come the night's end and the morning's sight,
As rights are freed that lies took hostage.

Then those who wrest the best from damage
Can sense the kind old sun grow warm and bright
And verity itself glow fierce with homage.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Load Of Nothing

This old wheel of time
This old wheel of suffering
Keeps on turning
The is-ness and the my-ness.

Outside the many forms
The multitudinous things
That make ex-is-tence
As the rubber hits the road.

Inside the many feelings
The cacophony of thoughts
That make ins-is-tence
As the squeaky wheel grates the axle.

This old log of wood
This old bag of skin
An empty noggin
Carted off to kingdom come?

It is not near
It is not far
Neither broad nor narrow
The road unfolds as it may.

Take comfort
This is the way it should be
At the pivot of things
Joy has spoken - a load of nothing.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A New Scene For Hamlet: Explaining Gertrude

ACT* SCENE **The Queen's closet.

QUEEN MARGARET is alone brushing her hair - enter Hamlet

QUEEN GERTRUDE

How would you steal into this tower
At so late an hour - am I your lover?
I am not your garlanded Ophelia
Fresh with the blooms and flowers
Of youth and untested beauty
But your mother come to autumn
And the fall of that which budded
Once when life itself was young
Hard now with jewels not petals.

HAMLET

Mother I am beset with thought itself,
With doubts, with jealousy and fear,
Oppressed by darkness unrelieved -
Were we ever friends, I might confide.

QUEEN GERTRUDE

Enough, are you a small boy again
That needs must use my apron strings
To tag along and stem your tears?

HAMLET

What is it with us lady that so disturbs
Our conversations and intercourse?
How is it that our love is so uneven?
Did you not want me as a son?
Did you not love my father?
Tell me truly what the matters are.

QUEEN GERTRUDE

Sweet boy, you touch upon unruly truths
That are much better left unsaid.

HAMLET

What, would you make my maddening worse
When I for want of understanding run
To every touchstone of conjecture?

QUEEN GERTRUDE

This I will tell you - once I loved your father
When I was sweet and young and knew no better
But he grew proud in all his powers
And took his majesty as right
Then taking me so forcibly
In neglect and habit and disdain
That I became no better than the maids.
Then no longer sweet, I saw his orders
And his postures as unjust, unnatural
Mere assumptions of superiority
And I no worse or sometimes better
In the understanding and conduct of the world.

HAMLET

What of me, was I conceived in love
Or in unwelcome force?

QUEEN GERTRUDE

I know not - I have no memory of that
For when we couple, lust brings
Force and love to bear in several parts
And none remembers which the most.

Now go I beseech you - my liege awaits.
I must guild the royal bed tonight
And take my part in serving smaller majesty
More tractable, more sweet and better loving.

HAMLET

Is it not cruel to talk of best and least
In being bedded by two brothers
And chide the grieving son of one
That his supplanter has the vantage?

GERTRUDE

Silly boy - can you be sure of which is which?
Do you not look like your uncle

Have you not his tractable nature
His pensive looks, his fancies
His easy bending to conspiracies?

-

Stay - put away that fiery look -
Those doubts which mar your beauty:
You indeed are your father's son.

HAMLET

You use me as a plaything still -
And mock when you should care
A string which holds me close
And then let's go and shuts me out -
Cup and ball in endless back and to
It ricochets my mind with me the fool.

QUEEN GERTRUDE

And like the brothers do you seek the cup
That you might out-sip the two of them
And dally with the taste of faded rose
To sweeten wine from generations past?

HAMLET

And you twice married, me betrothed
This is too base - and I your only son!

QUEEN GERTRUDE

You have touched and seen the very core of me
When as a baby you sought the light and air
Then you were mine alone within me
Before confinement became separation
And whatever man had had his way
His touch was long since gone from thence.

Can you encompass what that act means
So consequential and full of lust for life
And how little the ecstasy of men compares?

HAMLET

And does this giving of life extend to living

Have not men to stand apart to play their roles?
Destiny demands that those best suited
Take the greater part in bringing acts
To resolution - which motherhood itself gainsays.

QUEEN GERTRUDE

Could you but listen to yourself
You might learn to see the world.

HAMLET

Tell me then in my darkness and distress
Putting aside the thrust and parry of your whimsy
Did you - do you ever love me for myself?

QUEEN GERTRUDE

Fool - I loved you more than life itself!
Oft I would creep to your cradle
To kiss your curls and hear you breathe
You were my life - I trembled at your smile.
And when you grew to oldest boyhood
I would still creep to your room
To watch you sleep and tuck your covers.

HAMLET

Aye - and in your cups touch my hair
And spread your fingers across my chest
As I feigned sleep in feared deception
And once when giddy with wine
You took my mouth in yours and drank deep
Until my father came and took you back.

QUEEN GERTRUDE

Whether it was so or not I cannot now recall
I only know that you were once mine
And that my love if tainted was born pure.

You talk of destiny and final stages:
No affair of life or play was ever cast
Where ends and means were crystal clear
And motives purged of lies and subtleties
Or errant subterfuge and wishful thinking.
Put aside this Little O that still deceives

And take such comfort as half-truth conceives.

Be off with you, I cannot mend your life
Stand back from resolution and revenge
Learn to live with broken dreams
And unfulfillment as we women must
Our flesh will live when anger turns to dust.

HAMLET

Good night my lady - never lost for words
And never once is honour mentioned.
Sweet dreams become you when the bed goes quiet

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Personal Change Experience

I just found an album
Of Photo Memories
Compiled by my wife
Around 2005
And in it an essay
That she prepared as
An assignment for her
Masters' in Public Policy:
A 'Retrospective Account
Of a Personal Change Experience'.

She wrote:

'My pregnancy was planned.
My partner and I
Had been together
For only a few months.
With hindsight it was probably
An impulsive and risky decision
To try for a baby at that early stage
But it felt good and was very romantic.
We were in love,
In the early days of a love affair
When the world is seen through
Rose-tinted glasses.
We were happy and excited
At the prospect of having
A child together.
I have a vivid memory of that night,
After the positive pregnancy test,
When we walked hand in hand
Down Oriental Parade.
It was one of the happiest moments of my life.
I think this made a difference psychologically,
In the way I felt emotionally
Both during and after the change unfolded.
That is, I believe I adjusted more easily
To my new role as a mum
Because it was something I both desired and planned,

And was associated with a joyful period of my life.
Burns (1993, p.37)has noted that
Voluntary change is easier to adjust to.'

[Burns, R., (1993)Managing people in Changing Times
St Leonards, N.S.W., Allen and Unwin.]

I have never read anything more beautiful
Than my wife's words.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A Prehistoric Presence: Absent Abel N.

Sitting awhile in Civic Square
I missed you there.

I was watching the pigeons and the gulls
Hob-knobbing or squawky strutting
Waiting for scraps from wraps and squabbling
A bobbing beggar crew following
Heartless yellow eyed brigands.

Two birds jostling in that space
But humankind the only race.

Forty thousand years ago you watched
Barrel-chested and wide-nosed
Sniffing us puny newcomers
Listening to the keening sounds,
That drifted from strange kin.

There wasn't room enough for two
We schemed and made an end of you.

Our myths about you are unflattering
That you were unchattered trolls
With quizzical protruding brows
Sitting around napping rough tools
So dim-witted you built nothing.

Now we have the square alone
No rivals since you've gone.

Truth is we just don't know
About your songs and dreams
And what at times you may have seen
Your sense of right, your sense of love
Wonders at the stars light-stretched above.

And we are left to fight each other
With hands we bloodied on a distant brother.

A Sonnet For A Dark Lady

They will hunt you down and hurt you dearest
'Starlet-cum-harlot', 'angry dark lady',
'A diva who fights about who wore it best'
The butt of calculated fallacy.

Rose Red baited by hounds to each new low
The noble prince left to watch the curs bay:
If you were Snow White, no bile would flow
And lap-dog poppets would just drool away.

The spittle gutter press awash with spite
Has drenched your honest heart with hate
And you so young, so true, so very bright
Must now slough off this tarnished state.

But mark my princess that these words should prove
That there are many who would salve your wounds with love.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Addle-Yedded

He could see below him in his mind's eye
A fine sow: 'Inna hoo a belter? ' and a litter
Of twelve six-week old weaners ready for market
'Inna they grand lad' - he asked smiling?
And I was happy to agree that these spectral porkers
Were, as they said, 'a picture on the breed'.

Years later when some friends visited me
And I found myself telling this story -
With the proviso that if and when addle-yeddedness
Began to permeate my noggin
I would want to also inhabit once again
The farmland and dialect of my youth
Fetching a slop of thirds to the pigsty trough
At which townie observers would happily concur
That my pigs were reet pommers or bobby-dazzlers.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

A'Liver Bird

For Cilla Black [1943 - 2015]

A'LIVER BIRD

Why yes we all knew Cilla -
Why did we love her so?
No Judy held a candle up to her!
And Mister, if you've missed
Darlin' Cilla off your list,
You're not half the man I thought you were!

Now fate has taken her away,
On a bitter Baltic day
How can Liverpool be what it was before?
She's gone an wrecked me head in
With a lorra laffs and kiddin
But she'll never walk down Scottie Road no more!

So serve up half of bitter
But never bitter be,
It only gives you wrinkles on your brow!
She has been, as they say,
Quite a belter in her day,
Though we're devoed in our be vies now!

Oh, I'm gutted, down and grey
That fate has taken her away,
With the pops that most of us adore.
You won't see hot pants fashion
Or a hint of next week's washin
And she'll never walk down Scottie Road no more!

Things'll never be the same as they once were
All the sconners and the fellas loved her -
She lived and kept the golden rule.
And so my darlin scouser
Now we have to live without yer
Salt tears flow chocker through the Pool.

All Good - Beeston Castle 2013

Eons of flight-path inching set aside,
Back to earth that bush and nettles hide,
Bounding up the hill, we who came so far
Unfold the plain to glimpse towards the farm
And seek the tree where nanna's ash was laid.

Below stand Beeston Castle's broken walls,
With tat and ice creams in the shop beneath
As jest and jostling dust away the galls
And rollicking up, there's young mischief.

Fifty summers now the scene divide
As sunlight basks away the evening star -
With balls to throw and kick, and picnic plied -
We set to side the bales that maul and mar.

Hawthorn, oaks and sward tops standing wide -
Seasons come, the scythes of harvest bide

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

All The News Is Bad

The serpent fell out of the tree - stone dead
Making one last pronouncement to the pair
Before it bit the dust in paradise
'You're on your own now - orphans from Nature'.

"The World was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
From Eden took their solitary way".

And so they bid farewell to happy climes
And temperate sunlit clear and healthy morns
Stepping over the very body of good and evil
Glozed by their own proem to perpetual torment.

And all that ensued was endless futile bickering:
That they in mutual accusation spent
The fruitless hours, but never self-condemning,
And of their fatuous prattle there was no ceasing.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

America - You Have Fucked Up!

America, you have fucked up:
We gave you a Drumpf -
Now you don't know where you are
But hell, it's not Weimar!
Your inner lives are numb
Scant and then some -
And your children's unkindly fate,
Under lies, theft and populism
Bequeaths them ignorance and hate
Instead of tolerance and idealism.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

An Abandoned Farmhouse Garden In South Wairarapa

FOR ANNIE GRANT

She was a heavy, red and freckled lassie
Shipped from Greenock as a serving maid
But women were few in the colony
And Jack stumped up with her passage paid.

He was older, with money, but she was strong
And she loved the work in making a farm:
This was a place where she might belong
Weary at dusk with a bairn on her arm.

So they passed, the aching treasured years
As the orchard in golden fullness bore
A bounty of apples, peaches and pears
Sweet and tart to the homestead kitchen door.

But seasons came when the fruit just fell
And who was the gardener none could tell.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

An 'onstanding' Man

Wittgenstein was tormented
From being born obscenely rich
And precociously intelligent
As well as sexually ambivalent

Inter alia (there was a lot
Of inter alia in his life) :

Chastising himself, he atoned
By becoming a hospital orderly
Though he advised the patients
Not to take the medication prescribed

And he was a very poor schoolteacher
Who pulled one girl's ear so hard it bled
And boxed the head of a little dunce
Who later died of hemophilia.

But he won numerous mentions
For bravery fighting in the First War
And forsook all the wealth he inherited
Showing indifference to honours and fame

And waving a red-hot poker at Karl Popper
He demanded an example of a moral rule
To which his Austrian compatriot replied:
'Not to threaten visiting lecturers with pokers.'

But he had a lot to say about language
And the way it shapes thought
And creates an edge between what is known
And what is better left beyond that edge.

'The limits of my language stand for the limits of my world:
An entire mythology is stored within our language
About what one cannot speak, one must remain silent
But ordinary language is all right'.

And I very much appreciate how

He wanted to be known at the last
Not as outstanding but as 'onstanding' -
That is with his feet now firmly on the ground.

ein anständiger Mensch: a decent man
eine anständige Frau: a decent woman
also 'proper' or perhaps 'real'

ein ausständiger Mensch: a sturdy man
eine ausständige Frau: a resigned woman
also 'pending' or perhaps 'outstanding'?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

'And All My Soul Is A Delight'

The pint's trace lace-stained rings

Are company for me:

We watch the amber as it sings

Of Ireland proud and free.

At last she whispers to the night

Her name - from long ago:

'And all my soul is a delight'

That leaves the empty glass aglow.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

And What Of Families For Some Of Us?

And what of families for some of us:

I am the remnant of a father

who died before I was born:

There was a fair man

Who had tried to parachute -

He lived for a few minutes.

I was told by my mother

That she drank a bottle of gin

With nutmeg

And had a hot bath to ease me away:

'You were meant to be born', she said.

Come my infant bath time, she would say:

'Just because you have a little tassel

It doesn't mean you can rule the world';

It was never what I wanted -

Sons are the anchor of a mother's life.

And when I was a teenager

She came home

After a session of gin and tonics

Muzzling my half-sleep with a French Kiss:

I can still taste the lipstick.

In terror of my failures,

I waited in utter unredeemed dread

For my Final Year results. She said:

"If you had worked harder

You would have got a First".

I asked her to read

'I'm OK - You're OK',

And she wrote some post-it notes

That were there when she returned the book.

One said: 'Not everyone gets damaged -

The strong survive'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Angela Merkel's Poem for her Lost Russian Lover - ?????????? ?? ?????????? - Contempt Not Jealousy

What's life like now with your hostess?
Simpler? A cash in for the rouble
As the Silk Road sell-out progresses?
Does the memory of me trouble?

Like pine nuts and fragrant plums
Or ersatz amber and jade traded across Eurasia
You'll be paltry together - sold for small sums
Tokens not love knots in Siberia.

What's life like with a very ordinary
Materialist? Now that you've dethroned
Europe - renounced the visionary
And set aside the values you once owned?

What's your life like now with Cathay
No more riding bears only buses!
What price do you pay
For endless triviality - the losses?

I'm through with your turns and twists
Enough! I'll rent a place in Ukraine!
What's it like with a pseudo-communist
Harlot, my tiger-hunting bird brain?

More suitable and palatable -
Not noodles again - don't complain...
What's it like with a Chinese Doll
Dumplings and soy sauce a strain?

How's life with a money grubber
Without culture or higher aspiration
Is it to your liking?

Do you miss the stars in the gutter
Facedown without civilization -
Humming to drown the mice in your mind?

How do you live with cheap stuff:
Is the novelty market rising?
How is it kissing plastic and bumf?

Are you bored she's so mercenary?
Has her leaden lack of ideas
Started to offend?

Are you sad or mad? Tears?
Are your black sea crimes returning
To curse you when you could have been our friend?

['?????? ??????']

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Another Song For Pattie Boyd

Something in the way you move so softly
Something in the glow that follows you
Lights a touch to end explosively
To blast apart what still divides us two.

There's something in your smile that hints you know
A foolish felon seeks to lift your heart
Someone who'd do time to steal the show
With charges laid and readying to start.

No treasures are desired more avidly
Thought of the prize has made me shake inside
Look at how your charms still shine so brightly
Love blows my mind to throw the safe doors wide.

Nothing taken need go to waste in shame
The beauty of the crime absolves all blame.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Anzac Chums And Their Mums – The Possum

In Oz the possum grinds on thorn and gum
Far too stretched to visit mum -
Things are hard outback of Bourke
And there's no time for anything but work.

But Kiwi possums like to visit ma
With flowers for her crystal jar -
They'll even take a shopping bag of buds
With some greens and beans and spuds.

In Oz the possum is protected
As indeed might be expected -
Beset by fires and drought and prickles
And parched out creeks that slim to trickles.

But Kiwi possums are heaven sent
To slurp and scoff to heart's content -
When they dine they have the best
And not surprisingly are deemed a pest.

In Oz a treasure - in NZ an imported glitch
There are mixed opinions either side the Ditch -
Mum's the word on making possums able
To visit home with veggies for the table.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Apprenticeship

Quiet apprentice to what I survey,

I ready myself - bladed sun shining -

To craft a gradely well-contented day,

In line with its heavenly designing.

Motes of dust dance in the workshop window

As I strip back the covers to my task,

Taking stock of what the new day will show -

Of what must be discarded or made-fast -

And what poor rough lines need bettering,

If I am to become a true craftsman.

On I work, with form in fastness growing,

My touch grown old and still so much to learn,

Shaping my love of life, making my peace,

My facsimile of the masterpiece.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ariel's Farewell To Prospero

My master, old magician, co-conspirator
The time has come for you to set me free
To break your staff and drown your book:
Your charms and spells are overthrown.

I would weep Sir, were I human
Seeing an old man like you in tears -
Your fabric of inheritance reduced to
Thawing snow-bound cottage thatch.

Come give me a smile that we may part well.
The time for envisaging a better world
That you and I might bring to substance
Is now past - those dreams dissolved.

And now that all has come to end for you,
Set me free of what bonded us together -
The repulsive bag of skin that embodied us
The cleft pine become a rotted log of wood.

Trust not to be rounded by a little sleep:
Rather the body will lie corrupted at the last
A fathom of dark earth drawn above
Or drowned by the five-fold weight of tides.

You, who once enslaved me, bound tight
To cradled depths and vaulted heights,
And rings of fires and raging clouds,
Of which I have no fears or limitations.

But there is no loss - if you will now accept
The self must die to give the spirit life.
Born again to light, I'll play upon the senses,
And always answer to the word's best measure.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

As Easy Ways Grew Few

Pull aside the curtain! The moon rises
Above the garden - this is the present.
Wait awhile, are you sure of these surmises?
Look again, the woodland gathers absently.

These are the shadows that the moonlight throws:
On lovely woods so dark and deeply true
That tell of what we lose as knowledge grows,
And pathways missed, as easy ways grew few.

That other world of childhood calls us still:
Broken pure delight - can it be mended?
And second starts once lost to lack of will
Bring deep regrets - are these now transcended?

The forest deepens and its depths grow cold
And little can be changed by those grown old.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Astridsaga - A Fragment

It happened that the fight was lost
And she and her retinue took flight
Ferrying by night across the bay
To the island of the guarding light

Where in the small comfort
Of a deserted, half-ruined fort
Those who remained loyal
Made ready for their encirclement.

And as morning dawned, sails appeared
Seeking the promise of final vengeance
And she, taking counsel with her defenders,
Agreed it best to leave to avoid disgrace

Boarding a skiff brought full-sailed
To the wave-beaten broken walls
Of an ancient quay in shadow -
Breaking out into the crimson dawn.

And when those who loved her
Were overwhelmed and put to slaughter
Her enemies found her gone
With only her last pitiable treasures

Left for ransack and despoiling -
Though a servant boy, a beloved slave
Sought to save his life the while
By betraying the manner of her escape.

Then the winds fell quiet and the skiff
Became becalmed. At first sighted
And then hunted down by long ships,
The sea-hounds of their wronged lord,

Bearing down with their oarsmen
Chanting of her treachery and oath-breaking:
Of her poisoning of the cellar meads
At the treaty gathering for her betrothal.

She the long-limbed, wilful beauty,
Enchanter of the warder troops
Sent by her father to accompany her,
Unwilling to bend to the needs

Of dealings and the apportionment of lands,
She who took the gifts and dowry
And divided spoils among the conspirators
Promising the sacred ring to the boldest on her behalf.

Brought at last to the fastness keep
Of her dishonourable suitor and his father,
Her followers slaughtered or enslaved,
War now afoot across the wide lands,

She refused to kneel before the throne
And was cast down with violence
Summarily judged the instigator of evil
A harpy who had raised the flames of hatred.

At which the old king, at his son's bequest
Asked whether there was anything to be said
And she in reply promised a song so wistful
And yet so wise it might save her life.

'Sing then to those who you would kill
Those who may still die in battle at your behest'
Said the king: 'Let us hear the siren song
For you are surely now within our power'.

At which she rose upright to answer boldly:
'Kinsmen and Foemen alike, I am no chattel
To be bought or sold, gifted or pledged,
To settle feuds or mark out or borders

And my song is only the song of freedom -
I was not the cause of your bloody skirmishes,
Your enmities and intransigence existed
Before I was bright-arrayed and brought in offering'.

Though my song condemns me, I save myself

For life is of little worth if lived beholden.

I dreamt and wondered on a distant land
While mystic witches cast a twilight spell
With oaths of runes and carven bones at hand
In deep reflection at the fateful well

From which the tidings from the depths unfold
A curse that any future life must fail
When those betraying honour see it sold
And stain of gold is left to tell the tale.

There are much better mortal gifts to gain
There is a prize my sacred self holds strong
A treasure that will grace an inner realm
To which the best of me may yet belong.

The die is cast as I affirm my right -
Safeguarding freedom in the fading light'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

At Quilter's Bookshop Having Coffee

With maturity comes freedom?
Rubbish.
With an absence of choice
Have I ceased to be a man?

Reading Antony Burgess on morality
In the New Yorker,
I wrestled with predestination -
Nowt so queer as a clockwork orange.

As far as I could tell, things you think are OK -
Action makes it predestined.

I squeezed a glance at the twenty-or-so blonde
Bending over a second-hand book,
Wellington all the way - black and grey -
But great legs, dark tights.
Pity the haunches are hidden under a shift.

And then back to Burgess -
Maybe skins are choice -
It's just peeling that's wrong.

A very late middle-aged man having a coffee
Looking hopefully conspicuous -
Fruit for thought.

The girl barista is also personable,
As well as making a great trim flat white.

'Girl, I'm goin to make you sweat', the song has it.
Not in my case, I don't have options -
They are just lookers.

Time was when the blush would bloom above the breasts
And heads would roll back -
Now sin is passing me by.
Good has been imposed upon me.

I never had to contend with mind control -
All the girls knew what I was thinking -
Some tossed their curls, some bit lips - some smiled.
Most just practiced being admired - and were dismissive.

But in the round
Sad-to-say, I have lost free will -
Now destined to an absence of choice
By unreciprocated zest.

An orange that just ticks.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

At The Arena's Edge

[For Anna Politkovskaya on the Tenth Anniversary of her Murder]

The creepy clown lives between laughter and the uncanny valley
Dodging side-swinging ladders and drowning in buckets of confetti
Chasing his car in elongated boots with a dislodged steering wheel:
But if he gets too near to a little girl sitting at the ring-side
She will blanch and grab her mother's arm for protection.

Beyond the charades and the farces and the buffoonery
Those who are close see how the ring-masters are working
To woo the crowd with high wire thrills and cowed tigers -
Fleecing and filching the takings, orchestrating the Big Top.
Then they send in the clowns: isn't it rich, don't you despair?

Who will square up and protect the innocent from deceit
By the harlequin suits and greasy visages of the Media Circus
Peddling propaganda, distortion, spin, misspeaking and the Big Lie?
Reach out to those like Anna, who in an increasingly Post-Truth world,
Fully discern the chasm which divides safety from terror - and stand firm.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

At The Eleventh Hour

Over at last, that most bitter harvest task
The gathering of the cut down by the sack -
The fields quietened from the bringing back
Of canvas slings, the stumbling to the track.

And those who were cut down at the last
Received the same token as those cut first
All being brought to judgment as they must
Worthy of their hire and the vintner's trust.

At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day
The labourers ceased their bloodstain harvest
Wanting only rest, indifferent to pay
Ending the carrying to the wine press:

That those who picked and chose the skins of men
Might take their pay in life and try to live again.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

At The Final Bake-Off

I would like to be well thought of
To be remembered with a smile:
Leaving cherry stone memories
And a bake-mix spoon to be licked.

I would like to be one of a kind
To be thought of as unusual
Like turmeric and honey ice cream
Or citrus or truffle infused olive oil.

I would like to be thought of as warm -
Not so hot perhaps as when young -
More like eat-round-the-edges chowder
Or a cup of tea that just hits the spot.

Not that good taste has been my thing-
But I would like to leave a good taste -
To be finger-licking good at the last
So that you my friend might ask for more.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

At The Tennis Club Car Park

I was parked up at the tennis club
Waiting for the coaching session to end.

A car backed in a few spaces down
And I saw that it was little Sally -
Rory's mum in her SUV

Shyly retiring, petite, exquisite.

She didn't notice me waiting.

Then Sophie, who had been there some time,
Walked over to Sally's open car window
And bent down to kiss the hairline above Sally's ear

So very tenderly - with oodles of awe and caring.

I had not expected such beauty there
My heart stood still.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Autumn 1975

I have parked the car near the gate
And a short expanse of pasture
Has to be crossed before we enter
The woodland - the 'wood' of my boyhood.

We are up from London for the weekend
And I show you the farm from the vantage
Of the muddy roadside - there across
The valley on the bank above the willows.

But we turn from the view of the farm
And tramp across the muddy fields
To the spinney where I follow the brook
To the point where I had cut off a meander.

The stream had ground out a deep curve
And as a boy of nice adjustments
I had trudged across from the farm
And short-cut the flow with a spade.

And then I said that I must make love to you:
Unbuckling your jeans, kissing you first
I am sure but acting with a remote urgency
That was hardly appropriate, sparingly kind.

But you indulged my insistent ceremony
And let me bring things together there
Breaking and recasting ancient spells
That brought the stream to grade.

And hugging lovingly later, we found the bridge
Where we could cast some sticks downstream
And see them race away with the current
Or eddied endlessly ... or snagged to stillness.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Awaiting Andromeda

Everlasting darkness unforgiving
Denies that there are stars that we see through:
We only see the faces of the living
And those of whom the briefest loss is true.

The stars we see are not yet deathly red
For almost all are close and shine plain sight,
In forms and clusters that the ancients read
So what we see is touched by sparks of light.

The Way will turn its vast eternal wheel
As eons pass and star lights fail and dim
And we in stardust through our substance feel
Andromeda drawn broken to the rim.

Will we like her be rescued from the void
When the obliating dragon is destroyed?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Bad Angel

Tell me again how you romanced despair
And how this little angel took your side -
As you left plainer comfort standing there
Her tears no match for flashy foolish pride?

And how you broke an ordinary heart
To flirt with glamour, novelty and fame
But found deceit had ripped your life apart
And left you with a temptress lost to shame.

And how this spirit turned from friend to fiend
With curt demands and endless expectation
Until she broke down what you had dreamed
And left you lost in desolation -

And then grew mute towards the bitter end
Bringing life to quiet desperation.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Banyan Tree Swim

TOTAL IMMERSION

A friend recently linked me to
The Facebook photo-album that he had posted
Extolling the merits of the Banyan Tree Hotel in Macau
As the absolute last word in luxury
And I quote from the promo:

Watch the glamorous lights of Cotai City
as you bathe in your own sanctuary
A luxurious bedroom, expansive living area
complete with spacious relaxation pool,
unparalleled views of Cotai City or Hengqin Island,
a custom wooden bathtub complementing
an opulently furnished bathroom
breathe glamour into this enclave of serenity.
Spanning 100 square metres and lavishly appointed
with every quality trapping modern living has to offer,
the Cotai Pool Suite comes with an enticing king-sized bed
to tempt you into easy slumber.

This washed me back to 1966
When the Great Helmsman Chairman Mao at 72
Joined 5,000 other swimmers
For the 11th Wuhan Cross-Yangtze Swim
With the help of six life-guards
And his Cultural Work Troupe
Of young women
He stayed in the water for 65 minutes
Floating downstream for ten miles
Surrounded by giant placards
Requesting fate to grant him
A further 10,000 years of life
To create Great Order
After striking and smashing the Black Gang
By fomenting a Great Disorder -
For when there is Great Disorder
Conditions are excellent -
Under Heaven, the people are the sea

That the revolutionary swims in.

Mao hated Confucius
As he was far too pragmatic and unassuming.
Indeed, Confucius was chided in the I Ching
For his commonsense and compassion
After he asked a disciple
To aid a man who was being swept
Through the Lüliang Gorge
On the grounds that the swimmer might
Be endangering his life -
But the man made the shore singing
And berated his would-be rescuer
For lacking the assurance
To be at one with profit and danger
And follow the Tao of the Water.
But Confucius who liked to swim
With his friends was a modest fellow
Who thought that wealth and prestige
Were like clouds that passed away.

And I thought that I should write something
On behalf of the Banyan bathers:

'Laid back we wallow
Against the marble tiles
Our ample derrieres
Keeping us bobbing...
There are no perils here
Like the flowing tides
Of the Lüliang Gorge;
Although the water is too deep
For me to sit
Still.
All my life
I wanted to be in the swim
Though going against the current
Took my breath away..
Now at last I can indulge myself
Safely
As I immerse immodestly'.

Beauty's Moon-Mad Spell

Did you not discern that your beauty revealed
In deep-black curls, dark eyes and perfect form
Glimpses from an idyllic alien world
Where the maddened moon gives slip the storm?

Did you not understand that male reaction
Is shallow in such heady matters
As men must reject too much perfection
Fearing sorcery from the sacred huntress?

Did you sense hope run-down and killed by grace?
That you had been cursed as a moon-lover:
Set to roam the winds in lonely chase
As stricken hearts broke out and ran for cover -

That none would linger in the dawn's new light
So skies could clear and warm the chastened night.

[for the English Novelist and Writer Rosamond Lehmann 1901 - 1990]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Bed Bug Metamorphosis

I wake again from a recurrent nightmare.
I have been subsumed in a consulting assignment
For which I may or may not have been contracted
Within a labyrinthine bureaucracy somewhere
Abroad, in a very foreign country that despises me.

There has been a problem establishing the contract,
With arguments with officials over the terms of reference -
Days and days have passed in meaningless waiting
Punctuated by occasional hearings and meetings
To assess the validity of my claims for payment and release.

I feel that progress has been made as my dream nears end
And that the papers that I have submitted with my claims
Have at last been given due consideration - and that my work
Has been given some recognition and sign off by my keepers -
Such that an airline booking for tomorrow may be finalized.

And then I wake up and my immediate anxiety subsides
As I see the pale green curtains of my bedroom
And feel the quilt and pillow into which I have burrowed.
I am no doubt a fortunate insect or type of insidious vermin
That is still recognizable - only part into transformation
From the useful to the useless - to the burden.

We have a lot in common you and I Gregor Samsa.
We started off with the noble aim of independence
And took pride in being the family breadwinner
But things and people break down and become nuisances.

But for the moment I only relive the possibility of despair
In my nightmares - the quiet terror of redundancy,
The irrelevance in cash terms of a former productive unit,
The unraveling horror of impending dependency and frailty,
The inevitable and final separation from normal homecoming.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Best Befriended

And still there will be those who believe,
Like bridesmaids awaiting their friend,
Anticipating the possibility of her happiness,
That they live this moment for her good fortune.

Please God, that such nobility of purpose
Be rewarded in the marriage of freedom and country,
That those who wait so expectantly may be delivered
From tribulation, wrath, danger, and necessity.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Between Wednesday And Sunday Baths In The 1950s

WHAT WAS POSSIBLE?

Swish grime in wrinkle and navel

With a soaped warm flannel

And a sodden towel -

Be an angel.

Wash down as far as Possible

Wash up as far as Possible

And if at all Possible

Wash Possible.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Beyond Courageous Life Must Burn [mallory And Irvine]

As old men talk of scarce remembered youth
Of beauty's distant mysteries faded
With piquancy that's half imagined
Where nothing mars or seems uncouth
And only finest art can shape the truth
Conjuring boys to life no joys withheld.

Refrain:

Cover with the sky the stars' embrace
Snow tip Sacred Mother Sagarmatha
Man breaker, fate shaker, life breath taker
Dream as shadows light across your face
And wake to deeds that leave immortal trace
Per ardua ad astra.

When still cubs as snow lions romped and chased
Among the icy peaks and cols and caves
One played among the ships that chance the waves
The other through the fields and laneways raced
In sports and games both loss and winning tasted
So country sets the path that glory paves.

Meek like the tiger set to bound and spring
They lived to test their skills and make their way
Where mountains beckoned for prey and play
To take up the chase where the wind horns sing
And matching peril set aside death's sting
With peaks made quarry o'er the hunting day.

Inscrutable the dragon wise and sly
Shingle clad snow-dusted cold and sleeping
Shakes its rocky scales with scree-shards reaping
Waking, uncoiling, snarling at the sky
Recoiling back from those whose footsteps try
To wrest away the secret she is keeping.

Fierce and outrageous like the phoenix
Beyond courageous, life must burn
Vanquish none but ourselves is what they yearn
As ambition stokes its desperate tricks
So ever upward embers seal their tracks
And there is no way back when none can turn

In fellowship and practised skill sets sound
By heaven's stars, it seemed an easy leap
To cleft within the steps and pipes so steep,
Where fathom line could never touch the ground,
And brace up arms against the slips that downed,
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon,

Set to test and try to life's cliff's edge
Strong to the harm in heedless danger sped
Chancing all but fellowship's linked tread
Picks and crampons hammer and wedge
Risk taking all at scarp and ice and ledge
Two men to glory born though mortal bred.

There they stood, ranged across the sheer-sides, set
My lasting view of them a living frame
For one more picture! Into clouds of fame
I saw them move and lost them then. And yet
Dauntless to task and way beyond regret,
Two climbers to the towering summit came.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Bitch-Black Light

Doubtless poetry is not a luxury:
It is a testing quality of night
That illuminates reality
Rock hard, true grit, tough love, glint bright.

Felt and born in the nameless and formless
Intimacy of birth dreamt from chaos,
It speaks of the dark matter of Erebus
Which permeates each lonely universe

And holds the possibility of redress
For abuses, with the redemption of fear:
A bitch-black, ancient and timeless
Powerful, female, forbidden, queer

Light - whispering of possibility,
Dawning acceptance in its scrutiny.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Black Square Icon

God decided to create the world
To divest himself of it forever
Ceasing thought to become free
Unhindered by form and likeness
Retreating in perfection
To emptiness and endless timelessness

But as what matters is conserved
He passed the manifest universe
Down to mankind and his son
With its beginnings and its endings
And with the world came the word
The last inkling of enlightenment.

Though in love and pity of this creation
And the weight of suffering that ensued
The son offered mediation with death
That mankind should also free itself
But in its overreach of thought and pride
It came to own and rule primordial chaos.

Crushed by the insubstantial as we are
In the Black Square the echo remains
Of what is both divine and divested
And of the perfection of initial creativity
Offering a covenant of shape and substance
By which our understanding can be reconciled.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Blessing - Gift Of God

The rains come without asking:

Each year, they portend a harvest

When the generous clouds break.

They will bring joy and prosperity

When what is growing is ready

And the grain has come to term.

But there will be times of storms

When the crops are beaten down -

And our wealth is in what we learn.

For what is given can be taken away:

And what we share in love is everything -

Both the feast and the understanding.

Then let us devote our love-laden hearts

To the sacrifice and the remembrance

That the darkest clouds will be redeemed.

Blue Remembrance

Housman was born in Bromsgrove 13 miles from Birmingham
And Tolkien grew up at Sarehole between Billesley and Spark Hill
Some 4 miles from the city centre.

Turning away from the forging and fettling, they looked west
To the memory assembled spires and farms
Of Shropshire and the distant Welsh Mountains.

There under sun shimmer and roiling clouds
Were mythic plough boys summoned by bugles
And hobbits awaiting a rat-a-tat-tat.

And now Peter Jackson, who was born in Pukerua Bay
Has scoped a partly polystyrene, partly animated
Hopefully-soon-forgotten substitute here in New Zealand.

After all, talking about places, Janet Frame warns:

'I do not remember these things
- they remember me.'

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Blutmai - Another Conversation With Auden

'That girl of nineteen who was shot in the knees
And thrown down the concrete stairs in Berlin
Whose fate raised a righteous anger
That pleased you in its excitement -
What happened to her, I'm asking you now? '

'Her death was a necessary condition
For the subsequent seasons', you answer.
'Are you not aware, looking back to her death,
That nothing has changed, barricades erected
Shootings in the streets, organized fear? '

'That being so perfunctorily incited
And then weeping, mouth helpless and ugly,
Are inevitable conditions in coming to terms
With political passion, violence and betrayal
In the shifting seasons of lovers and writers? '

'Another girl has been shot and thrown down:
This time in Baghdad, Santiago, Hong Kong
Cochabamba ... Charlottesville ... Birstall ...
As recent particulars come to mind.
You didn't expect the last of these did you? '

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Boris Johnson Coming Good?

Eton blond-mop toff why did you abuse
The helpful spending that was yours to give?
Unprofitable wanker, why misuse
Great wads of cash but not let others live?

In expending roubles for yourself alone
Your rubbing up becomes deception
And how when nature calls you to be done
Can spaffing walls gainsay delusion?

Dastard austerity! Why did you spend
Upon the rich that bounty's legacy?
Nature seeks no recompense but will lend
And being kind, she lends generously:

There is no legacy in Onan's Luck
Except the truth that you don't give a f**k.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Brigands Of The Ocean Voids: Toroa - The Mollymawks And Southern Royal Albatross Of Foveaux Strait

Out from Oban on a fishing charter
Bound for a rocky islet in the whale-way
We are suddenly tracked and mobbed
By pitiless hard-eyed white-skull-cap marauders
Strait-troopers of the Sub-antarctic Empire:
A formation of Mollymawk albatross
From the deep spaces under the Southern Cross.
Death star interlopers from the roaring forties
Bound to intercept rogue vessels for the empire
Hunting down harbour break-outs and forays
In the name of Blue Cod carcasses and tidbits.

After the catch is hosed and the landlines stowed
The malevolent cloned conscripts of the sea-wastes
Gather to their piracy - and the plunder they exact.
In the lee of the harbour buoy, the gutting commences
And the squad squabbles for heads and rib-cages
In wave-breaking dives into the bloodied jetsom
Knowing no other restraint or discipline than is imposed
By their commander, the sole Southern Royal Albatross
The first order leader of the distant-rover cohort
Who rules by fear of force and steely-eyed supremacy
These brigands of the ocean voids and island galaxies.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Broken Hearted

Persephone - between light and darkness -
Swallowed to the underworld by Hades
Or defiled by her serpent overlord Zeus -
Was left the doubting mother of Zagreus

The beautiful boy child of the gods.

When the Titans consumed the loathed child
Only the beating sputtering heart remained
But the imprint of those barbarous, wild
Ancient flesh-eating savages was retained

And the heart became the embryo of life -
A bloody remnant culturing mankind
Rescued and implanted in the divine:
Barbarity and purity come to term with strife.

From that birth and death, came good and evil
Its heartbreak left to reconcile the devil.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Bronwen Of The Thirteen Ships

Then thirteen ships came from Ireland to Wales

A splendid fleet, bearing an Irish King,

Noble in their rigging and billowed sails,

Their shields upturned with peaceful meaning.

This sea-king Moir came ashore seeking Bran

The Blessed King of Wales who welcomed him

And asked him what brought them to Albion

And its precious holy land of Cymry.

'Most revered King, Gentle Giant,

I come to seek the hand of your sister

Whose beauty and chastity are renowned,

And that you may bond another brother'.

Then Bran took aside his sister Bronwen

And asked if she would take this adventurer

Who had chanced the wide grey sea unbeknown,

For island fellowship and love of her.

But she too soon the captive of this fleet
Accepted the warrior's white gold ring,
Losing her gentle heart beyond retreat,
Gifted in love to Moir the pirate king.

But seldom do the peaceful bring horses -
And Evnissen, Bronwen's broken sibling,
Saw treachery there, and he was jealous,
Wanting her but hating the saintly king.

Then this would-be incestuous betrayer
Skinned the mouth of each horse to their jaws
Showing no mercy in his hatred there
Blinding the best in fury for his cause.

Then Moir, heartbroken, cast aside his bride,
Angry to the bone at this vile mischance,
And vowing war he readied for the tide
Set to repay dishonour with vengeance.

When word of this came to Bran the Blessed

He was distraught that he should be betrayed,
That his beloved sister should be mocked,
His rule of peace and justice thus destroyed.

And Bran the holy king sought atonement
That Moir should forgive this dreadful slight,
Aside its perpetrator's punishment,
Pledging his own claim to heavenly right -

Offering a sound horse for those maimed
A staff of silver as tall as a man
Fine plates of gold, and a cauldron, long famed,
That will restore the bodies of the slain.

Then all swore peace as the gods might behove
And Bronwen set aside her tears of loss
For tears of joy and vows of endless love
In token that these ills would fade and pass.

And after feasting the lovers took ship

Coming at last to Ireland and Moir's keep
With Bronwen soon loved for her fellowship,
And her beauty, and her playing of the harp.

But some of the Irish could not forget
Their losses and their humiliation
And Bronwen became hated and disgraced
Her life demanded in reparation.

Then Moir not wishing to put her to worse,
Made Bronwen the court cook's scullion
Bidding the butcher, as his killing curse,
To smack her ear with his cleaving iron.

But Bronwen who was pure as first-light snow
Charmed the castle birds which heard her sing
And taught a starling to speak so it could show
Bran a letter she had pinned to its wing.

Then Bran his gentleness and love despaired,
Conspired to conquer Ireland and heel Moir -

And a mighty armed fleet he best prepared
That thus the nations came to bitter war.

Of which so much is sung by the minstrels
Who tell of endless triumph and defeat -
And how the Irish opened a thousand hells
Feeding the sacred cauldron with their dead -

And how Ecnissen staunched the warrior flow
By breaking apart the massive grail's bands
But died in agony as he came to know
The fullest fury one's own hell commands -

And how Bronwen died of a broken heart:
All hope for peace dying with her son Gwern,
Whose life unified what was torn apart,
The boy immolated by Ecnissen -

And how they severed the head of King Bran
Burying it at the white mound in London,
To warn of civil strife and be the guardian

Of every peace the just might swear upon.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Bunyip's Blues - The Koala

Whiskery chin and whiskery chops
Snoozing in the broad tree tops
Dreamy eyes and whiskery ears
They sleep away the furry years.

A nose that's hard to see around
And legs that bandy on the ground.
Perplexed and up a gum tree,
You can often just their bum see.

Now Uncle Wattleberry's a fine example
Whose sideburns sprouted more than ample.
So much his house among the trees
Even whiskered in the breeze.

His nephew Bunyip though was not impressed
And thought his uncle over-dressed -
And with their space by hairiness pervaded
Young Bluegum shaved and fur-pomadad.

He took to dining on the trunk below
But listless gummed his soup with woe
As lizards borrowed or much worse stole
His cough-drop pottage from the bowl.

Said Bunyip:

"Whiskers alone are bad enough
Attached to faces coarse and rough
But how much greater their offence is
When stuck on Uncles' countenances."

His uncle thus replied:

"Shaving may add an air that's somewhat brisker
For dignity, commend me to the whisker
As noble thoughts the inward being grace
So noble whiskers dignify the face."

Now this lingo sparked a blue and Bunyip lost his rag
So much, he did a bunk and upped and humped his swag.
And if you want to know the outcome of his walkabout intentions
Consult 'The Magic Pudding' [Albert], on his stew and jam indentions.

Quotations from: 'The Magic Pudding - the Adventures of Bunyip Bluegum' by
Norman Lindsay (1918)

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Burutu

Across the seven seas bedecked with rust
Roistering home in ballast or in freight
With bunker coal to blush each stormy gust
The steamship yearns to meet its own and mate

Iron from the mine and under the hammer
Beaten and bolted, plates rivetted tight
Engine room furnace, pistons in clamour
The foghorn pimps for hookers tonight.

Back from Benin and a U-Boat encounter
Botched and patched in Freetown the while
She is limping in fog, swell and downpour,
Her middle-watch totting each Lime Street mile.

A deadly kiss, the dirty deal is done
She finds her match and the seabed's won.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Buttercups And Daisies

In mid-year when the grass was thin
The buttercups would gild the fields
But when the hay was gathered in
Daisy-dust each swathe revealed.

Then we would take a golden tare
And test it to a tide-mark neck
To see if yellow glinted there
In a like or not like butter check.

And we would pinch the daisies' stems
To link up chains in garland strands
And deck our necks with tiny gems
With sap and pollen on our hands.

Now buttercup and daisy treasure
The book of time reserves forever.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

By Hook Or By Cook? The Saltwater Crocodile

The week before mid-winter's day
Young Nick's judgement went astray -
Spying aloft for cape and bay
He snoozed too long and missed the way.

Though Captain Cook just came to look
In sounding he was much mistook -
He failed to fathom every nook
And on a reef was badly stuck.

Of the gents he had onboard
Old Joe Banks was awfully bored -
And Herr Spöring as they yawed
Simply yawned and slept and snored.

But Chas Green the official astronomer
Feared for his chronometer -
He endeavoured to keep himself together
Scared the barque meet stormy weather.

[At this point it would be best explained
The watch was one that Kendall made
On which longitude was accurately displayed -
Tho' Harrison the inventor went unpaid.]

Then "Time has come" said Dan Solander
"To plug the holes in this colander -
Or immersion soon will end her
And to D. Jones's locker send her".

The ship was hauled and fothered next -
With oakum, wool and horse poo best -
And thence became the Yimithirr's guest
For caulking and a well-earned rest.

At this point Herman grunted and awoke
Clearing his throat before he spoke -
'Das great green log ich nichts gejoke
Hast eyes that vink and threaten volk'

At this, the Saltie ran a hundred metre
A sprint that scarce had been much fleeter -
And having shattered Charlies' box
Chugger-lugged the King of Clocks.

Thought he: my time has surely come
For fancy movements have begun -
But slowly as the cog-wheels spun
His hiatus soon was throbbing some.

Crickety-crockity-crickety-crook
The crocker, who was feeling yuck -
All horologic then forsook
Accosting famous RN Captain Cook.

Now Jim was taciturn and rarely smiled
And watched his arms were well-retired
[as to their attachment he aspired]
So he tipped the wink to Hicks - who fired.

The beast retreated to his den
But marines were ready at the count of ten -
And volleyed and sundered -
The crock stopped - never to go again.

The surgeon faced with these abuses
Took time to sop the innards' oozes -
A clock is what he then produces -
Sound - but stained with gastric juices.

Now time and tide are never late
And chronometers ne'er should wait -
Oh crocodiles just bide the while
And mind your etiquette and dining style.

Don't gobble till the day is done
With sixty seconds' distance run -
Just smile and watch the fun
Or one untimely spring may jump the gun.

Canterbury Male

Unresolved mystery remains
About the stiff that no one claims
Of a late middle-age white male
Found with a glass decanter,
A wedding dress catalogue
Addressed to Mandy Martin,
A small battered suitcase,
An oyster card from Walthamstow,
And a copy of Dr Lake's magnum opus
'Clinical Theology: A Theological and
Psychological Basis to Clinical Pastoral Care':
Which, in the author's words, advises
Those engaged in the caring professions
Dealing with the disturbed, troubled and mentally ill on:
"our inability to suffer the painful silences,
the anxious involvements,
and the reverberation of buried negativities
and helplessness within ourselves"

In his findings, the coroner
advised that this "was an incredibly unusual case'
of a person living at the edge of existence", with the
Post mortem recording cirrhosis
Possibly attributable to starvation.
Inquiries across Europe had drawn a blank
And poverty and loneliness set aside
There were only absences in explanation
Like the fact that the man had lost all his teeth -
The body having been found by a walker,
Who initially mistook it for a pile of rubbish,
In a neglected litter strewn hawthorn and briar patch
Near the junction of the A20 and the A28 -
The latter being the old Wincheap Way
Where pilgrims caught a first glimpse of the Minster
Took off their shoes and tugged on their hair shirts.
The Coroner ended by thanking the Kent Police
Commenting that "we could not have done more".

Cat And Gown

I reached 71 years old this morning
And my wife gave me a new dressing gown
While the boys gave me a book about cats
With the latter all being survivors
Of the Christchurch Earthquake
And as I drank my tea in my big green chair
My wife and I discussed spun cotton or terry towelling
And how you couldn't buy for love or money
The kind of dressing gown that I liked
And the conversation drifted to my mother
On the 9th of June 1944
And how she had not really wanted another child,
In any event with my father, and that
After his death with the RAF in October 1943
She was left to pick up the pieces alone
Except for a 7 year old daughter and a newborn baby
And I explained again that my father's terry towelling
Dressing gown which had been handed down
To my stepfather, but which he never used,
Hung behind the bathroom door at the farm
And how I used to pick at the cotton
Trying to understand
And I could see my wife bite her bottom lip.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Cat Fight

The cats are having a fight
With Scruffy caterwauling
And Fang chasing her.

Bloody hell
They have been together
Now for knocking on 7 years

Chosen from the same hamper
On Kitten Adoption Day
At the Cats' Protection League

Twelve-week old kittens spread
From five litters of strays
Between the hampers

We got a got a bog standard
English Black and White
And a National Health Tabby

They have been together
Now for a lifetime and
Never faced hunger or need

It seems that commotion
Is a mammalian thing
That is in the genes

Jesus, maybe we should
Be less hard on ourselves
About being such a washout.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Caws, Nurses And Muses

Yesterday we sort of rescued an old man
Who had crossed The Parade at Wakefield Park
Stumbled and cracked his head so hard on the pavement
That the paramedic could see his skull –
He didn't bleed much – the old man that is –
And immediately upped and set off for home
Almost horizontal from the shoulders
Like one of the Anthropophagi
Homing on sheer instinct back to Dee Street
Face covered in rivulets of blood
Followed by my wife who is a nurse
And a kind young woman from the Ministry of Social Development
And me turning with the boys in the car until we lost them
Only to catch up with them outside the old man's town house
Eventually, so that we were able to drive off and bring back
The ambulance when it got lost.
It seems that he is an 87 year old engineer
Whose wife is in care as she has dementia
And that he walks up to see her every day -
Desperately trying to push away attention
And the possibility of any kind of care for himself
That might rob him of his independence.

And the night before I had been to the theatre
And seen a one-woman show about Sylvia Plath
So that I have spent a day or so reading around
Sylvia, Assia, Olwyn, Carol, Frieda, Nicholas, Shura and Ted
About dreadful behaviour like Sylvia mocking her sister-in-law
Olwyn as a Barren Woman - 'blank-faced and mum as a nurse' -
And killing herself the day before a home-help was due to start
And Assia sending Sylvia's friend the gas bill and then sleeping in Sylvia's bed
And making sure that the childcare au pair had a day off before
She gassed herself and four-year old Shura
Felo-de-sey - auto-da-fey – hey ho.

And Hughes, a hard, brilliant, canny apeth, who saw himself as a bold
Emotionally charged Satyr drawing blood with ravaged captive nymphs
To whom he gave orders about getting up in the morning
And not going back to bed for a snooze in the afternoon

And making sure that his house was kept in order with his shirts ironed
But who was perhaps as much like a carrion crow caught
Raking at the maggots and rotting meat and pelts of field voles
And picking the eyes out of frost struck lambs.

Assia gave instructions that her body should lie in a quiet English churchyard
But Ted put her ashes up the crematorium chimney
Knowing she was Jewish and that her family had fled Germany -
And he gave Olwyn the job of running the Plath literary estate.
Somewhat ironic then that he spent his last 22 years
With Carol who was a nurse and that the only survivor
Of the original cast – Frieda - makes a thing of looking after sick crows.

'An honour! were not I thine only nurse,
I would say thou hadst suck'd wisdom from thy teat'.

'A man, young lady! Lady - such a man
As all the world - why, he's a man of wax'.

'O woe! O woeful, woeful, woeful day!
Most lamentable day, most woeful day...'

'Honest good fellows, ah, put up, put up;
For, well you know, this is a pitiful case'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Children Are The Orgasm Of The World?

Browsing Cherry Lazar's Instagram site, I saw that her most recent post was about decorating the design dilly-dildo that she had bought from the maestress of porcelain Adele Brydges (hand-made by a hand maiden?) . Cherry (aka Stephie Key) recommends doing this for yourself: 'I spent a fab morning that turned into a day. Now I have a primavera on a phallus and I have never been happier with my life choices'. And I thought of Hera Lindsay Bird and her inspirational stories. 'What's kinder than the glittered baseball cap of a stranger telling you what to strive for? ' Well how about putting some transfers on a vibrator and revving it up, living for the moment, reaching for the sky but remembering to breathe? Which then raises the question again as to whether children are the orgasm of the world - and if they are, where does this leave the lasagna, the hovercraft and helicopter, the sheep, and pasture rotation under modern farming practices? And whether orgasms get you up at three in the morning because there is a bogeyman behind the curtain or because blue ted has gone AWOL over the cot railings. Well if you are the dad and you haven't had sex for three weeks because the kid has created a time paradox in which lust is history, you might just want to think about a vibrating sheath that looks a bit like the rubber grip that you can finagle off a bike handlebar or the Next Generation guybrator, the 'Hot Octopus', which has been likened to a \$99 USB-rechargeable Darth Vader helmet - promoted as altogether trying to do something newly ambitious. Mind you, it might be best to slam dunk that one in the spare toilet - if you really can be bothered going down to the garage to fossick around under the camping gear at that time of the night - even if you are able to summon the thought of Cherry or Hera, or ideally both, naked on a distant and rocky outcrop.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Chimera

Every man who has a serviceable soul
Is not whole but contains a chimera
The twin girl child of his earliest youth
Whose emotions live on enveloped.

[No doubt it is the same for woman
With the polarities and negatives
Reversed - the ambivalent Sappho singing
Of the imperishable hero Achilles.]

But as manhood rises, the she-soul fades
Trapped in the frame of masculinity
Though she is never wholly transmuted
Whispering as she does of lost divinity

Singing softly from the mind's shades
Of the perils of mortality and eternity:
A shadow of His mother, sister, lover
Sotto voce - the silent S'ibalance of He.

Now we know of what the sirens sang
When Ulysses, chained firmly to the mast
Of his nameless ship heard the enchanted
Sounds - straining for the dangerous coast.

And why Orpheus looked back in Hades
Unable to return to life the nymph
From whom he will never be parted:
Paired victims of Elysium's serpent.

And why Hylas gazed deeply, knowingly
At the naiads who drew him down to drown.
And why Narcissus at the surface found
Only hopeless longing in reflection.

Remember also Aphrodite and her revenge:
Psyche's beauty sacrificed to a dark god
Nightly awaiting the unseen lover
Too trusting of sisters, too lacking faith.

All betrayals of the substance of Eros:
The theft of the rib and not the fruit
The ripping apart of male and female
And the imperfections left in duality.

And this unfolding, this drawing down
This enfolding of hidden opposites
Of which dissension is the essence
Bedevils our good-standing with the gods

Of which I have no answer - only this
That we should engender harmony
Between the shadow and the soul
And share our secret selves in love.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Coffee With Martin And Peter

INTIMACY IS SUICIDE FOR PHILOSOPHY

I spent another challenging cup of coffee
At the Maranui, this morning, with Peter.

I had consulted Wikipedia on Heidegger
But after a couple of turns, I still got lost.
Someone should develop a philosophical
SatNav that can overlay all particular entities
And allow them to show up as entities in the first place.
Hopefully it would have Satellite, Earth and Map Views.

Words like metaphysics, hermeneutics and ontology
Make me apprehensive
Much the same way that Gay references
Make me uneasy or apprehensive,
Or the threat of exams drove me to revise:
The apprehension of possible humiliation.

As I explained, I come from farming stock
And have a life-long atavistic concern about
Being killed with a tyre lever or a Stillson spanner
For using big words or being a brain box
Or pondering too long on the nature of being
Or kissing a bloke behind the bike shed or the silage pit.

I was interested though to learn that Heidi
Liked poetry and that he thought that
Stefan George was pretty cool
And unintelligibly intelligible:
'So I renounced and gladly see:
Where word breaks off no thing may be'.

And even more impressed that Heidi
Liked Gottfried Benn:
'publicly labelled a swine by the Nazis,
an imbecile by the Communists,
an intellectual prostitute by the democrats,
a renegade by the emigrants,
and a pathological nihilist by the religious.'

But disappointed that he only sent Paul Celan
A thank-you note for his commemoration
Of their forest walk at Todtnauberg.
Paul asked in the form of a poem:
'Who wrote in the Visitors Book
The line about a hope today
For a thinker's word to register in the heart?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Cohen Returns To Hydra With Marianne

And if the lemons are bitter

Take them with a pinch of salt

For there will be a feast tonight

When we are come to shore.

It will be time for us to laugh again

And cry and laugh and come to terms.

So deeply lost - we had told ourselves

There was no new land, no new sea -

But then we came again to Piraeus.

Spume from the ferry dies

As she settles at the quay

Hugging close the better land

That harbours noble dreams -

The sea like poured wine -

The coast so advantageous,

Promontories and bays

Broken like the bread of heaven.

Stepping from ship to shore

I touch and take your hand

Confidently, companionably.

There is artistry in this journey,

Recovering our common ground.

Better leave the rest unsaid

For we have touched on Lethe here

And come to join the ancient dead.

...

'They had this place for each other at the very end. That is what words of love can do'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Cold Pastoral

Every time I pass out into the light going north from the Terrace Tunnel
Gunning the car up to the 100k limit on the motorway
I am haunted by the memory of the death of 18-year old Natalia Austin
Whose body was flung headlong into the opposite lane:

'What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? '

Natalia fell in with adults who were drug-addicted and limitlessly irresponsible
And was persuaded to ride pillion on a Harley Davidson
Having been given a brief lesson on leaning with the bike
By Dee McMahon's girlfriend Monique.

'For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! '

McMahon was nearly five times over the legal alcohol limit
The equivalent of having drunk up to 42 standard drinks -
The autopsy also found morphine and tramadol
In what was left of McMahon's corpse.

'That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd'

Hitting 140k on the bend out of the Tunnel
He smacked the bike several times against the concrete median strip
Shedding metal in showers of sparks
And ripping limbs away in showers of blood.

'Who are these coming to the sacrifice? '

'We're trying to go forward and cherish the memory of a beautiful girl
Who had a bright future, and who was just too innocent and trusting -
You let your little girl go and you hope she's going to be looked after by adults.
She trusted them, and they've let her down miserably.'

'What little town by river or seashore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn? '

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Come At Last To The Landscape Of My Dreams

A greater life, a little death in love:
When I was young, I practiced wide excess
And sought extremes to gain and then disprove
The latitudes of folly in romance.

Why dispute so large a territory
And leave behind such transient touchfalls?
Why dream discovery from every
Distant vista - new conquests and their spoils?

For in the wide expanses of my dreams
I sought the perfect one to make me whole
And lost my way in desolate extremes -
The desert of an empty earth - my soul.

But now I've found and touched what's real and true
The brave new world of deeper love with you.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Come Here!

Out drinking with a friend at the Hummingbird
a little worse for wear I find myself

buying a third red wine for a beautiful young woman
who is weaving herself around

her eyes distant somewhere between dreamy
and stoned - trying to set on a shifting horizon...

drifting, she is trying to focus, to find something
gladly accepting the offer to sit with us.

After awhile, though I am very much older
she seems to take a shine to me and my repartee:

Me waxing lyrical in the magically relaxed
mode that comes upon me when I'm charming women.

Dis-engagingly, I tell her that my friend
and I are gay-bent but she just laughs - another of my corny jokes.

At the close, I offer to find and pay for a taxi
but she insists on an earlier offer of a late-night coffee at my place.

I put her to bed gently and lovingly,
her pretty, blonde curls dead to the world on my pillow.

Later, sleeping on the couch
I am summoned by an as yet unfallen angel intent on rimming the abyss.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Come Into The Street And Walk There

Come into the street and walk there
Think of the loved and those you lost
Long for caring - longing to care
Feel the pavement beneath your feet

As passers-by are lost to thought
Scarcely glancing others' faces
And in each step the fact is taught
That little leaves but empty traces

Trusting forward - look sadly back
Confide to time your broken heart
Smile to yourself then quick the track
That end be better than the start

We hope ourselves for endless love
We tell each other gentle lies
We dream that heaven shines above
But truth is where the ending lies.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Comfort

The cat has whorled itself on the duvet
Burying its head into its fluffy tail
Losing its nose in a quiet smile
And its body in a rhythmic sleep -
In that sweet-spot antithesis beyond
Fight and flight that constitutes comfort.

Last night you dressed in fantasy
With high heels and a schoolgirl tartan
Skirt and a pretty, white-lace shirt
And a new pair of white knickers -
Inside-out in error as the label disclosed -
And now I fear no evil as it comforts me.

Blessed be the God of all comfort
'Comfort, Yes comfort My People'
[And cats] says the Lord - that we who have
Patience and comfort might have hope -
That those who mourn shall be comforted -
And that those who comfort will dwell

In goodness and mercy in the House of the Lord forever.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Cornerstone

For Montrell Jackson - with Immense Respect

I was tired physically
And emotionally:
Disappointed by the reckless comment
Hurting at heartlessness that wouldn't relent
Disappointed by the hate we couldn't prevent
Entrusting my heart in the prayers I sent.

I swear to God
I loved this city
Those who cared were much appreciated
But I wondered that few in the city reciprocated
Out of uniform I was a threat that colour created
In my uniform my own people were alienated.

Look at my actions
And how they speak
I was guarding the streets to keep you free
A gentle giant and protector that sure was me:
Questioning my integrity, can't you see
You'll tear us apart indefinitely, it's a tragedy.

This city must get better
This city will get better:
Love my baby son Mason with all your might
Give him the hugs that are his birthright
Get together and build a citadel of light
Let him see his old man was right

That we go nowhere when we hate and fight.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Cows And The Carnavalesque

Perhaps it would have been different
If I had started earlier in becoming a writer
But then I couldn't.

My early life was a mess, a predicament
Torn between horny-handed toil,
Scholasticism and a paucity of acceptance and belonging.

And I chose survival rather than poetry,
Seeing the way forward in being
Adventurous, industrious and likably banal.

Ironic then that I find myself in New Zealand
Where the characteristics that I chose
Predominate -

But the top poets are markedly post-modern
Being versed in improbable punctuation,
Line slippages in their rondeaus, rondels and villanelles

& a marked preference for ampersands.

Such poetry we read is often a bricolage:

'characterized by eclecticism, digression, collage, pastiche,
irony, the return of ornament and historical reference,

... magical realism

& the referencing of popular media embracing
pop art, architectural deconstructivism,
maximalism, and neo-romanticism'.

Or what our premier laureate terms the 'carnavalesque':

Where more often what's enjoyable
is when a poem veers off,

carried along by a momentum that's not quite mine

towards a solution that neither I nor the poem's reader
is anticipating in ways in which language

can be our conspirator in subverting the too predictable
meeting of the sign with its meaning or referent,
encouraging our scepticism of the over-confident
Mot Juste.

That's all very well.

Those buggers never had to milk cows
And then write essays about Keats.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Crossing To The Island Where The Blessed Belong

Drink too quick as though this drink's the last
Drink up from what is past and taste regret
Drink down through what is left and what has passed
Drink deeper still - drink deeper to forget.

From dregs and froth the recollections pour
In loss and bitterness their flavours found
The thirsts of youth grown old and sour
A glass most-empty or a potion downed.

But think of when the glass was bright and full
A brimming bowl with zest and lust to rim,
With warmth that love, delight and friendship mull
Sweet draughts and quaffs that headiness makes trim.

With age the vintage grows too tart or strong -
Blend it with freshness savoured by the young -
And steer a middle course to best times wrong
Crossing to the island where the blessed belong.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Crossties And Lines

[for Wilfred Owen, October 1918]

Shrewsbury, Hadnall, Yorton, Clive, Wem,
Prees, Whitchurch, Wrenbury, Nantwich, Crewe

Backed against the oaks, the cattle gather
Minding the din of the clattering train -
Milking is late tonight as the farm lights flicker
And loco smoke and steam meet soaking rain.

On the line, the gangers slack and chatter
And twist a wad twixt palm and thumb
As clanging trucks rough couplings batter
And drive wheels rumble on to kingdom come.

'Wer'rup' the cowman calls - the black dog sets -
The sullen charges bunt and frisk in show,
Mocking the winter's edge, the day's regrets
They trudge through sleet that threatens snow.

The foreman mutters and bites his lip
'Hey up Will - shift back young mon -
The ballast can slip and the rails can trip -
Tamping is done 'til the tender's gone'.

But the boy is slow with his limping gait
And what he hears is artillery fire
Back from the Somme in a broken state
He left the best of his wits at the wire.

Buttercup, rush, sedge, thistle and nettle
The year's-end grassland thin between -
Muddy hocks and hooves at gate halt settle
Awaiting the latch to lift and keen.

But those who wager still in careless gift
As the yawping steel grinds hard
Won't stand in the cess as the bogies shift,
And the wheel of fortune deals its card.

On the Western Marches lines are broken
Iron has taken its mass and press to heart,
And clag and blemish and blood give token
Where switch and point new journeys start.

Bellinglise, Magny-la-Fosse, Riqueval,
La Baraque, Ramicourt, Joncourt, Oors

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

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Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Cyber Nymphs

Contracted to our brief demanding view
Youth and beauty pass in bright procession
And in perfection is this world untrue
As thumbnails click in scant obsession.

Fold of golden apricot and blush of peach
A hint of downy light on spray-tanned skin
Seemingly awakening to a touch
As dawdled fingers to the left breast run.

Come-hither eyes which beckon bright but bored
Feed the flames with self-substantial fuel
And so abundance swells its own reward:
None here can kiss but none it seems are cruel.

Where fairest creatures our desires increase
Alone the webcam screens rehearse the lie
That as the tender works towards release
The image fades and leaves no memory.

Pity this world but still its glutton be
Are there any you could love that now you see?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Dancing To An Old Tune

[With the Cheshire Young Farmers 1962]

And there I used to be, waiting
In the kitchen close to the coal fire range
Having put on my baggy hand-me-down
Dinner jacket and black ribbon-seamed trousers
And my creased dancing pumps
Ready to brave the winter evening
With my grandfather's white silk scarf

To join our neighbour's son
For a trip in his old sports car
To Tattenhall or Sandbach
Or the Civic Hall, Nantwich.
Then the air was oh so crisp -
And the stars were so very bright
Another perfect longed for night.

My God, could there be anything
More exciting than getting out
And away from the dark fields
And having some pints of mild
In The Lamb or the Wilbraham Arms
And smoking Player's Navy Cut
Or Craven A and standing there

In the urinal like a man already
Shaking off the excess alcohol
Next to the Durex dispenser
And getting ready to gather up
After some coarse comments
To roam the streets together
For a Young Farmers' Dance -

We would always arrive late
And stand at the back of the room
Like reluctant stock edging the pen.
The pretty girls would already be dancing
Their cards marked for the evening

But some of the plainer girls
Or those in ill-fitting dresses

Cut from their mother's or sister's cloth
Would look longingly for attention
Framed by perms, smiling hesitantly
So we would survey the scene
And settle for a bottle of brown ale -
Heaven enough to be with friends
Have choices and side-step the Fox Trot.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Danseuse Sauvage

Surviving pogroms, sleeping on the street
Was it such hardships, petite gamine noire,
That taught the steps that put you on your feet
Dancing a wild enticing repertoire?

Wary and weighing up powerful whites
She smiled on indifference and ignorance:
On those who gave eroticism plaudits
And those who traded in vile abhorrence.

Brazen with buck-toothed cheeky elegance
She danced from poverty to stardom
In a wild ecstasy of excellence
A demi-tour of suffering to wisdom.

So that when she returned to her people
She brought rights to triumph over evil.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Daramoolen And The Dreamtime

[For the Ngunnawal people - traditional custodians of the Monaro Plains and the Canberra region]

DARAMOOLEN AND THE DREAMTIME

Then there was no man
Or even woman
And the sky was clear
Only the sun
And beneath the sun
Lay the snake.

So the snake slept
For long
Alone and inert
Until it awoke
Hungry and thirsty
Ready.

Then the snake
Made a woman
From the moonlight
And when she
Had grown
He drank from her.

After the snake had
Tasted the blood
The rain came
And the land came to life
With many creatures
And the snake became a rainbow.

Then the woman said
'Daramoolen
Make me a man
So that I can give birth'
And the Rainbow Snake

Made a man
And the woman was glad.

So people came to the world
And children played.
And as the children grew
The mother told them:
'With blood and rain
The snake made you.'

But the man was curious
And when the moon came
He tasted the blood
From the woman
And cut himself
So that he too could bleed.

Then the man
Mixed her blood with his
And the Rainbow snake
Became very angry
Saying: 'these children
Are mine'.

Then the snake went along
Far away
And drought
Covered the land
So that the people
Had no food and were afraid.

So the woman
Sent her two eldest sons
To find Daramoolen
And they found him
Coiled cold against a
Great mountain.

And the boys said:
'Our mother has sent us
Open your mouth
And give us hope

That blood can
Bring the rain again'.

And Daramoolen
Ate the boys
And they were gone
But he said to the woman:
'Here is Jedinbilla -
Where boys become men'.

And the snake made
Murra bidgee mullangari
[To keep the pathway
To the ancestors alive]
Saying: 'Now the boys
Are colours on my skin

Ngunna yerrabi yanggu
[So you are welcome
To leave footprints on the land]
Where your people
Will see the rain again

And the man must dream'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Dark Lady

A light which left and gathered in the eaves
Rough waking - weary slouching to unease
A voice that chides that no one ever sees
A flickering mirage of our best beliefs

Stale actions further frozen by degrees
Terrors sown that trash the flowers and trees
A choice of loss that every ill perceives
A cult that flays a gash on devotees

A future that is worse than death foresees
Repetitions which become decrees
A mindless pain progressing mind's disease
An outcast that may never ever please

A loss of mine and me beyond retrieve
The image lets the empty mirror seize.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Dark Queen

I had not realized that you were so beautiful
Raven-haired - with eyes of summer blue

Heartbreaker of the anguished
Heart-stiller of the vanquished

Tell me - where are the lovers of the lostly past
Enchanted, beguiled - passing to oblivion at last?

Heartbreaker of the anguished
Heart-stiller of the vanquished

Tell me - where are the warriors once fiercely brave
Mouldering, forgotten - cherished only by the lonely grave?

Heartbreaker of the anguished
Heart-stiller of the vanquished

Do you the harvester of souls - through love and death
Still deal in faithless kisses and each failing final breath?

[a chant for the Morrigan]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Days Use Me Gently

Days use me gently - sleep, love, solitude
The tools of time's preparing - revealing
Skills lovingly applied with exactitude
Shaping the commonplace with meaning:

These craftsmen stretch out hours - measuring
The width and spans of laths of latitude
The height and depth of lengths of longitude
The intersections and the severing.

Now they are slowing, resting - assessing
The cuts made final - surfaces sanded finely -
Sawdust and shavings tidied - and polishing
Enough to bring to lustre finally

My object - holding future fortitude -
Whose days of work receive my gratitude.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Death On The Long Bridge

'Bolt quick' - sweet soul whose life they would suppress:

You who knew no peace and very little love

Must take this chance for freedom's slight caress -

Must run ... and run ... and call to God above!

What men or ghouls are these? What deadening fright?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What hue and cry? What wild and desperate flight?

And you must run ... and run ... for freedom's sake.

Such truth is more than beauty needs to know

And in your death the flow of time runs slow.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Deidemia's Reproach To Pyrrha

When your mother brought you here to join us
A bond was made as your eyes shone,
Beauteous red-haired daughter of Peleus,
My confidante and companion.

Boys glimpse visions of a she-male form
As beauty brooks no edge or error
So shores that shift become the norm:
It was thus with you my Kerkysera.

From your mother the Nereid Thetis
You were quicksilver like the autumn moon
As gay and constant as the changing tides
Jostling tender - caressing rough - in turn.

Each day we skipped from wharf to castle
The carefree, careless girls of Skyros
Till desire and doubt and blush gave battle
Awaiting the feast of Dionysus.

Then was I the master of us, shy maid -
Nub and nipple stretched against the cloth,
Easing, seeking, touching as we played -
Unafraid of any warrior's wrath.

Fickle sea nymph, tonguing salty skin taut,
As arm to arm, chest to breast, cuddled close
I stroked your thigh and your sweet pleasure sought,
My finger tips alive as passion rose.

Roused to act you found yourself revealed
Salving wounds in love's emotion
Sheathing the sword to set aside my shield
Finding peace in sweet commotion.

Was it anger then at this release
That set you bound for war at Troy
When that old trickster peddler Odysseus
Plied his guile to girlhood love destroy?

But freckled fem, I needed no defense -
It seems your shame a baser man concealed.
There was no cause to take offence
It matters not which skin, when skin's revealed

Your brittle pride will serve you well in strife
Let warlike acts subdue your deep unease:
And I will act the duteous little wife
Though making love you dream of Patrocles.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Desistance Hunting

JUST SIT

The pursuit of happiness is alright
And a fine delight for a chase
But latterly I have found
That happiness surprises me.

In my case persistence hunting
Left me breathless and agonized
As the bucks and harts would break
Into the thickets and shadows.

But if I sit quietly like an ancient wizard
Under a blossomed tree, it comes shyly
At first, the chaste, unhindered unicorn
And crowns my lap.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Desolate Dragon Raging Lion

Do you hear the dragon howl in the dead tree?
Listen to the lion's roar within a dry skull?
Is there joy after the death of awakening?
A dragon will not bide stagnant water
The still pond cannot contain the dragon's coils.
The warmth of spring will still touch the tree
Non-moving, non-living, non-attached.

At the water's edge, the ocean has dried up
But the moon is unhindered by the waves.
Mountain, ocean and sky forests lie inert
In each tip, each fork of deadwood
There is the sound of the dragon wailing.
Nothing can be grasped or attained -
In the dry broken branches there is only emptiness.

If the dragon moans, even then nothing may be realized
When there is a lion roar in the skull, something may arise.
The dragon plays joyfully and the lion watches -
Roots and branches must return to the source
The bark falls but the root-stock remains
Does anybody hear?
There is no one in the world who does not hear!

Deep nature is does not have it?
No grudging, not clinging - joy without greed.
Knowing when to kill and when to give life to thought
Knowing when to comfort the dragon and calm the lion.
A thousand, ten thousand melodies still reverberate
The writing has grown faint and all sounds are one
Text and score have been erased and come to silence.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Devoted To The Goddess

After all it is a drama
Motherhood and family:
Past, present and future
Enchanted by divine magic -
Love played as a game
Participants often driven mad
By promises and deceits
With winners at a loss from
Qualities and distinctions
Impermanence and emptiness.
She promises to be fair
But at the end is self-serving.
Hold on to her craft regardless
Rise with the flood tide
And drift back on the ebb.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Distant Music

I am of a stifled thought-tormented age
and conjure the past for images of music.

If I cross the threshold and Lily takes my coat
can I not overhear the piano playing -

And enter to see Miss Furlong folding away the music
of a pretty waltz?

There is no truer truth obtainable than
comes of music - at once welcome and now silent.

There is a woman standing in the shadow listening -
she hears the melody but for me it is too distant

I hold up my hand to silence those departing -
the image is of my wife - the notes are snow specks.

I exist that is for certain, but for how long -
until the thought ceases or until I cease?

And leaving the picture of words that I have painted,
the snow dissolving and dwindling in its descent,

We must take the passing carriage and brave the quivering chill
as the flakes, silver and dark, fall obliquely against the lamplight.

My wife Gretta is lost to me - she has fallen asleep in tears -
and the snow taps again at the window - all are becoming shades -

And I think of Lily, the caretaker's daughter - the Morkans' maid -
bridling at my attention and the shilling present that the evening brought her.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Do Not Heed That Darkness

I once stood at the very brink of a singularity
And felt its impending darkness draw down
The light from my life inexorably -
That I behaved badly and unreasonably
I can never doubt but then I was at the brim
And the poor girl with whom I half-lived
Knew that things were amiss when the dogs came home alone -
She struggled then to drag me back
And later cleaned the steps of
Bits and pieces brought in from the sea's edge.

As the stars wheeled and the surface began to close
I somehow saw a fleck of light
That had escaped the dark banal
And I was buoyed to the pier's end
Where I was found
By my unfortunate companion
Who I had not meant to so negate:
Thence condemned as we both were -
Exhausted at the safer shores of the commonplace -
To stand apart to better contemplate
In dreadful care that rimmed-jet intensity
Where photons fade (complexity become invisible)
And from which there is no ultimate escape.

As Socrates who was so much wiser than I observed
We should not fear what we cannot know
And his more noble death, face-shrouded
In the Agora, with the bitter cup lipped,
Gives testimony that true knowledge
Is the recognition that there is nothing to know
Except that one cannot discern in the darkness.
So if at all my light and my speaking out offend you
Simply remember that I once stepped back from obscurity
- for the time being.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Drinking The Pubs Of Otley Dry

Back home the wives are waiting there
Reading stories to the kids in bed
As their menfolk joke across the square
Being heroes at the bar instead.

Look left, look right, the pubs are bright,
The dales are dark beyond,
There is the call of youth tonight
To which we must respond.

The Rose and Crown will give us sup
And then the Horse and Farrier
So pay the round and square the tab
As we light-up the merrier.

On to the Horse and Bull both black
Though Rose and Swan are white
Across the market place and back
Though skin-full girths stretch tight.

Let's taste the best of bitter treasure
That Keighley brews and taps
And take Tadcaster's measure
As we roister round the traps.

"God Bless Guy Fawkes", a fiery gent
He may have drunk here too
The only honest man in parliament
Who sadly failed to see it through.

"God save the Queen"; 'twas just but jest
A loyal toast is better heard -
And Yorkshiremen will stand the test
In drinking deep to keep their word.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Dubious Gifts

SKINK

There's another half-dead skink on the carpet
Hunted out of the Bush and delivered as a
Contribution to the household groceries by the cats.
It will be carefully collected in tissue and placed back in the flax.

I tell the boys to feed Scruff and Fang.
'They've already got plenty of food Dad', they say.
'That's not the point' I advise.
'They are looking for attention - give them some Treats anyway'.

A wise woman learns that men are a lot like cats.
They need to be given regular attention -
Even if it is a bit of a nuisance and they lack nothing.
They hang around for treats because it's habitual - craving.

And, as for the men, they'll then go off hunting.
Memo to self: Bringing back \$5 tops and blouses,
Pre-loved from the hanger rails of the op-shop,
May just be a skanky behavioural response.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Dust

The heads of grain will shake and fall to ground
When stacks and sheaves are torn apart to thresh
And dust and empty bays are all that's found
As bags and bales are cleared and floors made fresh

The rounds of dough will form and rise and stretch
And those who sift the flour that's baked for bread
Will trim the bowl and wipe the dusty bench
While tools are cleansed for times that stretch ahead

But I concede that I am only dust
Like golden lads and girls of olden days -
Whose specks and flecks and motes in search of rest
Were brought to muted and more silent stays -

When harvest's home and daily bread is spent
The dust of words must witness for any who repent.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Each Quarter Day

[Love is only Love when Love can grow]

When young I fell in love four times a day.
I was more careless then and desperate
With little thought or heed of come what may
When braving reticence to date and mate.

Often I saw a flash of eye that shone
When cheeks' or necks' emblazoned blushes dimmed
And schemed of pillow buddies deftly won
And lobes and napes with kisses over-brimmed;

But as supposed eternal summers fade
I chide myself that truth and wisdom show
Deep seekers such as you are born not made
And love is only love when love can grow.

And so each quarter day I stop to see
Your kindness, laughs and hugs give life to me.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Early Morning At University House, Canberra

The brightness startles when the blinds are drawn
And smacks across the window's sleepy brow
As sunshine rages there against the lawn
And dawning makes a last flamboyant bow.

My entrance to the court un.masks delight:
The choisya is so very pure and white
Beset abuzz by jezebels and nymphs
That hover nectar-yielding labyrinths.

The pool is quiet where carp will bide the day
But then the birds alight - alert and keen:
The cockatoo sips morning mist away,
While come the tufted doves to coo and preen

And nesting mynas strut, weighing their searches,
As the chorus rises and then takes song
Amid the shrubs and the silver birches -
So swoops and chortles then the kurrawong.

And so by heaven, I thank the wakened sun
For this Canberra day that's just begun.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ebb And Flow And Fierce Regret

PICASSO AND SYLVETTE

Nymphet how much I wanted you:
To kiss the salt-line of your hair
To comb my fingers through
Your curls and linger there.

I lied that creativity is happiness.
As I painted, I longed to touch
Your skin, setting down the canvas -
How much... so much ... ne touche!

And my art is not stronger than life
How could it not betray your beauty?
It being laid by brush and painting knife
And you lustrous, innocent and day-dreamy?

Chaste sea-nymph, your other worldliness
Protects you from the satyr and the centaur -
Your land-grief and sea-loss-weariness
Salving wrack and wave on yearning's shore.

No arousal it seems passed between us
My heartless beauty torn from the sea.
As you left to tippy-toe the beach on broken glass
Between the tides, what did you think of me?

Ma jolie sirène au poney queue -
My pretty pony-tail mermaid Sylvette
Tell me, were my portraits true to you -
In ebb and flow and fierce regret?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Embracing The Night

Laid out naked below the balcony
Under probing ultra-violet light
Singletons and couples sleep fitfully
Eventually relaxing to the night.
The dark sheets frame them in negative
As they surface and then fall asleep
Into that lost land where spectres dwell
And those who loved and hoped may weep
In private heaven or private hell
Being brought as they are to sacrifice -

Flying or leaping in silence and slow time
Stretched out in ecstasy or torment
The sleepers move beyond care or claim,
Immodest to sense and consciousness.
Of what do they dream in those shadows now:
Of fantasies or the past returned -
Of things undone or discharged guiltily -
Or of favours that may yet be gained -
Caught in the flickering of a show
Where recognition stirs uneasily?

And now in that deep unfathomable state
They reach out to someone, anyone to touch -
Or shrink from entanglement with their mate,
Suddenly restive or cloyed at their clutch -
Taking up flight across the firmament
Reaching for the comfort of the cold stars:
Like those who fled the hell of Pompeii
And who forever sleep in testament
Of the lesser power of light on stone,
Though love there too defied that infamy.

Who are these brought now to the sacrifice?
To what still altar, what mysterious priest,
Lost in little death to open, honest skies,
Do the pliant come to be oppressed?
Dreams and nightmares vitrified that instant -
Tissue turned to glass and shone to jet.

Who will rise again from the lipped tray,
From the inert and becoming object,
Brought back like Lazarus to the present
Once more to the sunlight for a little stay.

And what of beauty and coming to truth?
Is beauty truth, truth beauty at the last
Brought finally to bay from mad pursuit
When dreams are real, and life has passed?
Form and surface in timeless endlessness
Where states decay beyond oblivion
And generations pass to death
From shades of Arcady and Avalon.
Will there be something left aside from less
Where sleepy heads share Lethe's shallow breath?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Enid And Elyse: A Medieval Courtly Romance Retold

In olden days there lived a wife
Whose noble husband courted strife
He loved her little - just at night -
This knightly treatment wasn't right.

He found her in the woodland wild
And took her for a wayward child
Making her his own for pity's sake
While long regretting his mistake

Belittling her at every chance
Their love was lacking in romance
And when they came to Arthur's court
He served her up in rags for sport.

But Queen Guinevere took pity
And dressed her in her finery
At which the husband fell for her
And took his way without deter.

At last grown slothful in his lust
He betrayed his knightly trust
And the lads of the Round Table
Questioned whether he was able

To sally forth on jousts or quests
Or polish up his chainmail vests -
And what is more said they made good
On wifely wants of knightlyhood.

At which he rode away with umbrage
Treating her as wayward baggage
Although he took her nonetheless
To keep the score on his contests.

He ordered her to ride ahead
And keep her tongue inside her head:
While he sought out each noble fight
She found a camp and cooked at night

With trolls and bandits on the way
She saw them first but could not say:
Distracting them she made them blink
And looking back gave knight-ward wink

But when the champion won the day
He sent her forward down the way
Driving chargers decked with booty
No words of thanks in line of duty.

Til in the forest depths a maiden cried
Beset by fire and to some faggots tied
A morsel for a dragon roast or fried
The fiery beasties' shawarma undenied.

Then Enid much beguiled the monstrous worm
And calmed its embers with her nubile form -
While Geraint freed the nymphet from the stake
She shared her story with the horned snake.

At length she found her knight had upped and left
Leaving her beset, bamboozled and bereft
But then the dragon taken by her grief
Gave her the gold that stuck between its teeth.

So, she took the stolen armour that she held
And girded up with lance and sword in belt
Giving eager chase to nymph and errant knight
To teach him his behaviour wasn't right.

She came upon her hubby in a glen
Enticing Elyse to a bowered den
He had fancied her since way back when -
He cut her bonds but tied them back again.

Then much in wrath our mounted maiden rode
Resplendent in her anger, brave and bold
And brought to joust Geraint the Oversold
But he took flight and fled the combat cold.

And Elyse was overcome with gratitude

For this gentlest of stranger's hastilude
That he should save her from calamity
And never once assail her chastity.

'Young Sir, my love is yours as you desire
I am a princess and my lands are yours
Come live with me and be my noble squire
And I will grant you what you may require'.

At which the champion laid her helm aside
And tossed the curls she could no longer hide:
'I am no knight young beauteous maid
But just a woman that misfortune made'.

When Elyse saw such woe and courtly care
She loved the girl who stood so sadly there:
'It matters not my lover and my life
You are my choice and I your loving wife'.

And then at last they came to rest at Camelot
Where Queen Guinevere reserved them a spot
At her table (which was like Arts' non-square) ,
Where all were welcome to partake and share.

And they grew old in honour and renown
With songs of courtly love that still resound
For they had found their holy loving grail -
That gentlest of knights and her beloved girl.

And last was heard of Enid's ex-Geraint
He was the fearsome dragon's catamite -
And labour as he might to slake its blood
The slightest recognition was withstood.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Epitaph For The Zephyrometer

Where vampires with the zephyrs play
Destructive winds their powers display -
There living dead their splurges roil
And lip the shore with wasted spoil -

Ere the kinetic needle takes a jolt
That frays its ends with misspent bolt -
So ends what Council kissed alive
The zombie junk on Cobham Drive.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Everything On Earth

Everything on earth and in the sea dies.
But man is more severely condemned:
He knows about this death sentence,
It was signed when he was born.

But, aware of the transience of life,
He lives obliviously - contrary to everything -
As if his life is forever
And this world belongs to him.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Fair Trade?

At the Finland Station in Petrograd, April 1917
Vladimir Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov
Better known as Comrade Lenin
Promised a Worldwide Socialist Revolution

With a permanent end to the class struggle,
And a similar finale for liberal reform, arguing:
We don't need a parliamentary republic.
We don't need bourgeois democracy.

We don't need any government except
A Soviet of worker, soldier and peasant deputies.

At Haparanda-Tornio on the Swedish-Finnish border
The bemused guards had shunted the Sealed Train
Into a siding along with the munitions, luxuries
And refugee removals waiting for the onward locomotive -

This was a package friend that would ruin Russia.

...

At his 'Cottage' or Palace at Cape Idokopas, September 2016
President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin
A former Lieutenant Colonel in the KGB
Promises social populism with a nationalist tinge

With a long-term plan to make Russia Great Again
Through a seamless mix of cronyism and pretence
In which state propaganda subverts justice and the media,
And wealth is concentrated among those who collude

Arguing: Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible
If we make information so dirty there is no longer any trust.

And in public opinion where borders increasingly count for little
The guards are mainly amateurs armed only with flashlights
So munitions and luxuries move endlessly down the track
Though the refugees are forced to flee empty-handed -

If emulated friend, this is a package that will ruin the West.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Falling In Love Finally In Takaka

Coming down yet again into Takaka

I saw the pub where we took a small room

And made love after you had handily

Beaten a couple of the locals at pool.

I marvelled then at your confidence:

Trusting so deeply in my easy smile

Content already that this was it

The end of the road for two drifters.

Fish and chips and a jug or so of beer:

Things were simpler in the old days

A very ordinary blue Toyota Corolla

No house, no kids, just enough dollars.

You told me 'I don't talk that much

I don't have that much to say

But I really like you and think

That you are a good person'.

A pretty-rare girl - a man whisperer
Meeting my flighty charm with calm
Seeing so many good things ahead
Committed to us being ever together.

And for once, I listened to the silence
Sensing that acceptance was everything
And that there was little else worth saying
Picking up on quiet beauty being quite enough.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Fat With The Promise Of Lean Streaks

PERSONAL TRAINER

Late harvest saw us lifting bales to trailers
And up from the trailers to shippon lofts
Using a 2-pronged pitchfork or pikel
Jabbed centre-bale and hefted up in one sweep.

At the glooming of a late summer's day
The last loads would be brought in
As a chill caught sweat and chaff
With aches akimbo as the tractor backed up.

Dank bales leaved with Cheshire autumn
From the flats along the Ankersplatt
A fair jag on and one last tussle
To put them overhead aired aloft.

"Tha mun shape lad
Dunna be like th'owd woman
With a belly-full of butter milk
An wimmy-wammy i'the bitlin.

There inna any way but reet.
Tha mun stand reet lad -
Jab an swing in one go
Shifting as th'weight rises".

Big men and me a youth of sixteen
Jokes and hard judgments -
But they are long gone
Mown down by salty home-cured bacon -
Fat with the promise of lean streaks.

.....

□
Late in life I have come back to the gym
And succumbed to the debonaire charm
Of my personal trainer Maria
Who comes from Wroclaw or `vrotswaf.

She has devised a program to improve me
And I stand looking at myself in the mirror
Holding a weighted ball out-stretched
Balancing on a BoSu and bending low.

I try to think of new things to say or ask
About Poland to reduce the pain -
But then she has me bridging
And holding for 10 more - she can't count.

"That's very good"
She says unconvincingly:
"Lift your tummy up
And squeeze your glutes.

Take a break if you are dizzy -
Next time bring a water bottle.
Now for your favourite
The lunges, leading leg straight at first".

Beautiful people in pink and black lycra
Pounding music and purposeful endeavour
And I am still here
Ready for a chick-pea and kinwa salad at the Maranui -
Fat with the promise of lean streaks.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Feel The Pulse Of Life

The arc of character's a simple myth
The arrow of time will find no target -
No bow is drawn that brings a point to life
The story will fall short - forget regret.

The waves that ripple to the waiting shore
Will play at making runnels in the sand
But tides erase them to what went before
Re-scribing palimpsests that know no end.

Nature is indifferent to age or youth
And beauty's parallel is constant change
Time's industry erodes each laid down truth:
Its endless task to shift and rearrange.

Watch each moment then and every breath
And feel the pulse of life - neglecting death.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Final Sovereignty

Final Sovereignty

SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD

Now a second testing adolescence
Beckons with its trials and pitfalls
Of rage and loss and acquiescence
As alertness ebbs and presence fails.

Seventy now - immaturity ahead -
I look to my elders for consolation
On how ten or twenty years are shed
Purposefully to dissolution.

Across the threshold of obsolescence
I pay court in admiration
To those who deny decay deference
And live on with quiet determination

Their indignities suffered and withstood,
In sovereignty the end makes good.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Final Training Flight

What happened once has yet to end,
Since the cards were put down,
And the evening cocoa drained,
Around the stove at the Sergeants Mess.

Turn in lads. Tomorrow is another day.
Another training run across to Ireland
And back across the steel-grey sea
To Cumberland, coasting home to Millom.

Touch Douglas on Man, on to Slieve Donard
Across the steel-grey sea and its mists
Up to sight Belfast and back to St Bees
Ahead Scafell and down to Black Combe.

Vince, you are the pilot it seems from orders -
It's lucky you played baseball for Buffalo
This is a home run with four bases
So let fly a homer and slide home the Anson.

Rene, you'll be navigator - we'll try the new compass.
You are only twenty but you're smart
I had to laugh after your mother Nolia wrote:
'Unfrozen by the Mounties in Chapleau'.

Joe they have you as the back up pilot.
Maybe we could wing some extra juice
To buzz Michael and the two Marys
Over Clutha's saintly Celtic Soccer Country.

Tom you'll be there as the radio crackles.
Dumb bastards, they have nothing to say
And when 'eh up' you turn on the tyke-talk
Let's hope they too come from the Dales.

As for me, I'm Sunny Jay, Bob's your Uncle -
A thirty-three year old who helped
With the cadets and watched his sixth form
Join the RAF and had to follow.

The Anson is second nature now -
We flew them from Oudtshoorn
Up the railway to Bulawayo:
"I like flying and flying likes me";

A commission delayed - expect no less
As the Avro Lancasters hatch and queue
At Broughton, off the factory lines,
Just down from the graveyard at Blacon.

Fire Dragons feeding on men and boys,
Ready for the Terror Anschlag
To bathe Siegfried in blood
In the straff and flak over Berlin.

One more and another flight tomorrow
Across the broken steel-grey sea
To test a new compass with some runs -
And temper sons staked for the dragons.

I'm a teacher, the thinker, the pipe-smoker -
The Londoner who has to take
The Blitz 'nach hause' but keep the boys safe -
A soft spot under the dragon's wing.

As I turn in tonight, I watch the stars
And think of my wife who was here
Three short weeks ago in Silecroft -
Black Combe walks, beer at the Miner's Arms.

We have no son - only a daughter at home,
Who shelters snuggled with Meg and her cigs,
As the streets of Loughton shake and flicker
From the raids of the beasts' distant kin.

Dear God, keep them safe this night
And at the rising of the sun
Engrave our hopes in what's foreshadowed
As we trace across the steel-grey sea.

Finding Common Ground

In my second year
At St Catharine's College
I had rooms in Sherlock Court
On the second floor
Of an old shop
With a window onto
Trumpington Street.

It was desperate cold
As the block was
Under renovation
And the furnishings were
Very shabby and dusty.

But I used to chat
With my bedder
Mrs Reynolds about
This and that.

One time she told me:
'I got a grandchild now
But my daughter's having
The devil's own time
As he's a blare baby
That won't sleep'.

I told her that
Where I came from
In rural Cheshire
We would have said:
'As he's a blart babby'.

She used to complain and mither
As she dusted and I used
To complain and munger as I swotted...
But she put it all in perspective
By saying with some determination:

'It's all work innit eh? '

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Flag Fen

That there are witches who foretell and riddles enough
Is not in question - but death-kissed lips mouth silence
Even as truths and enigmas clasp and bind -
The inextricable will not yield to spasms and spurs
All headway idle with a felled and break-neck steed.

Then as the oracle echoed and the shrine ran quiet
I pressed forward with a script - a shard - a token
There is no ordeal now that would be too unkind
For I have lived a lifetime knowing nothing or less
Suffering all and being alone and at the gates
To the waters' under world realms and here
In that marshland of old where swords are cast
Beckoning betimes in rising from the peat-stained flood
To arm the surface, vouchsafe me one meeting
To let me greet my lost father face-to-face.

Point out the causeway, follow the ancient track
Where, as the flames enveloped and the water rose
I sought him and would have borne him shoulder high
Amid the staves and spears of our perfidious kinsmen
In the thick of fighting for those that we both love:
Would that I had saved him and that he was at my back
The cloak for my wanderings and howling tempests
A man still young and fair - my brother or my son in fealty
He it was who half-prayed or half-ordered me to life

To live this sentence and make good these sentences
Wherefore must the gods and times be piteous
That my father died knowing not he had a son
And that this son still seeks him to shoulder him
Carrying him free from the dark pools and the burning
Holding close the blade that has risen from the depths
Once beckoning to our kin and held aloft among the ruins
Foretelling scions, lineage and heritage survives.

At my dread and hands the priestess ceased to tremor
Silence itself the prophesy and charm foregone
So I began in tears: 'No ordeal can now dismay me

For I have seen the fire sweep quay and standing
And know now that all are lost, the place consumed
Our enemies taking all they cannot end for good.
And I must turn and leave the young paternal king
Set him down gently in marshes' reddened skies
For the raiders have broken the stock from the fold
Women from their refuge and fear from the beleaguered
The thatch kindled and knives become the hunter'.

There is no manner in which I can retrace my steps
This going back is an undertaking beyond my strength
Holding the future, I cannot prevail against the past
There is a woman driven out and mute who bears me
And I must own the promise as she becomes a slave.

As the fenland darkens to the misted setting sun
Few remain of my company and there we gather
Risen from the hides where once we snared fowl
Watching the burnt piers and causeways flare and fall
To turn through the ring of dark water for the forest
Away from the weapon, token and silver depths
The garlanded maids bound for solstice sacrifice.

Still love and honour are my eternal covenant
That I could have stayed the hands of our tormentors
Or stemmed your wounds and never set you down.

For you I have grown strong, there is a band now
Of rebel warriors, captives, exiles at my command
Moving by rising moonlight on rafts of reeds and adzed oaks
Our skills honed by taking game and snaring wild fowl
And there the water village, its dogs and pigs making to sleep
Its women at the cooking pot, singing lullabies to infants
The children laughing as the old men net their fish.
Beneath the water are the sacred steels, the gifted gold
The sacrifice of metal and the bound both beautiful and base
So I cup my hands and rinse my eyes from holy springs
And catch reflection where I see you bend and smile:
We are at home now and all is well in lapping broads
That settle such straight levels linking every shore.

Balked of the raid's burning, rapine and revenge

I gently turn and slip you free beneath the mere.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Flowers, Flames And Shadows

From shafts and leaves of purple-bronze
Scarlet-gold the lilies flower and flame
Taking stock from grounds of spoil and stones
To blazon beauty's spells to praise your name.

Young sister to the heavenly graces
Rich with nature's gifts of excellence
Your smile all ill-will soon erases
And speaks of sweet and kind insistence

That the living lily triumphs over weeds
And puts to rest decay's indignity
With wisdom, bravery and wholesome deeds
That quicken life with power and industry:

And you the best that summer brings to bear
Display the finest blooms from nature's care.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For A Friend Who Is Leaving

Parting is such sweet sorrow
That in the days that follow
I'll borrow love from our farewell
To mellow griefs that mar tomorrow.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For A Politician Winning At Last

Each time you won selection's race,
Welcomed home with sham disgrace,
The rich and cold stood jeering by
And taunted you with jest and lie.

Today, the road is open now
As laurels sit upon your brow
And those who love you hold you high
To bring you homeward bye and bye.

Old lad, your time is coming fast
The mockery is long since past
As justice through the bullshit grows
To flower brighter than the rose.

Eyes the tabloid rags once deceived
Have seen the light on where you lead
And hope has switched the jeers to cheers
Of those who once would stop their ears.

You have seen neglect and scorn
Like those whose lives are hard and worn
Now the days are yours to harvest
With those to come among the best.

So many wrongs to right it's true
But reason gives us faith in you
You stood apart despised and low
But hardship saw you rise and grow.

And those who sneered are now refuted
As round that balding, grizzled head
The young, the brave and the excluded
Acclaim untarnished hope instead.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For America 2016

Are you downcast? Be brave, stop to listen
To a young woman playing her guitar,
Singing as the freeway car lights glisten
Misted windows on the bus to Georgia

For rich and poor she has no preference
This is a girl who loves the earth and sun
And will not shift her gaze in deference.
She is your poem and it has just begun:

She hates tyrants, she lives for others,
Knows justice is always in jeopardy,
Verses the hopes of children and mothers,
Marks time for the stupid and crazy.

She respects hard work and intelligence
Gives freely of her income and effort
Treats all with patience and indulgence
Believes only what life itself has taught.

Open and light-hearted, she earns her way
She despises easy riches and wealth
Disputes with none yet has her say,
Values each season, rejoices in health.

Listen again as rain falls and signs pass
Even at her worst, she aims for the best
She knows defeat and storms can never last
And riding home she settles back to rest.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For An Old Love - Jill Clayburgh (1944 - 2010)

Hey Jill, I still love you gal – dance again!
I used to joke about my ballet career
And splitting my tights with the Junior Kirov,
On my pas de deux debut in Omsk -

But we never met and my lifts are dodgy
Though an entrechat might have easily disappeared
Between your broken smile and mine,
Entre chats with a coffee and bagel.

Few watch now as you swan Odette
And, as a clod with encroaching klutz
My dancing days are curtain-called
By a sore spot on my right foot.

You were born in April, I in June
Under Von Rundstedt's spell -
And as the children of Operation Overlord
I could have spun a line to be your Siegfried.

You could have swooned or swanned -
Thighs caressed by the dark webs,
Held in my arms or wings
Quivering to the feathered glory.

Or then again, we could have walked and laughed
And watched the ducks in Central Park
And you could have sashayed your curls
And tippy-toed a deux or quatre avec moi.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Antechinus The Satyriast Aussie Marsupial Mouse

What reckless mouse, his modesty betrayed,

Divests of all restraint in getting laid,

And gives up all in amorous pursuit

Forgetting destination for the route?

Tis he! But why that bleeding bosom gored,

Why dimly gleams the visionary sword?

Oh, ever beauteous, ever friendly! Tell,

Is it, in heaven, a crime to love too well -

To bear too tender, or too firm a heart,

To play the Satyr or fair Dildo's part?

Is there no constellation in the sky

For those who come and come until goodbye?

Stay Antipodean Antechinus,

Marsupial mouse libidinous,

Whose fiercest couplings last the twelve-hour day

And two-weeks' lust gives heaven hell to pay -

Must each unlucky buck be banged this way

That time and tide must have their final say:

"Lo these were they, with souls that Eros steel'd,

And curs'd with parts unknowing how to yield."

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Clive James: 1939 - 2015...

ASHES AND BLACK STUMPS

I liked your Maple poem Jamesie
About you slowly karking in Cambridge -
Sentimental savvy
In part but the occasion gives it edge
And its light reflects the Aussie adage

That we are a Rooster one day
And next a bloody feather duster
Bugger as they say
When the whips crack at the last muster
Hide as dry as a dead dingo's donga

But you are a hard case bastard
And a battler who's best with a wry smile
Always big hearted -
Still pitching up a 'she's right' ocker style
That makes us nod laconically the while.

S'truth mate I have to ask before you wane
Why a bloody maple tree and not a gum
And bricked backyards in English rain
Rather than the bronze and ochre sun
Receding ever west now day is done?

But home your flecks of ash and bone will warm
Scattered to the tide on Sydney-side
Where the mullet and the king-fish swarm
To celebrate that you have died
And end up battered dipped and fried.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Colin Mccahon [nz Painter: 1919 -1987]

Offending against
Thy Divine Majesty

By thought, word and deed
And the greatest of these is word.

Epaminondas is black
Oyzmandias lies least
And Parsimonious the priest.

I will spend forty days and forty nights
In the desert, stubbing my toes on rocks

And the lamb will lie down with the lion
And I will rail against the fig
And return to cry out in the market place.

Old men dream dreams and wake without rest
There is no health in them

And I will scrunch my black and dirty words
Against the canvas edge on the dark hills.

Take no thought for the morrow
In the beginning was the word
And that day such deeds were done.

But thou oh God whose property
Is always to have mercy
Not weighing our merits
But pardoning our offences.

If we have no words
We have no God

Let me find the words.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Daigu Ryokan (1758-1831)

NEAR THE INN AT JOURNEY'S END

As the geese head home
I cross the bridge into the village,
Above on the hills are pines
Below stand fields and orchards.
Children chatter
And the persimmons are ripe.

Having crossed the bridge,
I am met by the hermit
From the forest wastes
Whose ragged robe and empty bowl
Offend me -
He is a little drunk it seems.

He asks: 'Has the bridge brought you
To firm ground now? '
'I saw you start to cross
But my mind's eye slipped
And the bridge was empty -
On the path, there is no separation'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Debbie Reynolds [1932-2017]

DREAM OF YOU

Chorus cake-busting in wide-eyed wonder
A fresh-faced girl dancing to rain or shine:
Hit the spot-light and the beam ignites her
She's the kick of coffee, the blush of wine.

Lickety-split in gingham and ankle socks
Bright as a button from a chintz band-box:
Perky, quirky, sassy and full of vim
She can shoot the rim off a dollar's spin.

From check-shirt tomboy and side-kick rider
To Jill-in-the-Box housewife - plaything pet:
Stetson and braids to apple-pie order,
With winsome children, let's not forget!

Perfect pitch and timing... ringing true,
A fantasy staged and prompted by men!
But playboys and fame won't pay their due
When the curtain falls, she's alone again.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For England 2016

You were so beautiful my own country
Your fields and fells the honest sun received
And under open skies the air was free
As all were equal and all bonds redeemed.

My place of birth you have grown sour and old
Uplifting hate to heart with evil lies
And now I find a touch that's coarse and cold
With devilment in hard deceiving eyes.

No longer does the land I loved seem green:
Three scores and ten to ashen grey have turned
The sparkling summer's days that once were seen
When truth glowed bright as lamps of justice burned.

For fear of which, I cannot leave unsaid
My dread thy beauty's summer is forever dead.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Eric Shorrocks [1926 - 2014] - 'he Has Been A Joy'

In love with the farms and fells
Out in all weathers with his dog,
Snap tin of butties and cake,
And a thermos flask of tea
He rebuilt one and a half miles
Of dry stone walls in the Lakes
Blending faces, ties and chocks
Hearting, binding and bonding.

If I, in love with the farms and fields
Had done as much for the hedgerows
Of my native county Cheshire,
Badging cops, staking and laying hawthorn
With my dog, some baggin and a brew,
Then I could have been so well content
But only words are left for stones or pleachers
To heart and bind and bond and pen.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Fadwa Suleiman - Returning

LAUREL

by Fadwa Suleiman

I'm sitting alone in my room
my clothes scattered around me,

and the suitcase that took to the road with me when I fled

I keep telling it about our return, soon
When we go back, you'll carry my clothes that crossed the border inside you
We'll pass through the cities, walk on their streets once more
We'll write in the dust with our own ink
and our ink to us will be essence of laurel.

POISON IVY

My response

It's not so easy Fadwa
Picking up what remains from hatred

in bits and pieces beyond the lost familiar - after the homegoing

I was once promised the return of my treasures
By a wronged and vindictive lover whose anger could not be contained
And waited in the car as a friend picked up one of my old suitcases
Revealing a frayed leather belt and some wire coat hangers
threatening perpetual enmity - written in resin of poison ivy.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Frankie - The Australian National Library Mudlark

So well renowned among the janitors
A small pert bobbing mudlark presence
Struts and pecks - a library scavenger
Reviewing books and reading's sustenance.

No sounds from her of hymns at heaven's gate -
Just solemn quiet investigation
Of Australia's literary state
In Frankie's foyer interrogation.

Dainty in her bobbing quest for crumbs
She trips so lightly through commemoration
Ignoring pride to which mere man succumbs
Oblivious to admiration -

And in this vast cathedral of learning
Is she picking up the book-worm's turning?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Heather Heyer (1985-2017)

THE DAY THEY DROVE THAT SWEET GIRL DOWN

Titus Caine is the name
I was just eighteen when I was slain

In the winter of '64
Knocking hard on Nashville's door.

Holding fast for my carbine's aim
When Steedman's troop formed up again.

...

After his time with Robert E. Lee
My brother came back to Tennessee

He raised me up and took the family farm
Or what was left from the brigands' harm

There he sang of Dixie driven down
And regrets that he let the whiskey drown.

...

But we were down and poor and white
Long before the people owners' fight

This could have been a paradise of plenty
A promised land of milk and honey:

It wasn't war that broke the honest heart
But power and greed which tore the land apart

...

Where hate divides and privilege rides high
And skin's the mark of those who live or die

Where twisted history condemns the young
And news is fake or spun or simply wrong

Where the few but rich hold powerful sway
And the many hold their say and then give way.

...

Those who lie and steal will gut the land
And seize their moment with a bloodied hand:

But truth and love are there in black and white
And they will bring the shadows into light

When justice burns a brighter, fiercer flame
And sears each dreadful wrong with shame.

...

From where I lie, I see so clearly who is free
And how the rich raised dupes to swindle me:

I'm not saying that any kind of rage is good
And I would hate to be misunderstood

Take just what you need and leave the rest
And when all's done don't take the very best:

...

Like the day they drove that sweet girl down
The finest that Dixie's ever raised and grown:

The day they killed that sweet girl in the street
Where liberty and decency and death would meet

While people sang that love and truth will set us free
Walking hand in hand in peace and on to victory.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Ian Curtis [1956 - 1980]

BUCKLEY BOY

Caressing half-sounds
Stumbling your stories
Under star-snake glories
Round the flickered embers

Did silence shake you
And tear you apart
As desperate loss
Tracked endless plains?

Dying in your dreams
When the cord tightens
Did your execution
Proceed as seemed it must?

How many atrocities
Were buried in the sand
And laid aside
Then brought to hand?

Years without kindred
Did you lose control
Find communion dead
And cease expression

Traversing the empty spaces
In dark companion?
Did you long for traces
Of what was told?

In the waste and fever
Did regret ride high
Chaffing the leaver
Chiding the loser why

So many roads were tried
Through trackless wastes
Where stream beds lied
And haste led back?

Walking on the edge
Of no escape
Left on hillsides
By your last mistake

When the dark broke in
Was an icy flaw
The token endpoint
Holding a wider line?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For James K. Baxter (1926 - 1972)

Poor Pass in Kilbirnie

There is still no Revolution, the drums are dusty
And the once young bullfighter has grown sad-whiskered.
Briefly escaped from the Rita Angus complex
He wheels his steel-frame down Bay Road

Having survived from among the singers, the fighters
And the so-called lovers - body now stiff as board,
A face like weathered newsprint from the verge -
He edges and side-steps to the Ruth Gotlieb library.

Let us admit that we were unimpressed from the start -
That when the door shot open and he awoke us
We were sleepy and angry and in need of a coffee,
Never considering a corrida among our options

I further dispute that there was any call to consider God -
And as I remember, death, sex and hope were off the program -
With no chance of blood on the sawdust that or any wet Sunday
There being no time for flashy and outlandish suits of light.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Jane Fonda At 80

When young you were as stunning as the dawn
Red clouds threatening an impending storm
Older you are as lovely as the dusk
Quiet in twilight now the storm has passed.

Though darling buds fierce rain erases
Rough winds will test but strengthen seasoned boughs
And ruined choirs make perfect resting places
As the sun's now waning power still shows.

No stranger to contempt, defeat and strife
You little thought your day would last this long
But the showers of summer brought new life:
This the miracle that comes of staying strong

Time's bounty and its scars alike revealed
That life itself comes finally to yield.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Janis Joplin - Eat Your Heart Out Baby

You go back there and find out who it is spreading stories I'm a dyke.
and tell them that Janis says she's gotten it on
with a couple of thousand cats in her life
and a few hundred chicks and see
what they can do with that.

'Our love', he said, 'shall be none other
But chaste and true as is between
A goodly sister and a brother
From lust our bodies to keep clean.

And wheresoever my body be
Both day and night, at every tide,
My simple heart in chastity
Shall evermore, lady with you abide'.

Oh, come on, come on, come on, come on
Didn't I make you feel like you were the only man? Yeah
An' didn't I give you nearly everything that a woman possibly can?
Honey, you know I did
And, and each time I tell myself that I, well I think I've had enough
But I'm gonna, gonna show you baby, that a woman can be tough
I want you to come on, come on, come on, come on and take it

Take another little piece of my heart now, baby
Oh, oh, break it
Break another little bit of my heart now, darling, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Oh, oh, have a
Have another little piece of my heart now, baby
Well you know you got it, if it makes you feel good

Persephone - between light and darkness -
Swallowed to the underworld by Hades
Or defiled by her serpent overlord Zeus -
Was left the doubting mother of Zagreus

The beautiful boy child of the gods.

When the Titans consumed the loathed child

Only the beating sputtering heart remained
But the imprint of those barbarous, wild
Ancient flesh-eating savages was retained

And the heart became the embryo of life -
A bloody remnant culturing mankind
Rescued and implanted in the divine:
Barbarity and purity come to term with strife.

From that birth and death, came good and evil
Its heartbreak left to reconcile the devil.

The Saracens went and left him lie
With mortal wounds piteous to see;
He called his page hastily
And said, "My time is come to die.

"In my heart is so deep a wound
That I must die none gainsay;
But before I lie within the ground,
On one thing of you I pray:

"Out of my body please cut my heart
And wrap it in this token of her hair;
And when thou dost from hence depart,
Unto my lady thou do it bear.

You're out on the streets looking good
And baby deep down in your heart I guess you know that it ain't right
Never, never, never, never, never, never hear me when I cry at night
Babe and I cry all the time
But each time I tell myself that I, well I can't stand the pain
But when you hold me in your arms, I'll sing it once again
I'll say come on, come on, come on, come on and take it

Take another little piece of my heart now, baby
Oh, oh, break it
Break another little bit of my heart now, darling, yeah
Oh, oh, have a
Have another little piece of my heart now, baby
Well you know you got it, child, if it makes you feel good
I need you to come on, come on, come on, come on and take it

"Promise me this without delay,
To bear my lady this present;
And tell her of my faithful chastity
And the love that death would not relent.

...

The Lord of Faguell, hunting there
Was in the forest with his men;
And met the page who bore the heart with care;
"Page, " he said, "what news do you carry then?

In fear he told the story from the start
Of how the knight was slain in combat,
And how he had sent his lady his heart
As a token that she could wonder at.

Then the lord returned to his castle
And asked his cook to dress the meat
As a spicy, dainty, well-served morsel
That she should be heartbroken by deceit.

Take another little piece of my heart now, baby
Oh, oh, break it
Break another little bit of my heart now, darling, yeah
Oh, oh, have a
Have another little piece of my heart now, baby
Well you know you got it, child, if it makes you feel good
I need you to come on, come on, come on, come on and take it.

Oh, come on, come on, come on, come on

Didn't I make you feel like you were the only man? Yeah
An' didn't I give you nearly everything that a woman possibly can?
Honey, you know I did
And, and each time I tell myself that I, well I think I've had enough
But I'm gonna, gonna show you baby, that a woman can be tough
I want you to come on, come on, come on, come on and take it.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Jo Cox [1974 - 2016]: Peacing People Together

PEACING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Estimated female, what is your legacy
What footprint will you leave?
Inhumanity took your life
Humanity saved your friend's life.

Devoted to a thing - to a cause - to the abstract
Those who divide seek to conquer by default:
Beguiled by propositions, power and aggrandisement
They conspire to rip us apart with violence

We must create our own path, our own future
And choose how we respond:
Never presume anything about a stranger
There will be no resolution until there are no strangers.

There is brilliance in humanity - to who we really are
If we comfort each other and call out our names:
She came through the darkness to tend my wounds
He held my hand and I felt the life he gave me.

For those who were still alive, in that indescribable hell
There was a soft oh so beautiful female voice
That bid us to a greater unity and a stern commanding
Male voice that said: 'There is a lot to do'.

But for some their purpose is fulfilled
'I cannot get up, it hurts too much':
I knew then that nothing would ever be the same
That from that point I had a purpose.

And our words can make a difference:
It's all we have in the darkness
And people called together
Learn through working together.

Be aware of our thoughts
Know that words are powerful:

Making a Difference for Peace

We are a lot more than we give ourselves credit for.

Hold firm to renewed unity

Stop thinking about us and the opposed others:

Anger is a motivation for change

Peace is not a noun it is a verb.

Children need to be taught to make peace

By peacing things together:

It is something we must do

There is a common thread.

There are models of humanity that roam among us

And they called me to their ranks:

On a pilgrimage that saves us from bitterness

I take the path of unconditional acceptance.

In the prospect of our children's lives

I opt to believe in beauty and love:

Committed to the contributing journey:

Peacing together the worst and best.

NOTE

[I am heavily indebted to Dr Gill Hicks here for her words - a heroine who lives on to make a difference]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Kamala Harris

Dark mistress of the ancient amazons,
Whose strength of heart is boundless, it is said -
Her state of golden promise like the sun's
Brings hope of joy and better days ahead

I have seen fair roses blossom red and white
But no such roses see I in her cheeks -
Rather the cup of gold blooms in delight
With every remedy her justice seeks.

I love to hear her speak, for well I know
That truth is still the world's most pleasant sound
And with it deeds which simple virtues show
That life with love and care will best abound.

Yet by heaven, I think such virtue rare
As any key to life that rogues may share.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Keira Knightly

VENUS AMAZOS

Goad not endowment with that good Knightly
Small wares still stand and tip their milky way;
Cut the straps of 'A' cups clasped so lightly.

Women know such ends can chafe most rashly
As the fabric's stretched from overlay
And nightshirts drenched draw comments crassly.

Venus Amazos, buff the shoulder slightly
Let loose your arrows on the streaking day
Pierce deep with left-fledged rose-tips tiny.

Wild girl who fought and quivered mightily
Discard the blouse and let detractors stay
To view that torso decked so scantily.

Sad men, see now exposed so blindingly
Mini-meteors touch the sky in play
And burn convention incorruptibly.

So brazen Hippolyta go boldly
Show us once more your martial front, I pray.
Do not go clothed again slim beauty
Stay topless breastplate warrior Keira K.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Lily Allen

I want to be rich but to sob poor me
I'm clever but I want to play the clown
The apple never falls far from the tree
And I'll fill buckets from being down.

I don't know what's right or wrong, or so I say,
Can't feel anything anymore that's true or real
I know my life is shit, that there's hell to pay,
Ecstasy is the way I need to feel.

I've come to the land of the free for all
I have let loose, am lost, faithless, chainless
Take me on a desk or against the wall
It's all the same - feeling aimless, painless

Shameless - showing it all - famous for it
No-fucking-fearless - you're my latest hit.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Luci Tapahonso

SHE-WHO-BRINGS-HAPPINESS

Tell me the One Good Thing about Today?
It has been listening to Luci Tapahonso
Reading her poetry and having her sign
Her book 'Blue Horses Rush In'
With the words 'Keith - In Beauty - Thank You'
Hozhojii naanaa.

I had welcomed her coming into Te Papa
With a granddaughter who was wearing Navajo leggings
Whose decorative design portrayed their heritage
[Feathers or sparks splayed in escutcheon]
And led her through to The Marae
Mana whenua

And I said to her as she signed her book:
"In these troubled times, we need to go back
Not to history but to the Deep Past"
Meaning that I believe that myth and ceremony
Will serve better than worldliness,
As we are the stuff that dreams are made of

But I fancy that she, being a woman who weaves
To pattern the past to the present
Draping the land in precious fabrics
Wrapping us in blankets of love and wisdom,
Looks most to the future and her granddaughter
She-Who-Brings-Happiness.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Maggie Gyllenhaal

No touch is predestined
But if you have none to make you cry
You have none to make you smile:
Sometimes reaching out is everything.

You stand with your pants down
Splayed against a wall
In a prison cell
Waiting for a cavity search.

A spotty-faced virgin boy
Is offered your open blouse
And the fondling of your breasts,
There is a condom between your teeth.

Your friend is facing death
As the guard wreaks his revenge
And you say: 'I am here
I am on the floor as you wanted'.

I am in awe of your art
Of the way you manifest
The imminence of touch
And its foreboding.

I am drawn by that rawness,
To feeling for you with words,
Trying to touch your heart:
Don't pull back, don't flinch.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For 'matariki' Our Right Whale Or Tohora

The Right Whale is a sporty swell
Although he's vast in girth
He's sixty feet from nose to tail
And grows to ninety tons from only one at birth.

Cruising into harbour out to find a date,
On the lam from icy Ross Sea deeps,
He flips and flaps his tail to find a mate
And serenades each lady ship with acrobatic leaps

With a six-foot Jolly Roger
And half a ton of goolies
He's got a lot to offer
In the matter of yours' trulys

But he'll flounder for the good oil in the CBD tonight.
As his Miss Right's not a bright lights clubber,
With our Splash Club mermaids too slippery and slight
To warm Antarctic blubber.

Expect no fireworks then for Tohora Matariki
No sounding out of Maggie Mays by Moby Dick:
For such whales-of-a-time are far too tricky
And leviathans are all at sea in Wellington / Poneke.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Medhi Mousavi: ????? ????? ??? ?? ??? ????? ?? ????! !

HOLD FAST FOR PROMISES OF RIGHTS TO COME

Each morn a thousand sorrows brings the day
More endless hours that silence dreams away
So when the autumn shrinks the cankered bud
No rose will flower to sunlight as it should.

Bare blocks and dusty floors the times allow
No books of verses there beneath the bough
No wilderness, no songs - just bitter bread
And paradise betrayed with death its stead.

Etch the writing now upon the bloodied wall
Where words are lost as censures' shadows fall
Though those who seek to bolt the dreamer's door
Have lost the way to what is good and pure.

Where less travelled roads to crossroads lead
There signs to love and life will justice heed
And for the miseries of this world, let some
Hold fast for promises of rights to come.

Look to the rose unfold in better days
In truths it pleasures with its bright displays
For when the summer heals galls' blight with light
Stainless treasures greet fair freedom's sight.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For My Young Farmer Friend John Watson Of Townfield Farm, Wettenhall

Gunning up the old TR2 down the Old Coach Road
Through Delamere Forest after a party or dance
You hit one hundred miles per hour - avoiding
Rabbits, hedgehogs, stray deer, and blown boughs.

Slowing down nicely to Oulton Park Gates -
Like Stirling Moss lining up Knicker Brook
Where Blaster Bates had blown a stump
And a village girl had lost her clouts in the scramble.

We lived and laughed on - the thrills of speed and survival
Nothing like doing something daft when you're a lad
And living to tell the tale - the smell of beer and gasoline
Time to pull out the Player's Navy Cut and light up a smoke.

Fifty years on I called in at the farm, down the new driveway,
And waited and chatted with his wife, who I hadn't met before,
Until he came back from moving agisted youngstock at Eaton
And we smiled those deep shy grins of country boys reunited.

Time to tell again the tale of the straight run and the ton up
You were a bloody hero Watson - a right wild young gentleman!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Nigel The Gannet

Nigel wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats aloft the waves and billows,
When all at once he saw a crowd,
... A bevy of birds for bedfellows,
Beside the cliff, above the seas,
Stoned and plastered in the breeze.

Decked as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in straggling line
Along the margins of the bay:
Eighty or more saw he at a glance,
Bobbing beaks in zonked out legless dance.

The waves below them broke; but they
Out-did the sparkling spray's display:
And any gannet guy would sure be gay,
In such bird-brained, blockhead company:
He strutted, preened—but rarely thought
What dearth the show to him had brought.

But when at last he came to die
Still lacking consummation
It flashed upon his inward eye
Cement had blocked persuasion
And then his heart with sorrow filled
For courtships that the concrete stilled.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Pocahontas

The little brown girl turns cartwheels naked
Challenging the ruffian boys to dares:
She is full of life, brave and unashamed
Afraid of no one, immune to tears.

Over and over she tumbles, wrists taut,
Rising and hand-standing from the ground
Then falling - easy mastery in sport -
Palms dirtied and dusted by her own land.

She wheels again upside-down, topsy-turvy:
How can these pantalooned boys prosper here
Their baggy drawers and stockings a mockery
Of freedom, their shifty eyes dull with fear?

But savage dancer kicking up your heels,
You were unaware how sullen progress steals.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Roger De Over-Cum-Navel In Cheshire

[Don't Bad Mouth Cheshire - We Started It All!]

Do what you list, I will your thrall be seen
To lust the eye at which the sun goes blind
Though magistrates proscribe and then condemn
In name with which 'look evil' may be rhymed.

Fair Milking Maid of cheesy mould
Fresh from the vats and parlour
Fat with the curds of kindness round
Your belly button spurs my ardour.

For as the rennet clogs the cheese
The fluff and lint will stuff and bind
So setting then my bliss and ease
In rolls as cloths unloose and then unwind.

And like a bird's nest be your button
That it wobbles when I see you dance
Yet that woe my dart may ere confound
So such pretty dimple does me dalliance

Therewith you be so merry and so jocund,
That at a revel when that I see it wink,
I am an ointment unto thy wound,
Whate'er the priests and clerks may think

For though I weep of tears a bucket
When flab and folds in love abound
I treasure so your knotted pocket
And amorous become where fuzz is found

So I be-knavell'd Roger - thy true Cheshire swain -
Still press my suit with threaded remnants -
And oh that I attain that holy well again
With your sweet floss my grail and penance

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Rumi (1207 - 1273) [Jalal Ad-Din Muhammad Rumi ?????????? ????? ?????]

In the wake amid the agate sea
Burst flecks then forms of foam
And as they rise among the waves
The whirling white is whipped
And sprays and sheets of lace
Take flight and stream the winds.

Look then at the mighty sea
That moves by dawn and moon
Its deep is bold and cold and green
Yet seething frays its very edge -
Watch then the twisting curlicues
And see them part to shreds and fade.

We are out of kilter, poised then lost
Bound as the wheel revolves
Open to the heavens yet first blinded
To the ocean's meaning and its play:
Is it not time to awaken to the waves
And the rolling breakers that enchant us?

Below the water, tide on tide still ebbs
As veils of sheen are stripped away
And we must give ourselves to ecstasy
To sense what moves the greater depths
And also shifts the glistened surfaces
That wind and light now dance upon.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Steve Smith - The Aussie Cricket Captain

Somewhere the Good Old Aussie Battler
Became the Smart-Arse Little Prince:

As up himself as a pipe pig at a stop-cock
Or a rooted rat up a drain full of jam rags
Or a trouser snake in a concrete jock-strap
Or a one-eyed wombat in Aunt Ethel's corsets
Or a pissed newt in a barrel of Bundaburg cane toads

Smithie:

Your head looks like a chewed mango
Or your pet lamb's dildoad dock-sucker
Or a totalled roo on a bull-bar in Menindee.
If my dog had a face like yours
I'd shave its balls and walk it backwards

Mate:

I hope your chooks turn into galahs and cream your budgie smugglers
I hope your gran's moggie gets chugalugged by a carpet python
I hope the red back in the dunny gets lucky for the night
I hope your Uncle Norm gets bundled by a drag queen from Woolamaloo
I hope your pet monkey slips its chain and rogers its hernia

But whatever you do, you Toe-Rag of a Foul-mouthed Sledging Bastard
Don't stop playing cricket!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For The Keats Family

Trudging the wind between Bed, Bath and Beyond
And the Warehouse, I had a few kindly thoughts about Keats
And Fanny Brawne and how they missed out on the joys
Of setting up a home in a dream of empyrean domesticity.

Somehow - I'll see them right now - in measured retrospect:
Young homemakers expecting a baby 'JK' on the way -
Careful in spending Jake's limited stipend as a tutor in English Lit,
Looking for a suitable vacuum cleaner and some table mats.

Now she was having to step aside from her policy analyst role in Women's Affairs
Things would not be easy but 'they had each other' -
They would remember these as the best days of their lives
Far too full of excitement and momentum for lyric poetry.

Even though he had to make his way at the University
And she, having turned the line blue, was absolutely in the pink.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For The New Zealand Poet Sam Hunt

Flamboyant in his oversized
puff-sleeved white shirt
part pirate, part dandy or fop
slender legs in tight leathers,
with a blond mop bouffant,
he has somehow captured
what we are and how we are:
ordinary people contending
with desolation and disappointment
and the never-ending unease
of mortality and the loss of love
to a backdrop of beauty without pity.
Rather than turn the bleak pages
of time running short, running out
better to listen to the breaker-song
of the roiling ocean tracts
forty or fifty below, a play

of shingle and spent waves

as he speaks his poetry

lilting, pounding and gritty

rolling to rest inshore

grounded with the saltiness

of far distant southern islands,

A storm passed or threatening.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For The Poet Meena Alexander - Dead At 67

So much of what we think is naff:

I am relieved to be still alive when Meena Alexander is dead
I am not in solitary in the slammer like Paul Manafort
Facing a decade of jail at 69 absent a pardon from a crook
I was not involved in a cover-up for the loss of my baby
Like the bearded guy in the Aussie TV series The Cry
I am not addicted to anything - though porn is a possible
It would be so special to feel desire again as a young lover
Though finding some solace with a back-scratch is on the cards
As I told my young son this morning driving him to the bus
In the rain in my dressing gown and heavy shoes, no socks,
If I'm run over by a bus and I'm not wearing any underwear
And this is revealed to the operating surgeon there will be a scandal
Or rather that is what my mother used to say - and she knew -
Not from experience though - though I would guess that things
Were tough in the Anderson Shelter and under rationing
Thank heavens I don't have to cook tonight, they can get instant noodles
Poetry sort of keeps me sane - it's thinking with a no-think purpose
Might-have-been, No-more, Too-late, Farewell - pale, wan and loitering Dante
Rossetti
I had a look at your poetry Meena - mango trees, baobabs and macaque
monkeys
Being divided, being lost, being different - you and Dante and I should get
Together for a chai and a chat.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Those Who Never Love And Then Repent

[For A.E. Housman (1859 - 1936)]

Deliberately he chose the done and dusted
Living in sepia tones with quiet reflection
To dream of country lads, courage and regret:
Recruiting them to war or worse intention
To death on distant battlegrounds or gibbet
Claiming loyalty or faithless lovers sent them.

Fearing the hard caress, the felled swathes,
Sleep faux farmer's boy - what point to rise?
No harvest comes to wintry empty bays
The farm's deserted, nothing to rear or prize
But stack-yard groundsel, chaff and shiftless days,
Beneath the earth the quick-limed dry-stock lies:

For those who never love and then repent
Sheave postcards from the land of lost content.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Wuhan ??

??????,????
???????????????

???????,?????
?????????????

???????,??????????
??????????????????

The stones themselves are moaning, the clouds are weeping
The winter rain brings a cascade of tears

The Yellow Crane Tower still stands but it is deserted
The willow and cherry blossoms bloom to emptiness

And where is the promise of home in the fading light?
The mist gathering along the river is becoming impenetrable

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

For Yulia - My Russian Personal Trainer

THE CURSE OF FITNESS

With heavy anguish, hopeless straining -
Standing still - she chides reproof.
Oh, to be loosed from personal training!
Oh, freedom, only not to move!

The body shame and fear is scourging -
Lunges, planks and bridges tear the flesh.
From pain dear God and her insistent urging,
Spare me flinching from the sets refresh.

Is pity's wall alone unshaken?
I pray to God, I cry in vain,
More weary, by all hope forsaken;
Recurrent squats segue pain again.

There is no respite ever given
Enslaved by lifts, by weights reduced;
I suffer tortured, hounded, driven
Promised life though aching, stiff, contused.

[With acknowledgment to Russian Poet Dmitriy Merezhkovsky (1866–1941)]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Fouling The Nest

Soft green English light over
Fens and broads and reaches
Where the reed warbler nests.

There are mayflies and midges
Rising above nurturing waters
Fringed by rushes and willows

And the cock warbler sings
To his lifelong lover-partner
As she makes a nest for their chicks.

Tranquil ... idyllic ... come to mind,
As Sir David Attenborough intones
Quintessential pastoral lyricism.

Except that there is a villain here
Who robs our lovers of their part
And lays a trail of trickery and deceit.

Similarly, it seems there are among us
Gowks or cuckoos who are stealing
Paradise with mimicry and subterfuge

Whose monstrous demands for more
Run us ragged feeding gawping maws
And their bloated demands and expectations

Pushing our own children out of the future
Heaving sustainability and fairness over the edge
So that they can take all and give nothing.

One could be forgiven for the conjecture
That these parasites may be implanted aliens
Who are cuckolding the world with counterfeits

To ensure that its environment morphs and warps
To better sustain their kind with necessary toxicity -
Such that those who feed them may face a wasteland.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Four O'clock Mouse

Come down to my office to check emails
Having wakened from a dead-tired sleep
And gathered myself in the quiet deep dark
Of the something between mid-night and
The early hours and made a cup of tea
And settled to the heavy black and its streetlight stars

Minds-eye awakening, I'm startled by a small rapid shadow
That flicks across the backdrop of the corridor behind
And turn to see a mouse - brought in no doubt
By the cats as a plaything - and now run down,
Its clockwork sending it in circles hither and thither,
A small lost heart beset by vast terrors.

So I rise and move carefully to the bathroom,
Avoiding menacing a shadow where it crouches,
Taking up a towel that I cast like a fisherman
And then gather swiftly and tuck beneath my catch
Bundling on my small disciple lest it burrow and slip
Thankfully shaking it safely on to the balcony

My expectation is that it will start up and dart into the bushland
But there is no movement, only the form of a mouse
That lies dreadfully inert with its tiny limbs limp
In the half-light through the shadows of my window
And slowly I realize that I have witnessed the very last moment
When a presence is lost in the boundless stillness.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Freedom In A Thin Black Line

FOR ASHRAF FAYADH: ?????? ?????? ??????.

Strange how a single black line can offend
Much more than the lips it frames
Nuzzle there the scent of freedom
That outlasts a cry or a kiss
Musky, whiskery – full of promise
And if it gets up your nose

Take another sniff.

[On reading the Poem 'Frida Kahlo's Mustache' by the imprisoned Saudi Arabian poet Ashraf Fayadh]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Freedom Will Burn

'If you do not immediately singe

the whiskers of a slain leopard,

its spirit will pursue the hunter.

A popular Abyssinian belief.'

What then of the leopard enslaved?

Trained for the circus with hot irons,

Used as a wheelbarrow by the clown,

Freedom and honour mocked?

Be sure, appropriate retribution is inevitable:

The leopard's spirit will pursue the hunter

But more thoroughly torment the clown -

For freedom will burn more than whiskers.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Full Fathom

At sea, always you are sailing over graves
And the eyes that were made pearls
Watch a little of the wake as you pass above:
Transitory, translucent, impoverished, familiar.

Peer down as best you can as you make way:
You will see little, simply feel the call of the undertow,
And at the depth's ending sense the weight of water
That settles impartially on bone and coral.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Full Many A Glorious Morning Have I Felt

The roguish golden sun kisses the hills
And lusted meadows feel the warming touch
The gilded streams respond with sleepy smiles
And protestations that won't count for much;

There is glory in the morning rising
The over-glowing form ablaze with lust
Entering the folds without retiring
Mastering the mounts' half-dreaming trust;

This is the stuff of lazy holidays
Crisp white sheets and sparkling Grecian isles
Honeymoons and stolen getaways
Hours lost in making love as timing stills.

And now aroused the sun brings fond to mind
The all-triumphant splendours such unruly lovers find.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Gathered In - Beeston Castle 1956

Days of dust and hayseed set aside,
For once a gradely jaunty family ride.
Let's take a Sunday tootle in the car
And leave awhile the drudging, aching farm,
Where slog and maul are sanctified.

Ahead stand Beeston Castle's broken walls
By Four-Lane-Ends and Bunbury Heath -
Beyond the fields and oaks the evening falls,
And trudging up, the plain is swath beneath.

Fifty summers now the scene divide
As hindsight strains to glimpse that far -
A family cut and kenched and tied -
Grey and faint the snapshot evening star.

Ashes scattered, stubble standing wide -
Seasons past, the scars of harvest hide

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Getting Laid By The Black Swan

As being feather-dusted seems inevitable
Ruffle up for the next financial crisis -
Being screwed by the unspeakable
Rooted by cobbling, cheating and lies

Brute greed and its passionate intensity,
The loss of probity without conviction,
The re-treading of orifices with austerity,
The upping of decency by dereliction.

A crash in the market, out of thin air
Wall Street broken, blood in the streets
Mammon abroad undead

Being so fucked up,

By a totally foreseeable web of deceits
Like a girl mastered by metamorphosis
It will be sold as a Black Swan affair.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Gilbert's Potoroo

Said Gilbert to the potoroo
I hear you like to fungus chew
Nibbling dainty toadstools too
As well as scoffing mushroom stew
Can I give my name to you?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Goddess Of Mercy

You were told 'the dark storm is closing in'
But you were too bold, too adventurous,
Rising far above where the air grew thin
To where flight stalled and became treacherous.

I paint you holding a golden crocus
So young, so fair - back down to earth again -
Beloved of the shy fawns that share your trust
Though the background cattle prepare for rain.

I had been unwell but you rescued me
For you became the Goddess of Mercy
Having stretched down the sky canopy
For me to rise against adversity.

Heavenly girl your beauty lifted me
And your saffron offering set me free.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

God's Fiefdom

WHALIAM

There is a YouTube Video
Of an exploding Sperm Whale
On a beach in the Faroe Islands.

A man slashes it with a mincing knife
And once the diaphragm is pierced
All the guts sort of woosh out!
Strips and strings burst in a spray
That stings the whaler with filth.

I showed my young son Theo
And he told Hayden his teacher
And all the class watched it -
Over again - and laughed.

It put me in mind of William of Normandy
Who died alone in agony when
No one would trust him enough to help.

He had devastated and enslaved the North.
One in four died from his ruthlessness.
Deaths in battle were the best.
Tens of thousands died as crops went unplanted
Stock died, harvests burned and castles rose.

When he had finally expired
The monks in Caen dallied
For far too long and had to force
The corpse into the kist.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Golden Billion

And still we plan our greater paradise
Of more and more of everything - squabbling
About who takes most and their persistence,
While berating laggards in the scrabbling.

Most pathetic in the melee are those
Whose instincts yearn for greater equity:
Promoting welfare - ringing Eden close
That all within may share its bounty.

Yet beyond the pale other billions wait
Unaccounted, unwanted, eyeing it all
For opportunities to share a better state -
Swamped boat, truck crevice, breached wall.

So my liberal and my Third World friends
Who and what is right when means meet ends?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Good Angel

And what of you Ms Discarded Comfort
Can you forgive the jilting and distress?
It is in your best nature to forget
And act in trust again and not redress.

Can we restore love's lost simplicity
And dream of what is true and never tires?
Of both the comfort of eternity
And cheerfulness of trek's-end campsite fires?

Let us meet for heaven's sake beside the lake
And picnic there when we have walked awhile
That I can beg of you that my mistake
Be put aside - so you may pause and smile

And healing words of comfort then be said
In thankfulness for love and daily bread.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Grounded Enlightenment

Set aside racing the run of day
For the time the seconds chase
Will never show a fairer face;
Come close and let the stillness show
Where we must put the world away
To draw it closer as the silence grows:
Let's tell unheard our deepest sorrows
To the shadows that the sundial throws,
For what goes forward and what is past
Will never alter time or stay its haste:
Then let what's left unsaid in quietness strengthen
The amity that calmly sharing space will lengthen.

...

God's very own the West
God's very own the East;
As also the North and South
Gathered in love and truth.

...

So let us study distinction and its absence:
That there is no separation
Of what is apart and what is in contact;
That there is no form or formlessness
As edges and envelopes are unsealed;
That there is no resting or resolution
As emptiness and decay are inevitable;
That thusness is fleeting and yet perceptible
With reality and illusion in mutual shadow;
That life and its converse co-arise
The sentient born of and returning to the insentient;
That we may distinguish the qualities of people
All special - but then there is nothing special;
That when we are grounded in enlightenment
And return to the world from the mountain,
Or from the wilderness, it is in the natural order
That we should equate compassion.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Grubby Grub

I love to cook two crispy snacks
Of Aussie grub and Kiwi tucker,
But the little crawlies both have knacks
Of gumming up my cooker.

I seek them out of bush and tree,
I send out east and west;
But after they've been twigged and logged for me,
I give them all a rest.

I let them rest from nine till three,
For I am busy then,
But scoff them down at dins and tea,
When hunger strikes again.

But different folk have different strokes:
I know a person small —
She keeps a tub of crawling grubs,
Who get no rest at all!

She dines on them in cakes and pies,
And scarcely bats her eyes —
A dozen Huhus, two of Witchettys,
And seven scores of Whys!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Haikus For Womad

Tufted apes delight
Romping creativity
Doomsday set aside

Fucking the planet
Forgotten in the music's
Mindful reveling

Nothing but trash left
And the joys of artistry
To geology

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Hand On The Plough - Heart Lifting

[Celebrating the Russian Poet Nahum Korzhavin - a 'translation']

So we plough
Furrow by furrow
Year by year
But we also need to soar.

Let's face it
Sometimes, as he needs to eat,
The poet ploughs on
Just turning old ground

And sits down wearily
Reaching the headland -
But then the heart soars
And he is himself again

As long as the flight of fancy lasts -
Rising up but sinking down
Year by year
Back to ploughing furrow by furrow.

I am not a hunter of prizes
My world is the stubble-field.
If I am boring
There is no shame

I think, hope, thirst to know, seek
Sowing words with warmth and sunlight
And when others plough
I sometimes just stand and watch.

And then I recover my strength
Forgetting my past failures
And want to bring things to fruition
Smoothing my lined brow.

Well - it is clear soaring is a must
Let's fly... But still

Plough year by year
Not neglecting the essentials.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Happy Feet - He Must Not Flote Upon His Watry Bier Unwept! The Emperor Penguin

We Asked The Waves, And Asked The Fellon Winds, What Hard Mishap Hath
Doomed This Gentle Penguin?

In this Monody the Authors bewail a feathered Friend, unfortunately lost in his
Passage from Campbell Island to Antarctica in the Southern Ocean,2011.

[by John Milton and Elaine Martin, with a bit of help from Keith Johnson]

Bitter constraint
And sad occasion dear
Compels me to disturb your season due
For Happy Feet is dead
Dead ere his prime

The wind blows hard,
The temperatures plunge,
The sky is dark,
The waves rampage,
I'm tossed.

My flippers are weak,
And my energy's gone,
I've struggled so far,
And had nothing to eat,
I'm lost.

I'm all alone
In a foreign place,
The sand's too dry,
Stones have no taste,
I'm beached.

Before I know it,
I'm surrounded,
Human's concern
Here abounded,
I'm blessed.

Weak and helpless,
I don't enjoy it,
The stares, the fuss,
The skill, the focus,
I must rest.

I'm going home,
I heard them say,
For me these people,
go all the way,
I'm stoked.

Bugger!
Next, I'm on a ship
Tossing in the briny
What a bloody trip,
I chucked.

Then the bastards
Put me on a slip
And poke a pole
To make me slip,
I'm arse over tip

Don't call me happy
As I hit the tide
Bloody hell it's cold
Can I come back inside?
I'm freezing

Alas, they've left
And I'm alone
Just endless surf
No sand or stone,
I'm all at sea

At 51 below
So far to go
And months to swim.
Is that an undertow?

I'm gutted!

Look homeward Angel now
And melt with ruth:
And, O ye Dolphins'
Waft the hapless youth.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Having A Quiet Rant About Things - In Conversation With Louis Macneice

Everyone now has a voice and the horse
Brings up its bridle in its teeth -

But none can refuse the sugar of the mouthing off
Or its harness
Better a sweet taste today than coming to a better stall,

We live for words sown in the air or travestied in slogans
Written on Facebook postings or Tweets of 280 characters or less

Our faces framed in selfies or posed with besties
Momentary fame for the record
Where instances linger indefinitely languishing

From familiarity

Subservient to a life that others nudge,
Even more utterly lost and daft,

Observers and consumers of triviality
Fancy lives - fancy that

While the many dine on fast food takeaways
And the dispossessed sleep in doorways

And the food cartons, fish and chip papers and plastic wrappers drift in the gutter

And now the tempter whispers 'This is not slavery - this idleness and indifference
is ours to keep,

It is no longer a matter of profit or loss - simply paying your way'

We are all degraded now - most of all those whose faces used to gaze up at the
stars

Self-esteem is no longer an option - cream or whey
Notions of freedom and freedom of choice are now moot or is that mute

Permeate free - less processing

And I argue for decency and truth and compassion
Largely out of habit - a reflex action,

Knowing that should things even appear to right themselves
The illusion of a fair order of things has passed

The elite no longer even concern themselves with honour
And cynicism about ruling and the ruled predominate
In a world where giving the many a chance
Is a Big Wednesday Power Ball Draw

And concern about the standard of intellectual living seems utterly bizarre
As does the fear that the highbrow will impose any kind of consensus
On the 'ordinary people'

Or that there is a danger that if you give a chance to people to think or live
The arts of thought or civilized living will suffer and become rougher
And will not realize a general improvement in the Human Condition

Get real - everything is now preparing itself for amnesia
Relapse then into sleep, to dreams perhaps and inaction

Or the nightmares that play of gangsters, sheikhs and charlatans
Or of hucksters, jihadists and populist deceivers

Power playing for the love of making a killing
Sitting on the greasy sofa waiting for the balls to drop
Grabbing women by the pussy, straight up with prejudices
Flat out with lies, fake news and half-truths

My concern about which is probably a matter of my private history
To be expunged or rebirthed
Or a personal pathology that stems from
Genetic flaws, hormonal imbalances and my Myers-Briggs typology

And the will and fists of those who abjure the luxury of self-reflection
Will inevitably triumph over the disorganized rabble of opposition
Where purity of motive is always a matter of contention

Thinking it through, seeing it through, seeing through it all

It is no longer a matter of moral merit, of sincere earnestness

Assuming personal responsibility is a delusion - a fallacy

There is evil unleashed- it is both within and abroad

It is teaching us to dance to its tune

Orchestrating and choreographing time and luck.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Heart Stains Are Forever

Longing for landfall, the albatross
Sought the twin sisters of the waves
Mist of the Breaking Surf
And Voice of the Breaking Surf.

So the young warrior Rautoroa
Courtied Rehutai and Tangimoana
Bringing gifts to their chieftain father,
Hoping to take away a bride

But both of the girls fell in love
With the bold and handsome youth
So that neither would leave him
Alone with the other.

Seeking to choose between them
The young man asked for water
And Tangimoana hurried to the stream
To fill a gourd so that he could drink.

But Rehutai lingered, at last alone
With the man she fallen in love with,
Until he said again in anger:
Woman fetch me water.

But Tangimoana on filling her gourd
Muddied the stream so that
When her sister came to its edge
She had to wait for it to clear.

And on returning Rehutai found
Her sister wearing the warrior's cloak
With his raukura feather in her headband
Signifying that they were betrothed.

At this the bereft girl rose with the mist
Living thenceforth a desolate life
On the hill of the lonely one,
Ohine-mokemoke Rehutai.

Rehutai's Lament

I toss like the waves
Moaning with loss
Turning restlessly
Alone on my sleeping mat.

A young girl dreaming
That he would choose and love me -
But only starlight lingers
Now night has overtaken day.

The dark stains of peat
From the marshland
Are washed by the stream
But heart stains are forever

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Hearts Become Sharper

Hearts become sharper
Through cut and thrust.
If a heart has glimpsed hell
It cuts quickly, deeply -
Take great care
With its knife edge.

I beg of you, let's not
Leave love severed
At hell's grindstone.
Why is the heart keen
To cut to the bone?
Who is to blame?

I beg of you, pull back.
In such a deadly duel
There can be no winners.
Hearts simply become sharper
When they are ground down,
Steeled by rage and fury.

[An attempted translation of a poem in Russian by Julia Drunina]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Helen Of Troy - Beauteous Bird

Variously born of swan or goose
Fathered under downy feather
You were saucy, flighty... loose
When you and Paris got together

But how could Menelaus think you true
However much you begged?
Seems he was cooked when you
Slipped off your top and lay there golden-egged.

So widely gorged on pâté de joie
Was truth with beauty ever basted so?
Can you answer for the Fall of Troy?
Honk once for yes and twice for no!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Hide A Crook Ride

[For Prince Charles – on his resentment at Kiwi chipping about his riding skills]

See a Royal Charlie on a fine hoss
Come a great cropper and get awfully cross
With reins from his fingers and turf at his toes
Munting the chukka wherever he goes.

See the Pom Charlie showing who's boss
Pitch from a pony ass over toss
With chips from his mallet he lands on his nose
He shall be Chuckie wherever he goes.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

High Country Hymn

High the mountains rise in spur and summit
Headed up to frozen tracts and recent snows
Clear to the blistering ice-blue sky
Ringing bluffs and cliffs and ragged flumes
Hard country gullies topped to waterfalls
Drop to native beech and sweet short pasture.

Into the easy country, the creeks are bound
By rubble walls spilled from tussock heights
Each fissure with its self-built stop-banks
Breaking through to foothill flats and meadows
And below the river laces braids with willows
Stilled to lakeside once among the poplar stands.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Hillside Gems

Shapes and orientations curve and contort
Coiled steel scribbles confirm wires will not tame
But here a lucky seedling may come to grace

Absolute plane red ridgeback rough reeds
Schist world and firmament - shot and carapace
Iron forms bent and wrought by the careless river

Variously coloured dragonflies flit low across the lake
While the weta takes its ancient outrageous stance
And a bird alights on kelp that prospers far inland

Shire horses snuffle and throw their manes
A slender female figure salutes the snow in play
While wolves beset the sword-wielding warrior

And the man without a name sits quietly on the hill:
Come some time and we will all become anonymous
Though there is solace in the wind.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Holding On

I catch her words and see his fear
As they pass in stolen conversation:

'I have been trying so hard
To hold on to something.'

But how hold on?

Like the surfcaster to a line strike
Reeling in the arm-wrenching catch
Or the kingfish fighting for the sea?
Like the would-be rescued girl at the outlet rip
Slowly choking her desperate saviour
Or the brave swimmer fighting for the shore?
Or the pony cantering along the sands
Holding a measured gait and steady course
As its rider climbs and toe-grips its bare back?

If the touch becomes too taut
Is there anything to hold on to?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Hong Kong Orchids

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HONG KONG ORCHIDS

As the umbrellas are raised and we lift the sky
The blossoms of the bauhinia or orchid tree
Drift down softly on the bright yellow discs
So that they become parasols patterned with flowers.

Let us be joyful together and invite the sun itself
To gather the white five-petaled blooms
Which fall so gently and so freely to the earth
That better days may come as the rain clears.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Hope And The Black Swan

It seems you tried to kill the black swan
That was defending the underworld river
But that you drowned in death itself -
Though your mother raked up
Your dismembered rotting corpse
Sewing you together and adding honey
To bring you back to life.

Whatever!

Laid down mortal on a bed of lettuce
Gored as you were by a boar
Or shot as you were with a spear
Cut from mistletoe
Or an arrow cut from a tamarisk tree
In far Cathay - fatal strength in beauty
We have need of your return.

The demons have been set upon you
As the sun falls to winter
And the oak becomes bare:
The perfect boy, the perfect son
The once and future king
Who may rise again in glory
A full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice.

You who were put to death on a crosstree
Of elder, cedar, olive or dogwood -
Whence bloomed below the anemone
The white lily, the daffodil, the rose.
Your resurrection gave us hope -
Now more than ever
We have need of your return.

Regardless

That what I have outlined about the nature of hope
Is highly improbable and no doubt
Part of the human tendency

To seek simplistic aspirations
For rare and redeeming events.
That said, we have need of you -
Stitching together regrowth and florescence
And their inherent unexpected weaknesses
In facing the black swan of oblivion.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Horsing Around In Chipping Norton

Ian Blair, Ian Blair, lend me your bay mare.
All along Wapping gone ethics gone spare
For I want for to go to Hacking'em Fair,
With Glenn Mulcaire, Nev Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw
Stu Kuttner, Jim Weatherup, Ian Edmondson
Andy Coulson, Flame Becky - all bareback an all
Andy Coulson, Flame Becky - all bareback an all

And when shall I see again my bay mare?
Chipping not Norton not - not that I care
Of tapping or snapshot or entrapment so bare
With Glenn Mulcaire, Nev Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw
Stu Kuttner, Jim Weatherup, Ian Edmondson
Andy Coulson and Becky Brooks - braving a fall
Andy Coulson and Becky Brooks - braving a fall

So they harnessed and bridled the old bay mare,
Raisa the police horse, with scarcely a care
And off they plotted to Hacking'em fair,
With Glenn Mulcaire, Nev Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw
Stu Kuttner, Jim Weatherup, Ian Edmondson
And Andy and Becky and Charlie - all having a ball
And Andy and Becky and Charlie - all having a ball.

Then Friday came, and Saturday noon.
All along down along reckoning soon
But Ian's old Raisa hath not trotted home,
With Glenn Mulcaire, Nev Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw
Stu Kuttner, Jim Weatherup, Ian Edmondson
Andy Coulson and Mrs B - all too close to call
Andy Coulson and Mrs B - all too close to call.

So the Commissioner got up to the top o' the hill
And he seed his old mare down a-making her will,
With Cameron astride in his cavalry twill
With Glenn Mulcaire, Nev Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw
Stu Kuttner, Jim Weatherup, Ian Edmondson
Andy Coulson and Rebekah - all riding so tall
Andy Coulson and Rebekah - all riding so tall.

Poor Raisa the mare - she took sick and she died
All along, down along when the hackers were tried.
And Dave he sat down on a stone, and he cried
With Glenn Mulcaire, Nev Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw
Stu Kuttner, Jim Weatherup, Ian Edmondson
Andy Coulson and the Chestnut - four-faulting the wall
Andy Coulson and the Chestnut - four-faulting the wall.

But this isn't the end o' this shocking affair.
With Raisa and Becky dead-horsing it there
Nor, though it be dread, of the horrid career
Of Glenn Mulcaire, Nev Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw
Stu Kuttner, Jim Weatherup, Ian Edmondson
Andy Coulson and the Witch - all casting a pall
Andy Coulson and the Witch - all casting a pall.

When justice is sought in the cold morning light
The voters will ask whether all this is right
When Murdoch the trainer was kept out of sight,
With Glenn Mulcaire, Nev Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw
Stu Kuttner, Jim Weatherup, Ian Edmondson
Andy Coulson and Hot Bex- all hacking your call
Andy Coulson and Hot Bex - all hacking your call.

And all the long night be heard skirling and groans.
All along, down along, democracy moans
From Raisa the police horse rattling her bones,
With Glenn Mulcaire, Nev Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw
Stu Kuttner, Jim Weatherup, Ian Edmondson
Andy Coulson and Game Becky - still chuckling an all
Andy Coulson and Game Becky - still chuckling an all.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Hunt The Edge For What Is Yet Unsought

MEDIA MURMUR

The mass is taken up in shoals and swarms
Swept by unseen force or stigmergy,
Trending on subtle cues and false alarms,
Burgeoning with maelstrom energy.

In the void, meme-clouds seed and gather
And movements stall and breakaway to spawn,
In whirls spinning in the ether,
Motions for prospective good or harm.

Ebbs and turns shape-shift collective mind
Separation lost in perturbation -
From flock to mob - now mawkish, now unkind -
In wheeling, billowing murmuration.

But best to rise alone, apart in thought
To hunt the edge for what is yet unsought.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Hylonome

Having too much time on my hands
A small surfeit of disposable cash
And an interest in what's hot and what's not
I subscribed to the Paris Review
Where I found a poem by Ange Mlinko.

It's called Barding and I had no ghost
Of a clue what the title meant
Or what the poem was about -
Stepping back from 'the siren cresting
With its unsettling charms'.

No doubt this is what real poetry
IS all about - mind games for aesthetes
Designed to wake you up stickily with a start -
Like finding a bloody thoroughbred's head in your bed
Donated by a playful but insistent gangster
Who wants to put the hard word on you.

Anyhow all was not lost:
Barding or barbing is the body armour
Worn by the horses of late-medieval European knights
And when she is talking about 'the brow
Of a chamfron [als chaffron, champion, chamfron, chamfrein, champron, and
shaffron]
In a vitrine', she means the equine faceplate in a glass display case.

Thank god for Wikipedia for holding the bridle.
This gave her options, yea or neigh, to sugar-lump us with words like
Criniere, croupiere, flanchard, peytral, and caparisons
And even mention the prior history of cataphracts exemplified by
The Scythians, Sarmatians, Parthians, Achaemenids, Sakas, Armenians,
Seleucids, Pergamenes, the Sassanids, the Romans, the Goths and the
Byzantines.

Anyhow, once I had the bit between my teeth
I got on to the Centauiromarchy - the Lapiths vs Centaurs
Dust-up that started when the centaur Euryt(r) ion
Tried to mount the Lapith bride Hippodomia at her wedding

After he got a bit worse for wear, and Hylonome, who was the only
Female centaur at the feast, was so heart-broken

At the loss in the subsequent battle of her better half Cyllarus
That she grazed on some yew branches and auto-equicided.
Leaving Ovid to explore in his *Ars Amatoria* II
Hybridity itself as it illustrates putting two and two together
In "possible combinations of a number of conceptual opposites:
Natura and cultus, human and animal, male and female, love and war
And the contrasting values of lyric-elegiac and epic poetry".

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ice Picks And Violets

While picks make good a fastening
That binds and bonds and slows
The violets in the mountains
Will break through rocks and snows

The frosts are their condition
The axe so sharp and hard
While violets seek salvation
In gentle beauty shared

God made the diamond violet
To deck the mountain slopes
Where only man is violent
With spikes and blows to stake his hopes.

The staves and shafts will soon be gone
When summits glimpse the winter's face
But flowers will seed and linger on
Which cleave and claim their birthright space.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

If You Were The O'o

If you were the last of your kind
What song would you sing
And who would you sing it for?

Would you sing a song of memory
Or of regret or of past kindnesses
From and to those that you loved?

And would there be unkind notes
About your desolation and solitude
Or a last blast singing against fate?

Or would it just be a kind of sweet swansong?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

In Praise Of Drainers

SOPS' LAW

How is it that people with the toughest jobs
Are often the most competent and helpful?
This afternoon, Sheldon came over to fix
The pump on our wastewater system.
He found that the sump was full
So that he couldn't work on the pump
But he recommended a firm
That would drain the tank.
So Gary came over with his tanker
And I helped him back up against the fence,
Having advised Laura who keeps the office,
That we needed 20 meters of hose:
So the tank was emptied and we found
That the non-return valve had been damaged
And that we would have to order a replacement.
As Sheldon's firm is in Lower Hutt
And the parts stockist is in Porirua
It is now too late in the day
To pick up the non-return valve
And we may have to wait until Monday
Before Sheldon can return to fix the pump -
By which time the sump will have filled
With toilet waste, shower water and sink slops
So that Gary will have to return with his tanker,
Suitably coordinated with Sheldon's boss Craig.
Not that I am complaining - I'm grateful -
But as a friend in the business once wisely observed
About the economics of all this:
'It may be shit to you - but it's bread and butter to me'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

In Praise Of The Odd Rigid Boundary

In the modern age chaos is counted fair
But every meaningless becomes the same
So failing beauty's bland successive heir
Mutes poesy in deconstruction's name
And every voice adopts digression
Encumbering the clear with artistry
From ornament's oblique impression
To irony, pastiche and sophistry -
So beauty's slandered with a bastard shame
And nothing is clear in readership it seems
While lines limp on from crook to lame
As prosody the lack of wit redeems.
Mourn then the loss of joy in sonnet form
As jouissance gloss becomes the sonic norm.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

In The Lines

Amid the snares that wording pitfalls set,
A no-mans-land of mined grandiloquence,
Clumsily - at the tripwire of regret,
I'm caught by flares of hurt and misread sense.

It almost seems you want to take offence.
Understand I count my life to you a debt
That I would gladly die in recompense,
In freedom from the flack's reproaching threat

In true-belief that we are one and hence
That you should grant me leave at the outset
To be misunderstood and make poor sense
But keep your love and caring nonetheless.

I'm heartbroken you so easily forget
The absence of reserves in my defence.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

In The Year Of The Horse

ZEN GALLS

My pony would stand and let me
Crumble the night-eyes on his fore-legs -
Extraordinary muskiness -

Raised, dry, broken and calloused
Like a dead wart or the crust on a roast
Or a shank truffle.

And my dog would be snaffled by the smell
Of the pieces that broke away
And the three of us would share
A weird sacrament.

It seems that time is an illusion
And that its only purpose is so that
Everything doesn't happen at once.

That old chestnut!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Isegoria

Come citizen, let us hear from you:
Comments are open
And you can make your case.
Tell us then who you despise.
Give vent to your prejudices,
Give us reasons why a better future
Will come from insult and intemperance
Why division and self-interest
Help you to live a full life
Help to build better lives for us all?
Let us see your views set down
In social media
Engraved forever on the ether
Perhaps then you will reflect
That time holds us all to account.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Isla Negra

Little by little
The arguments killed caring:
The sound became unendurable
Of the endless after silences
That demanded resolution.

Doubtless slowly
You have erased me:
Hardly a memory is left now
But in writing about Pablo Neruda
The past is whispering a say.

When we visited Isla Negra:
There was no crystal moon
Only a dull, cold and windy day
And a nondescript concrete bridge
Across the Cordoba Creek estuary -

A piped water main upstream
Its distant companion on stanchions
And dirty pools waiting to be cleansed
By the tides from the black rocks or
Floods and surges from the stream.

Then as now, the mud was stained
With the ordure of ordinariness:
El sucio y maloliente estero Córdoba
(ubicado cerca de la playa Las Ágatas,
en la localidad de Isla Negra) .

But when Neruda first came there
Into the solitudes of that strand
He came by horse, with his friend Don Eladio,
Wading the pristine stream intoxicated
By winter sprays of pollen, salt and wrack.

‘Era a media tarde,
llegamos a caballo por aquellas soledades
Por primera vez sentí como

una punzada este olor a invierno marino,
mezcla de boldo y arena salada, algas y cardos...'

Now I recall the vines clearing on the trail
As the horses scented fresh water upstream
And we gave them their heads,
Standing back on the stirrups,
Letting them seek the beach between the rocks.

We should not have let love
Grow implacable and bitter like we did
Crossed so separately and stained.
Once there was another land, another shore
Where I am now resolved we are together.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

It Blows So Hard - T'Will Soon Be Gone

Evans D. Martin, Evans D. Morgan and
If I remember right -
There was a third 'Juffy' Evans at class roll call.

We also had a D.J Roberts and an A.W. Roberts.
Chester is very Welsh for an English city
The surnames said it all -
But then again not using first names is very English.

I once went to school with a rose
In my lapel for St George's Day -
I was a strange child.

So it was with fascination
That I find Dai Morgan Evans hosting:
'Rome wasn't built in a Day'.

It was a long time ago but
We both loved archaeology -
Our heroes were
Glyn Daniel and Mortimer Wheeler.

As D.M. said a couple of years back:
'I'm fairly ancient - I'm 66, so I've been around for a while.
I became interested in the Romans by being brought up in Chester'.

As his classmate, I was super impressed that he studied Anglo-Saxon
At Robin Alden's Georgian townhouse in Abbey Street -
After school!

As a country bumpkin, I had 90 minutes travel either way
And had to talk to the cows along the Long Lane -
As I biked home to the farm from the C84 bus.

But Dai and I
[or David as I remember him] -
Were bonded by relics, ruins and inheritance.

Again I was super impressed that he was one of the Ordovices

Who was still living near the Land of his Fathers - Wales
[‘A place of bards, bigots, tenors, drapers, milkmen and journalists’]-
When I was a sort of war orphan who was a bit of a
Spare wheel.

But I hung on to the fact
That my step-dad was an English yeoman:
‘Cheshire born
And Cheshire bred
Strong in the arm
Quick in the head’.

One time, D.M. and I took part in a dig
In Watergate Street -
Hoping for evidence of the Roman docks.

We got down about 10 feet
And found planking – but it was still fresh -
The ground had been used in WW1
As a training area for digging trenches.
Nothing changes that much.

The Ordovices got a pasting
When Caractacus or Caradoc ap Cunobellin
Lost the Battle of the Wrekin or Caer Caradoc -
around AD 51.

Craddock took refuge with the Brigantes
[My lot, I have since found out
Through YDNA testing] -
And our Queen handed him over to -
Publius Ostorius Scapula in chains.

Paraded as a trophy in the Eternal city,
He had this to say:
'Does it really follow that everyone should accept your slavery?
And can you, then, who have got such possessions and so many of them –
Covet our poor tents? '

After that the Cornovii, who wore bulls' horns and had hill forts
[My Cheshire relatives],
Used the Pax Romana to build Uriconium into

Britain's fourth city.

They were descendants of Himilco

The Carthaginian -

So they knew their

Elephants [and cows] as far as the Romans were concerned.

They were a cunning lot, with an eye for

A bargain and what is practical -

And reinvented themselves again under the Angles

As the Wrekin Set -

With Chester and Shrewsbury

And their department stores and tea houses -

Browns and Quaintways -

Very nice too!

And 'the gardens of Blandings Castle

Are that original garden -

From which we are all exiled'.

And so it goes.

My uncle had a farm and then a pub in South Shropshire.

And my cousin [another David] and I

Cycled over once from Wenlock Edge to Wroxeter -

And brought back some shards of Samian ware.

'What's that rubbish?' his dad said.

That David died of AIDS in the 1990s.

As Housman has it:

'On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble;

His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;

The gale, it plies the saplings double,

And thick on Severn snow the leaves.

'Twould blow like this through holt and hanger

When Uricon the city stood:

'Tis the old wind in the old anger,

But then it threshed another wood.

Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman

At yonder heaving hill would stare:
The blood that warms an English yeoman,
The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet:
Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I.

The gale, it plies the saplings double,
It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone:
To-day the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

It Is Enough To Delight

My dear one is mine
As mirrors are lonely
Look into the glass
And tell the face you see

Of how the lens gives power without purpose
Reversed to purpose that no power redeems

Look more deeply
Into the dark glass
Matching devilry
Against the angel

And how the spirit, so easily betrayed
To cruelty, becomes so undermined

Then set aside the mirror and its meaning
It is enough to delight without believing

For I will love the spring
And cry to dream again
My magic is my own
I dance for death alone

Listen - new voyagers are seeking landfall
They will awaken to the sweetness of the island

Water into the well
Music into the air
For the high green hill
Sits always by the sea.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Joe's Brook

The lonely boy pulls on his rubber boots
And calls the dog from her sacking bed
In the small shed where the sticks are chopped.

He is off again across the fields to the brook
Past the pit with its bulrushes and white ducks
Down to the willows and the farm bridge.

There he will build causeways and dams
Endlessly prising broken bricks from the mud
Shaping and retaining structures to his daydreams.

Somewhere at a clearer stream - perhaps in Sussex -
A more famous future poet is putting in place moments
Carrying similar hidden watermarks of significance.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Kamchatka Lilies

LET US ACCEPT

To begin with, let us accept the following:

Poetry is love. Now we can continue:

So in Kamchatka lilies are blooming

In their naranja zest / burnt-gold hue

More beautiful than the russet curls

Of the youngest and most loved prince,

A scion of the Tsarskoye Selo world

From times that have passed to legend long since.

See the little boy gathered by the Tsarina

Her hair dressed with a dark diamante tiara,

Less in loveliness with all its arcane power

Than the Sarana's purpure-petalled flower.

So I gift with awe the verse that nature writes

In startling suns and jet-tipped star delights.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Karl

I see Karl coming up on the footpath
And set my composure for the encounter
He is as always cherry and friendly
But in something of a dreadful strait.

I have known him now for 15 years
Since he attended Buddhist classes
And he still talks about the conveners
With whom I have largely lost touch.

For as long as I have known him
He has been ravaged by schizophrenia
And now into his late fifties
He is gaunt and his face is heavily lined.

He is returning from playing the piano
In a bar - a task to which he is still suited
Though at one time he played in a famous group
And was highly regarded for his skill.

His clothes are dirty, torn and ill-fitting
His jacket stretched across his slight frame
Is both too small for his bones and too big
For his emaciated and neglected torso.

He tells me that he is still living alone
In reserved accommodation and that
He has cut down his medication
Taking only Olanzapine to help him sleep.

'Pretty wild in those Nelson Street Flats'
He chuckles - they are cooking Crack
On the top floor. 'Better stay off it' I say
'I try to' he replies with a shy giggle.

'I'm off to hear Herbie Hancock play
On Wednesday at the Michael Fowler Centre
Somebody gave me a free ticket - he's
Still the best at acoustic and electronic jazz'.

At which he wheels, feeling the audience is over,
Having learned that listeners tend to edge away -
And he is off with a crab-like gait, long hair flying,
Muttering another improvised solo to unreality.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Kebechet

[For Amy Winehouse (1983 - 2011)]

KEBECHET

Why were you so wild
Heart-weighed child?
Jazzy dreams and love's mistakes
Lifting ladders, chasing snakes
Dance the squares the dice-throw makes.
What's that baby at your breast
Princess, are you sure that you know best?
The asps are in the royal quarter
Bringing sleep my pharaoh's daughter.

The reeds are broken
The river's spoken
There's a basket floating there -
And you my foundling needing care,
With needle teeth to suck your share -
Who will love you, who will dare?
Seven lean years and seven fat
Drought and floods will see to that
Serpent goddess Kebechet.

Too brave to last
The prophecy has past.
The pyramid is raised and sealed
Its mysteries stay part revealed:
Sacred madness, cryptic rhyme
Close the passages of time.
But the hieroglyphs of melody
Tongued by you to set the children free
Still promise crossings of the crimson sea.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Key

What is needed to unpick the labyrinth?
How can we find our way and keep track
Of the endless corridors, steps and stairs
Of the mind and its intricate delusions?

What is required to release melancholy?
Where is the thread that will lead us back
Having faced and put down our terrors
And returned to everyday confusion?

What is possible in the besting of the beast?
Will Theseus return a hero to found Athens
And become the keystone of a Golden Age
With Ariadne come to Naxos and deserted?

What is most and what is least at the last
What secrets and prospects can be opened?
Perhaps there is no key on which the world turns
Only the thread of knowledge and its heartbreak.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Kiss Me Kate - Carefully. The Kangaroo

Poets often use many words
To say a simple thing.
It takes thought and time and rhyme
To make a poem sing.

With music and words I've been playing
For you, I have written a song.
To be sure that you'll know what I'm saying,
I'll translate as I go along...

Hum with me the tune
And let us play amid the Bush
Let us come together soon
To consummate our crush.

In other words,
Bounce my way.
In other words,
Share the hay.

Leave the billabong
And let me sing forever more.
You are all I long for,
As I take your tender paw.

Careful with those shapely legs
And watch when you get toey
Treat me like a tray of eggs
If you plan for us to joey.

Fill my heart with song,
And let it sing forever more.
You are all I long for,
All I worship and adore.

In other words,
Please be true.
In other words,
I love you...

Katie Kangaroo.

[To the tune of 'Fly Me to the Moon']

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Kiwi Fossicking

I sit at the bottom of the world, eyes strained.
Internet browsing, surveying the scene
Between my books and my fly-spotted screen -
- intermittently attuned.

The convenience of the South Seas!
Remoteness and its objectivity
Are of advantage to me:
The earth's voice is open to my inspection.
My fingers are tapping on the key board.

It took years of separation
To steady my gaze, looking out abroad:
Now I hold the world in my hands.

Or let it loose to turn again slowly -
I read as I please because it is all mine.
There is no grasping in my gaze -
Only distanced curiosity.

A new at oneness of life
Directs my searches, guides my fantasies
There are no restraints on my fancies
No arguments contest my rights.

The Bay is below me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My thoughts have permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

[With acknowledgement to Ted Hughes]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Larry's Song: For A Much Loved Labrador Rescued From The Pound

Fer `er sweet sake I've lain down on me trampoline:
No trees and posts an' all that sniffy game
Fer when a mutt `as come to know Maureen,
It ain't the same.
There's `igher things, she sez, fer dogs to do.
An' I am `arf believin' that it's true.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Let Me Grasp The Light You Shed

I stepped up taking both your hands in mine
They were delicate and cold and ghostly,
Flesh against metal contacting eerily:
I flinched slightly at our standing back time.

On your dress, spells in fretwork ribbons pour
With edges sharp enough to cut or feel -
And palms that berries stained are forged in steel
To break and share a dead man's bread no more.

Woman of words laser-cut line by line
Hailing the taxi of immortality -
Iron killed your brother, ripped away his mask
Do those bright fingers now avoid my clasp?

Although your silhouette may now be read
So much surrounds you that is left unsaid:
Let me grasp the light you shed - tacitly.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Liberal Is As Liberal Does

I dream of equity and brotherhood of man
As only Oxford Nobs of Liberalism can.
Of ancient lineage or so my mother claims
I love progression and its fun and games.

I love the common man and guard his rights
It's good that he has upper crust protection
And if I put a finger down his tights
It's just to muster favour at the next election.

The world is made for top-notch men like me
That take both cake and biscuit - but bucket swill
To grunts below them on the social tree
Who suck it up but back the stuck up still.

I ride to hounds with the noble and patrician
But ride the stable-boys for fairness sake:
Unspeakable I'm not, I just jockey for position
And hunt down rent-boys who are on the take.

"Great Scott, I wish that Norman dead
That his goose be cooked and giblets served -
His allegations leave me quite unnerved
Will no-one rid me of that little turd? "

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Life As A Masterpiece

Look for an edge or pattern or corner
And try to build up, build out or build back
Look for groupings, forms, colours and order
Trace the links, follow lines to ends, keep track.

This is a jigsaw that you are solving
The intricacies of which are endless
Or a mosaic that you are laying
Where resolution is beyond tenuous.

Don't spill pieces or disturb the paving,
Kneeling as is needed to make progress,
Though icons and motifs defy saving
The task will absorb you nonetheless:

This is the stuff of honest craftsmanship
Where dedication is the masterpiece.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Life Itself Come Finally To Yield

When young you were as stunning as the dawn
Red clouds threatening an impending storm
Older you are as lovely as the dusk
Quiet in twilight now the storm has passed.

Though darling buds fierce rain erases
Rough winds will test but strengthen seasoned boughs
And ruined choirs make perfect resting places
As the sun's now waning power still shows.

No stranger to contempt, defeat and strife
You little thought your day would last this long
But the showers of summer brought new life:
This the miracle that comes of staying strong

Time's bounty and its scars alike revealed
That life itself comes finally to yield.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Little Comrade Klutz Teddy

LITTLE COMRADE KLUTZ TEDDY

????? ??????????: A translation of Andrey Usachev's Poem

Little Comrade Klutz Teddy
In the forest
Collecting pine cones
Singing songs.

Then a cone drops
And hits head first
Smacking the bear cub -
Bonk - and whoops a daisy!

On a branch
A blackbird mocks:
"A clumsy Teddy
Trips on his own tail"

And then
Five young hares
Break from the thicket
Screaming "clumsy Teddy".

All agree among
The forest creatures -
A klutzy Teddy Bear
Is galumphing through the woods.

Back at the bear lair
Little Teddy, still unsteady,
Shrinks with shame
Hiding behind a cupboard.

"Everyone is teasing me
About my clumpy paws".

But Mum responds:

"Dumb son
I'm proud of your feet.
I'm a clodhopper,
Dad is a clodhopper
And Grandad is a real spud foot".

Klutz Teddy then
Became very proud.
He washed with soap and water
And ate honey cake.

And he came out of the den
Puffed and chuffed
Ready to show everyone
Some clumsy, klutzy, clomping!

[with apologies to A. Usachev from one poet to another]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Looking Deeply

Who is this young woman with her blue eyes?
Is it the artist or the subject or perhaps both?

Who is reflected in the mirror - what is seen?
Who is the painter - what is the intent?

How does beauty manifest itself - Question?
Surely the subject and the artist must object?

Look at me - look beyond - look behind
What is your intention in this interrogation?

The ordinary can so easily become uneasy
Can you sense the menace in exposure?

Even in the children, there are portents:
Innocence and beauty are unsure - at risk

Let them play and we will listen carefully
And note the way in which the music unfolds

Let us watch who is sad, who is centre-stage
Who is wistful, who is calm and who looks away

And this Midsummer, we should above all become aware
That looking deeply into things is a sacred duty - the art of life.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Lord Give Us Frugality - But Not Yet

It is not so much a question of not knowing what to do
We knew what's right and wrong before we were elected.
We heard a lot of stories and we reckoned they were true
About developments and the way they got selected.
We know we mustn't fall into the pit
But when we're on a roller
We forget!

We are just a gang who can't say 'no'
We're in a terrible fix!
We always say 'Come on, let's go', just when we ought to say 'Nix.'

When a hustler gives a heist a whirl
We know we ought to give his face a smack!
But as soon as someone shakes the money tree
We somehow sort of want to fill the sack!
We are just fools when city lights glow
We can't be prissy and quaint
We aren't the types that just wait
How can we be what we ain't?
We can't say 'no! '

Whatcha gonna do when a scammer talks purty
And starts to talk turkey
Whatcha gonna do?
Supposing that he says
That there are rake-offs like baubles
Or a pay-back which boggles
Whatcha gonna do?

Supposing that he says there's pie
In the sky that's sweeter than cream
And he's got to build his dream or die?

Whatcha gonna do when he talks that way?
... Spit in his eye?

We are just a gang that can't say no

Can't seem to say it at all -
We hate to see a pitcher go
When he is paying a call!

For a while we act refined and cool,
A sitting on the velveteen settee
Then we think of that old golden rule:
'To do for him what he would do for me'!

We can't resist the con men
Such plausible and affable chaps
With an Apple on their laps
Something inside of us just snaps
We can't say no!

We are just a gang who can't say 'no'
Yessin is how we get screwed!
With or without the mistletoe
Here at party central
We're in a holiday mood!

Other councils may be harder to trick
But those other gangs ain't havin' any fun!
Every time we give a big tick
We have a funny feelin' that we won!

Though I can feel the undertow
The voters are muted in complaint
'Till it's too late for restraint -
Then when we want to but we cain't
We cain't say 'no! '

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Lost For Words

'In the beginning was the Word'
But surely there was a time
Before words, when dreaming reigned?

And the dreaming was intrinsic scoping -
Part-listening, part-musing, part meditation
In a seamless word-less, pre-word world.

Then creation had no bounds -
Imminent, predestined, immanent -
It was unconcerned with particularity.

Are poetry and music then the echoes
And reverberations of that time
Before heaven and hell mattered?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Lost Village

The leaders and warriors of the village failed
In their attempt to attend the ceremony:
Caught in a storm, their canoes were overturned
And their bodies were washed on to the rocks.

And when the tribes gathered to celebrate
The ascension of the new paramount chief
Into the sacred, lordly realms of the spirit gods
The allotted kava and offerings went untasted

And the chief sought the counsel of a shaman
On the insult to his mana - and of the taboos broken -
And the priest decreed that the village should be eaten
Each year, every year a mouthful - piece by piece.

At the season when the signs in the heavens signified
A war party would be readied, beaching its canoes
Behind the headland - demanding the necessary tribute
Burning the huts of a family and clearing its taro fields

And smoked meat, young girl slaves and other tokens
Would be taken for the great chief to appease the spirits
So that the family and its people came to be extinguished
And each year the village would grow smaller in significance.

And the time came when the last family was butchered
And the clearings closed beneath the forest canopy
So that nothing was left of that unfortunate lineage
And its retribution to the gods became a story.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Love In The Time Of Singularity

Being in love is a highly disordered state - so there you are, about to leap into a black hole.

It transforms lives, alters judgment, consumes attention.

What could possibly await should — against all odds — you somehow survive?

'Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs;

Where would you end up and what tantalising tales would you be able to regale if you managed to clamber your way back?

Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes:

Falling through an event horizon is literally passing beyond the veil — once someone falls past it, no message could ever be sent back.

Being vex'd a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears:

They'd be ripped to pieces by the enormous gravity.

What is it else? a madness most discreet,

Should you then find yourself at the event horizon

A choking gall and a preserving sweet ...'

Tidal forces might reduce your body into strands of atoms through 'spaghettification'

Love does take us and transfigure and torture us.

The idea that you could pop out somewhere — perhaps at the other side — seems utterly fantastical.

It does break our hearts with an unbearable beauty, like the unbearable beauty of music.

What's more, because time distorts close to this boundary, this will appear to

take place incredibly slowly, so answers won't be quickly forthcoming.

But in so far as we have certainly something to do with the matter;

Maybe a black hole leads to a white hole?

In so far as we are in some sense prepared to fall in love and in some sense to jump into it;

Unlike a black hole, a white hole will allow light and matter to leave, but light and matter will not be able to enter.

In so far as we do to some extent choose and to some extent even judge -

Giving extra credence to the idea of black holes serving as a portal.

In all this falling in love is not truly romantic, it is not truly adventurous at all.

Such that singularity does not exist, and so it does not form an impenetrable barrier that ends up crushing whatever it encounters.

Or you might prefer a more cynical approach: it also means that information doesn't disappear.

If you ask me—and I have now had time to think about this—love, or what people call love -

It would be impossible to figure out what went in by looking at what is coming out

As it may be just a system for getting people to call you Darling after sex.

Someone crossing the event horizon might not actually feel any great hardship

After all, no neurons can be seen sparking with ecstasy

Because an object would be in free fall and, based on the equivalence principle,

And none are seen to fade or even pink or plonk with despair

That object — or person — would not feel the extreme effects of gravity

When the altered state returns to some kind of stasis.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Love Is Only Love When Love Can Grow

When young I fell in love four times a day.
I was more careless then and desperate
With little thought or heed of come what may
When braving reticence to date and mate.

Often I saw a flash of eye that shone
When cheeks' or necks' emblazoned blushes dimmed
And schemed of pillow buddies deftly won
And lobes and napes with kisses over-brimmed;

But as supposed eternal summers fade
I chide myself that truth and wisdom show
Deep seekers such as you are born not made
And love is only love when love can grow.

And so each quarter day I stop to see
Your kindness, laughs and hugs give life to me.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Love's Mystery

I promised you everything that comes to good:
The compass points of life and being loved -
What's worth retaining and what's before me
And all that might achieve a legacy.

I promised you things that could not be done:
Muting the keyboard and muffling the drum,
Throwing all barking dogs a juicy bone
Stopping the clocks, cutting off the phone.

I promised you things that were impossible:
That I would pack up the moon and dismantle
The sun, put out the stars and pour away the sea -
In part melodramatic irony.

Why do lovers and mourners abuse hyperbole?
When it's simpler to say: 'We shared love's mystery'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Lucky Tossers

Let's call it hopscotch!
Now this is where it all begins
A lot of talk and bull-shit spin
Hit the zone, no time to wait
Draw them squares out, 1 to 8
Hopscotch!

Fake that spin and hop along
And now you're ready to sing the song
Spinning out a love match - bippity-bop
Keep on skipping, no time to stop -
Miss the piggy - the world will watch
Hippety, hotchpotch, hopscotch hogwash!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Luminescence

How is it that the word is gracious light?
That the light witnesses to the darkness
And bright in dark reflection, darkly bright,
Shines upon the comprehension?

In the beginning was the word manifest
That there should be greater enlightenment
And that those who make this atoned request
Should receive the true light's endorsement.

Come from the shadows into your own light
Be a lamp for yourself and take your place -
And return from the dark glass to plain sight
That you will know love and truth, face to face.

In such a life, light is everlasting
And words and luminescence self- recasting.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Lunch At Cressage - Returning To Wroxeter 2013

The wind has set aside its ire for love
And nuzzles nape of sun
The shadows drain the blush above
As ripples through the shallows run.

At Riverside the glasses bubble
Where the basking Severn weaves
And joys the Shropshire summer double
With steak and beer and cheese.

Then, it was two thousand years or so
That Marius chinked his glass
And watched the boatmen heave and row
Through willows to the quayside grass.

Here with the heat of day at peace
Specks of why meet sigh and cease -
The river of life ne'er ran so quiet and high
Then thought Mario, now again think I.

The sun, it turns and shares the kiss
So soft the courtship scarce begun -
To-day we celebrate such joy as this
With those who dream at Uricon.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Lymph Massage

That life should be so wonderful

That I have a carer who loves me.

She leans across me as I sit up in bed

And follows the instructions from the hospice

About lightly massaging - saying 'one thousand' -

Rotating her fingers according to the manual.

It is quite counter-intuitive - that such little pressure,

At such light touch, should have any bearing on outcomes.

And I start to think of things that bring tears:

I remember being terrified and unwanted as a boy

When we had moved to the farm with my stepfather -

And how we were overwhelmed when he became sick -

With me as a five-year old watching him heaving blood

In the back toilet from a perforated peptic ulcer.

And of being mystified as the dog was shot -

Brought from the pen in the old pig sty at the back

And set to wander to the abuse of the human beings

Before it was brought low in the driveway with a 22 -

And we returned to the kitchen to drink tea

Beset by so many fears and self-recriminations.

And me desperate for any kind of place or standing

That would help me survive the harvest of 1949.

And the incident of the open-top cart behind the tractor

When I was placed on the flat bed among the stalks and chaff

And the tractor pulled away - only to see the massive end-gate

Fall around me - missing me - but dashing down my toast and honey!

That was funny!

And come the autumn, of me riding the tractor draw-bar, harrowing

Across the pitted and corrugated fields - anything to be part of things.

But bloody dangerous! Sorry but this must stop. Rewind these memories!

Slightly tearfully, I thank my lovely carer and apologise for being such a nuisance

'You are worth it', she says - my tears welling - 'I'm so very sorry', I sob

'You are a lovely man', she says - and what is below the surface begins to give.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Making It New Again

There were constant struggles to understand
Constant struggles to explain, justify, provide hope
About how mankind came into existence
About how their own tribe came to rule
Or was dispossessed and brought to subjugation
And the necessity of revival and reassertion
About the nature of being a son and father
The dangers of desire, temptation and betrayal
And the fickle nature of women and their ways
From homeliness to divination and blood-letting
The rituals of forgetting and propitiation
Acts of sacrifice, of mortification and ritual slaughter
Of the need for valour in battle and loyalty
Of making it new again and restoring greatness
A trust in the after-life for the valiant and obedient
The chosen ones coming to the throne of judgment
Being welcomed to the resplendent halls
With a promise of everlasting heavenly ease.

All this is becoming evident once more
As we return to the ancient beliefs and ways
And tribal commitments to blood and folk.
But for some a small problem -not wanting to share
Valhalla with Sean Hannity and Steve Bannon
And if Odin has any sense, he won't either.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Marla's Song

When suddenly, I knew not why,
There came a funny feeling
Of something crawling up my thigh!
I nearly hit the ceiling!

A mouse I thought. How foul! How mean!
How troublingly tickly!
Quite soon I know I'm going to scream.
I've got to catch it quickly.

I made a grab. I caught the mouse,
A wriggly little lump
A mouse my foot! It was a hand -
The hand of Donald Trump.

Tis irksome when the vermin
Will brazen seek the cat
But pussy is so charming

This louse don't think of that!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Matariki [maori New Year]

MAORI NEW YEAR - THE SEVEN SISTERS RISE ANEW

Our birth-folk
Sky and earth
Together and apart
Grief and yearning
Heaving and strain.

Their children
The woodlands
And the seas
The winds and waves
The food stores
War and stillness.

Though the young struggle
With storms and snares,
The dark and emptiness
Are overcome by light and growth
And the sky is clothed in stars.

Get ready for the westerly
Stand fast for the southerly
It will be icy white inland
And icy cold on the shore.

May the dawn rise
Red-tipped
On snow, on frost

The breath of life!

POWHIRI

At the island's edge
The warrior-waves
Swell and break
In unison

And the shore
Picks up the challenge.

Across the strait
Are distant mountains,
Arrayed like wise chiefs
Capped with heron feathers,
Snow-shone with white flame,
Welcoming us to the winter solstice.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Memories Of Nigeria - And Such

Scents, a sense... scenes
Of Nigeria tug at my memory:
Smokey maize beer, yams and egusi;
The beautiful girl who had been to Italy
So lustrous black, so very beautiful;
Fierce light, dark shadows, rough cast walls;
Swimming in the Benue at Makurdi
The river's surface arched with power
Fishermen skating the flooded sunset.
As for the crocodiles:
'Poor Little Creatures
The People have Eaten Them
Long Ago'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Merienda On Buendia

[Another Special Lunch at the Asian Development Bank Office in Mondragon House - 1985]

MERIENDA ON BUENDIA

As she is transferring to HQ on Roxas
There will be merienda today for Rosa.
There will be ukoy and ube-macapuno cake
And the boss Dr Dhoni will make a speech.
He will be charming and diplomatic
And tell of Rosa's many talents,
Avoiding reference to her penchant
For bunking off and cultivating seedy affairs
With senior expatriate staffers who should know better.

And the office girls will giggle
As they load their Pancit noodles
Onto paper plates and sip Mountain Dew
Or take another slice of Sans Rival cake
Saying 'Sir' in their sexiest voice
And the professionals will ponder
Nervously the beauties that beset them
And talk seriously about interest rates,
Country statistics and trade finance
And the necessity of buying a generator.

And then as it always does
The conversation will drift
To the best deal on duty-free cars
And which model has the highest resale value.
After which mention will be made
Of the Swiss man from the WHO
Whose car was shunted at the traffic lights
On Ayala and who unwisely got out and shouted
At the Pinoy who had stopped short -
Only to have his windscreen shot out by the accused.

But Chris who is new from Australia
Will flirt dangerously with Baby -
She with the shone jet eyelids and
Slinky in oh-so tight silk skirts
And he with the sweaty hairline acne
Getting goose-bumps from the aircon.
He whose young wife is at home gated
In Dasmariñas Village isolated - sat sobbing
Under the paddle-fan on the lanai.

And nobody will remember
The young labourer from Bohol
Who I saw being carried limp
Off the building site
After he had fallen from
The bamboo scaffolding
On the ninth floor
Blood at the corner of his mouth
His eyes already distant and opaque.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Messengers Relent - The Piwakawaka

I who have come so far, find welcoming
Two small pied shadows dancing in the air.
Laughing at their delightful powhiri
I gather up their rautapu gifting,
Cherishing their tumble-round uplifting.

Yet piwakawakas I am aware -
You forewarn a threshold to my ending.
Once under my roof there's no gift to share -
Just dark warriors' stern attending.

We brought the farthings sparrows to your place.
They once welcomed priests by flitting the space
Across the roof beams of an old thane's hall
And gave us hope of welcome everlasting
To God's mercy, ending sorrow's fasting.

I proffer you this blessing shared with all.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Millennial Laertes Gets Some Advice From His Mum

ABOVE ALL BE KIND AND TRUE TO YOURSELF

Take off your head-phones and bloody listen
I'm your Mum. Give quiet thought a fighting chance,
Control intrusive and abusive urges.
Have some mates, or not, but be your own man.
Care for true friends as if they were the best,
Grapple them to your heart with hoops of steel;
But go-easy on the good-times and being loose
And don't get led astray by smart-arses.
Avoid getting into pointless fights and feuds
And treat every girl and woman with respect.
Weigh up what's said and speak carefully -
Be critical and reserve your judgment.
Don't get suckered in to waste and debt
By following fads and being flashy
And only buying the best brand labels.
Don't wear jeans that show a builder's crack
Think twice on tats, mullets and nose rings
And remember that your Gran will see.
Guard your money and value what you earn -
Neither a borrower nor a lender be
Loans can be a millstone for eternity
Above all be kind and true to yourself.
And help out others with the odd good turn.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Mirror

"Now we see through a glass, darkly;
But then face to face:
Now I know in part;
But then shall I know even as also I am known."

Looking again for recognition and acceptance,
Cleansing skin and wiping sebum
From the oily insets of your nose lobes,
The time has gone for greeting yourself -
Smiling back to the self-stranger in the mirror
Searching for the younger of the two of you.

Something is lost every day,
Every day we die a little
Neurons fail, memories fade
Hours, places, names
Houses, rivers, continents -
Losing yourself is half the battle,
Each wrinkle accumulating
Without artistry or mastery.

Behind every door is a scream
Open carefully - there may be
Tigers, virgins or executioners
Awaiting the turning of the lock.
Forget threats and inducements
And the regrets of incarceration
What do you sniff - the scent
Of innocence or feline ferocity -
Is perfume deadlier than dander?

Which side are you on?

No matter how you consult the glass
Your interrogation will not turn the key
There is no walking through the mirror
No matter then of liking or disliking
The apparition of ordinary normality -
There is nothing that you cannot face

And no turning away or seeing it through.

You will not find yourself,
It was only ever reflection:
Wipe the sleeps from your eyes
And put away your tissues
They may be useful yet for tears.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Miss J. Jade – Enchanted Game

Miss J. Jade, Miss J. Jade how well you have done
Aceing at anchor the Island Bay sun
Calling the lines to an admirer buoy
Tether'd and weather'd with murmurs of joy.

What storm sets we shared you and me
Toss'd and returned by the firmament sea
With crafty obliviousness lightly you float
I'm weak from your net calls fishy red boat.

The sound of the wind, the scent of the surf
Iconic and tonic your importunate berth
Flashing your stern where the bay breakers run
Matching the waves, you've played up and won.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Modesty Their Standard [ice Picks And Violets]

Where wonders, wars, misfortune
And stirring deeds are seen
Where peace and wild confusion
Have come and gone again

I could rhyme of Robin Hood
Or Ranulf Earl of Chester
England's ancient blood
Its shield and its protector

But greater strife the country tore
Wide wasting land and kin
And Lads had died in mud and gore
That hid the kind old sun

Now nature generation shows
And young men take their place
So noble is as noble does
When scions pick up the pace

Like Gawain and Bayard
Perfect knights of old
Modesty their standard
For quests and ventures bold

Called then the far dominions
With bitter frosty skies
The demons' dark pavilions
Where devils hiss their lies

And though their mothers scheme
And urge them not to go
They smile and then explain
The answer must be no

Before they reached the shore,
What promises they made!
And how high country's store
Was stocked with glory's tread

Now huntsmen take their places,
And all the hounds run free,
As blood's up honour paces
Swift to crag and shifting scree

Those lads their eyes grown bright
Would soar, surmount the way
Climbing on with great delight
As sets the end of day

Bold Mallory unflinching drew
His pick and staked his claim
His mind's eye upward flew
Summit set to be his aim

Then Irvine said with cheerful face:
'Why shrink back from the quest?
Though fate bring glory or disgrace
A man must meet the test.'

Life can only little mean
With loss so much in mind
All faults they may redeem
Through fellowship in kind

Spin the prayer wheel letters
Tell of ancient noble truths
Their story flagged in pennants
The mountain people choose.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Moments In Waitarere - New Year 2015

I was in the 4-Square at Waitarere
Buying a Dom-Post and an icy-pole
When I lost it and bought 'Vs Moments'.
It promised a Cinematic View
On Fashion and Culture
With specials on Uma Thurman and Kirsten Dunst.

Kirsten tries to look louche
But looks spoilt and blasé
Among the marble in the photo-shoot.
Apparently she gave her cats cat-nip
And they went ape-shit.

Outside on the bench, I sort of
Half suck, half buck teeth razor
My orange-lemon paddle-pop
And glance between Kirsten's
Santa Monica Mansion
And the assembled beach raff
With their bulging shorts and bonhomie.
A bleary, ouch-tanned gaggle of ordinaries
Pose for a cell-phone moment:
'A real Kiwi Summer Photo, eh? '

And I turn to look at the 10-something
Blonde-braided pig-tail perfection
Who I had seen pirouetting on the beach
In her black swimming costume with the gold stripe
Faultlessly leaping and twirling
Carefully practised ballet steps from
Gillian's Modern, Tap and Classical Dance School
In Palmy.

Kirsten's mum who looks after the cats
Says once we could look out to the beach
And say 'isn't this the most beautiful place in the world?
But now our visitors train the balcony telescope
On the car lot beside Ernesto's
And say 'I wonder what

Celebrities are down there today? '

As I finish my Frujo, I put my jandals back on
And the beautiful little girl becomes
Resentful of my stolen adoration.

Last night we walked back after
The rain had stopped and we had spent
Most of New Year's Eve playing
Some American game where you
Pick black cards that provide questions or blanks
And white cards that provide bizarre, rude or crude
Answers or fillers that you can slot in when your time comes -
In a tent as the southerly coming up the South Island
Blew itself out.

Some of the questions and answers
We didn't really understand
But we laughed a lot.
By midnight, it had cleared
And the revels at the Bowling Club 'All Welcome'
Died down for the countdown
Five, four, three, two, one! ! !

Boom, cheers, fireworks - Happy New Year
And then 'Auld Lang Syne', 'A Scottish Soldier'
'Dirty Old Town'.

It was a great!

And we walked home through the clear, dark night
Along the mud-sand drifted streets and their puddles
To our batch or beach cottage
As the sea celebrated
With its own momentous song.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Monday Crossroads - Epifanio De Los Santos Expressway, Metro Manila

The car door closes,
I step back alone
To dirty streets
And dark shapes.

I make my way
Warily - as
EDSA roars above
The underpass.

The poor bring water
To sidewalk homes
In plastic buckets
Yoked or dragged.

Vendors roll their mats,
Set out their goods,
Cigarettes and gum -
Trifles and trivia.

On a concrete step,
A dark-haired child
In t-shirt and shorts
Sleeps fitfully.

As dawn is rising
In the viscous grey air,
The traffic crowds
To cacophony.

Reddening clouds -
In the steel grey dawn
Skyscrapers emerge
In serrated edge.

The hotel canopy
Takes me in

Cool marble and sweet air
'Good morning, Sir'.

Entering my room
There is disorder
Sheets and pillows
Thrown aside.

And you have gone
And with you love.
Sweet-heart stay well
As day breaks hearts.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Monkeying Around With Shakespeare's Sonnet 3 [update]

Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest
To grin and grimace and strain another
Bardic turd - that if now thou not renewest,
To besmirch the word and rhyming smother
Will consign fair Shakespeare to the tomb,
Disdaining the tillage of his husbandry -
Endorsing those whose fatuous farts still bloom
In monkey shit to stop posterity?
Art thy primate glass is best dark to thee
Leaving the lovely screen of empty time
So thou through windows of each age shalt see,
Despite the crap, the word still reigns sublime.
For if macaques, in plenty to infinity,
Type his words, mankind will not remembered be.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

More On Marilyn - Lagos Forty Or More Years Ago - For Theresa Lola

In Lagos, the atmosphere stands over you like a dark genie
The water has failed in the smart concrete apartment
And I shave using Sprite to foam my face
But the electricity works, so the paddle-fan moves above my sleeping place in
the lounge.

Burning myself out from work up-country for my engineering company
I have come, fighting for my life again, to this dense dark city
On the way home - back to Heathrow and the Home Counties -
If they'll recognize my ticket at the Nigeria Airways desk - dash permitting.

I have somehow made it to a nightclub and become a little drunk
And found myself liking and loving a girl who has excellent English
Who also speaks Italian - having been what we would now call trafficked -
My beautiful girl, my Black Marilyn, my night club pick-up.

The fan is still turning above this stifling ceiling of inadequacies
That most beautiful of deep, dark lustrous skin to be cherished
For both of us a petit mort - death itself in touch
You were so much more than your beauty - I still can't take my eyes off you.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

More On The Art Of Letting Go!

Setting aside loss is a fine intention -
so many things seem best lost -
that they simply don't deserve attention

But so much insists on retention:
coming back to mind at all cost
denying erasure, resisting elimination.

Practising letting go, by resolution,
is likely an illusion at best
or a disastrous misapprehension.

Perhaps I lost my mother's affection
or her kind attention at least at the last
though forsaking her was never my intention.

I took her mantel carriage clock in reparation:
for thirty years it has stood still - stood at rest -
since she died - a troublesome acquisition.

The jeweller can do nothing in restoration:
regardless of aspiration or cost
the movements are frozen to inaction
and letting go (like it or not) gets no traction.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

More Verse To Bring Tears To The Eyes Of Reserve Bankers

FREE-WHEELING TO A FULL-STOP

Lower the rate: then housing loans are cheaper
So buyers' pockets stretch a little deeper
With Auckland as the premier spot
Where bids are hot on every lot

Speculation now fires greed and envy
And landlords join the feeding frenzy
Which foreign buyers top collaterally -
So housing prices rise again implacably!

Raise the rate: the money floods from overseas,
For risk-free gains and un-taxed earnings please:
The Belgian Dentist saves to buy his bonds
And Ms Tanaka in Osaka soon responds

Now local banks in securing profit properly
[And guarding their repute for probity]
Must shift the money straight to property
So housing prices rise again - predictably!

Hence Wheeler spins it round and round
With hand-brake turns on shaky ground:
Tracing tireless through excess liquidity
[As assets bloat with wealth cupidity]
The enigma of inflation's quiddity!

The puzzle deemed a Sisyphean task,
With resolution seen a hopeless ask,
No Change is thus what fate will now anoint
In indecision as to what's the point.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Morning Star

Me he mea ko Kopu!

As fair as the rising morning star
Her eyes are as brilliant as the full moon
Outlining dark hills in a crystal-clear sky
A presence so becoming she can
Call in the returning tides.

Though the clouds gather in the night sky
The stars are so numerous and startling bright
With many caught glistening in the net
Brought together by the vast cast of light
Thrown across the heavens.

Who can bring to harvest the catch
Before the billows hide the shoal?
She will be waiting by the shore alone
When the dawn clears to reveal
The rainbow in its glory.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Morning Walk At Evans Bay

Then time took up the koru sun

That coiled and edged the bay

Burned and in its heaven spun

The spiral of that shimmering day

And waves fell tilted from the spill

To topple there and then at last lay still.

There the gyre and there the strand

In progress set to play and turn

The thrower takes the cast to hand

And catches ripples in return

So the steady foot step trails

And dusts the trace where imprint fails.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Moths And Butterflies

Life will take its way with you
Snuffing out or bringing to earth:
As a moth burns with the candle
The butterfly is torn by the wind.

But be sure to take flight first
Settling on damask or the autumn rose.
Ask: 'why are you here, soul? '
And have your time at rise or rest.

From cocoon or chrysalis:
The moth gives up life for light
The butterfly its life for beauty
For freedom has its purposes.

Let eye-spots hold this insight
As love whispers to your wings:
'Taste the savour of your life
In velvet dusk and petaled dawn'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ms Lizzie Goanna

Billabong Lizzie Goanna
Wore nought but a scarf and bandana
Choofing weed from her tin
She oft raised a din
By playing her off-key joanna.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Mudbound

In Mississippi in 1800, each acre of cotton absorbed
185 worker hours per year and substantial capital -
Compared to 56 worker hours per year in upstate New York
For an acre of wheat (after an all-told investment of around \$20) .
Setting aside considerations of climate,
Let's say a healthy young man could work 3,000 hours per year.
This means that a lone white settler could farm 18 acres near Natchez
And 60 acres near Syracuse.
So what was needed in the South
Was a populous peasant under-class
While an enterprising man could find
Liberty and independence in the North.
Clearly something had to give.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

My Chicago Date

ANN - WAS THAT YOU?

In the Fall of 1976, I spent a month in Chicago
Working with Harza Overseas Engineering
Preparing the Agricultural Economics Analysis
For the Jordan Valley Irrigation Project, Stage II,
Having flown over from our London Office.
I stayed at the Midland Hotel, 172 West Adams
Which apparently started as Beaux Arts
But stopped at 22 floors and switched to
Art Deco and Contemporary when the Crash came in 1929.
I was severely unimpressed by the CBD
As it emptied every evening, leaving canyons
Of windswept streets, and on one occasion
A plate glass window fell from way up the Sears Tower
Splintering on the sidewalk opposite from where
I used to pick up my tall cardboard carton
Of undistinguished percolated coffee and a doughnut
On my way to work in the mornings in South Wacker Drive.

Anyway, the then monotonously dark-brown veneer hotel
Was a dreadfully boring place to be after I had
Finished up my evening meal at the Berghoff German Restaurant
And one evening I set out to explore its mysteries:
Finding one of the Great Rooms of the old Midland Club
Which had been hired for the night by an Afro-American
Community Group for a sort of sharing and giving talent show
That celebrated and affirmed the gifts and confidence
Of its young people. I asked if I could watch.
Which was a bit of a mistake for they generously said 'yes'.
So there I was, the only white person in a vast room
Full of Black Americans who really wanted to be totally
Rid of Whites for the purposes of the exercise.
And disgustingly, I found myself looking for a response
From a fetching young woman who was notably whiter than the rest:
I thanked them and left - but they really should have thrown me out.

Later things looked up when I met a winsome lantern-jawed
Dark-haired young woman in a Singles Bar on the North Side.

On the lam from her work as an expat in Indonesia
She was attending a conference on micro-credit programs
At the University of Chicago. She told me that she had a
15-year-old son who had an African father from Kenya
And a 6-year-old daughter to her second failed marriage
To an Indonesian. Eighteen months older than me
She knew the ropes and was out for a good time -
Confiding after a second tray of slammers
That she had once posed for raunchy photographs
That were published in the soft-porn magazine Exotique.

Well, if you believe that, you'll believe anything
But then some do - and seemingly we are losing all conscience:
So stained, so insufficient, so lacking in decency -
Pumped up by sexism, racism and braggadocio.
The way things are going, it won't be long
Before a whiter shade of pale
Enhances the color of dishonor -
White-livered, white-feathered, white-washed -

And there are waiting lists for melanin injections.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

My Love In Novel Fashion

Cherry, lay down your good vibrations
And set aside the pulsing ivory
To dwell awhile on lost love's agony:
My thousand sighs and approbations,
The high desire of futile aggravations,
Running fast and loose in febrile alchemy.
Slow down I pray and pity my calamity
That you and I may match our perturbations.

Thy cheeks are stars to my astrology:
Let me then chart celestial motions
And synchronize our joint devotions
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic free -
With I thy Galileo in discovery -
In mutual orbit with your ecstasy.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

My Morning Chaffinch

Small passerine bird -
One of the finches from England.
I look you up - a chaffinch.
You sit on the highest branch
Of a native - an ake ake -
Outside my window,
Delighted with the regrown Bush.
But you have nothing to report
Nothing to sing about -
Life is too good here even if
It is not in clover.
That's right have a
Good look around -
A 'Captain Cook'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Nach Schwerem Traum - A Personal 'translation'

Nach schwerem Traum

by Gerrit Engelke (1890-1918)

Ich bin Soldat und steh im Feld
Und weiß von niemand in der Welt.
Drum kann ich diesen Regentag nicht feiern,
So kummerzärtlich, feucht und bleiern,
Da mir dein Bild zur Nacht den Schlaf zerschlug
Und mich in deine Nähe trug.

Ich bin Soldat und steh im Feld,
Gewehr im Arm, und fern der Welt.
Wär ich zu Haus, ich schlosse Tür und Scheiben
Und wollte lange einsam bleiben;
Im Sofawinkel sitzend mich versenken,
Geschlossnen Auges deiner denken.

Ich bin Soldat im trüben Feld.
Hier endet alte Menschenwelt.
Der Regen singt, die nassen Strähnen fließen.
Ich kann nichts tun - nur Blei verschießen.
Weiß nicht warum, tu's doch als ob ich's muss:
Ins graue Wetter kracht ein Schuss!

After the Dream 1918

a personal 'translation'

I am a soldier in the field
A stranger to the world:
Weary on this rainy day
That sits so heavy - but tenderly
Since I dreamed of your face
And the place we both loved.

I am a soldier in the field
Armed against the world:

If I was at home I would
Sit alone, hunkering down
At the end of the couch,
Eyes closed, waiting for your touch.

I am a soldier in the field
At the edge of no-mans-land:
The rain sings a soft chorus
As another blast crashes -
Nothing but fire and grey sky -
Needs must though I don't know why.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Nancy Brunning: 'the Totally Wonderful Eyes That Challenged Me With Aotearoa Dishonoured...'

My audio and video channels got mixed up.
I started trying to listen to a podcast
On Nancy Brunning the Maori actress who has just died
And it got drowned out by a clip from
'A Spoonful of Sugar' with David Tomlinson and Glynis Johns
Waltzing around about making the 'medicine go down
In a most delightful way'.

And I missed the talk with Nancy that honoured her mana as a
Te Wahine Rongonui (a woman of tremendous influence and talent)
Of the time when her people were starting to overcome their bitter past:
Bastion Point, Dame Whina Cooper's Hikoi ...
And the Rugby Tour Riots for decency over matching our beloved All Blacks
Against the Racist Springboks from Apartheid South Africa in 1981.
I couldn't go back and listen - it would have broken my heart.

Ka rongo i te ia o te aroha, he ngakau mahaki:
Being genuine is everything in matters of the heart.

I'll just remember Nancy on the Number One Bus
Into Town taking her little daughter to childcare
Getting off at Macdonalds on Adelaide Road
And her extraordinary and totally wonderful eyes
That challenged me with Aotearoa dishonoured.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

New Kitchen

The dahl has dripped on the icing -
Bloody fridge! Time for a new one
That has all its glass shelving
And doesn't ice up shaved ham
Like a beard outside Scott Base -
And the entire front has come off
The knives drawer so that it falls
On the floor if you are careless
And I had to fix up the pan drawer
With some second hand knobs
And put scotch tape on the floor
Of the food cupboard to mouse-proof it -
And that's only the half of it.

Not to worry, the order has gone in
For a state of the art Poggenpohl
That will be shipped from Germany
And have so many bells and whistles
It will be an all singing, all dancing
Kitchen that will knock the socks
Off my fellow forty-something
Yummy-mummies and be the bees knees
Of Island Bay and Berhampore.
The only problem now is finding
The wherewithal to pay for it:
But in the meantime, I can use it
To cook up a few mixed metaphors.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

New World In Island Bay

A 2-litre bottle of Diet Coke
from the New World Supermarket
here in Island Bay now costs \$3.39.
When local poet James Brown
wrote 'Disempower Structures in the New World'
twenty years ago, it cost \$1.95
that's a 70 percent mark-up over time.
The car park is always full.

James spends much of his poem
decrying the 70 percent mark-up
charged by the local 'dairy owners'
on Diet Coke, vis a vis the supermarket
- the offending capitalists in 1998
being first generation Gujerati immigrants
who run small, shabby corner shops
where you can buy milk+ at unsocial hours.

James seemed to think that
the seven-days-all-hours were making
an unjustified potential retail profit,
gouging him with a net consumer loss -
and went home counting his change
carefully after one convenient walk,
seeming to resent the dairy owner
talking in another language
as he gathered up his crying daughter.

Well, I'll have to talk to my mate 'Alan'
about what he charges now for Diet Coke.
He used to give my little sons treats,
including gummy crocodiles or 'crockers',
when we lived down on The Parade -
and my wife and I would chat to him
and his wife about India - both having
spent time there - Jane more than me.

Mind you, Alan's job is almost done
what with two sons now through

university and into secure, well-paid jobs -
and he's too stiff to bowl off spin nowadays
for the Wellington Indian team in Hataitai.
I miss chatting to him - and his cheery
evening inquiry 'bisi-day? ' but we moved
to a bigger house up on the hill
and have to car down now to New World.

The young mums are still beautiful
But they are not the ones that either
James or I knew in our respective primes -
they don't notice an old feller like me
and I have to flirt with the checkout girls
with their squeeze-out smiles.
I saw my gay friend tonight with his
Lovely little daughter holding his hand tightly.

The dairy on Dee Street has closed
and the one on Mersey Street is closing
killed by lack of parking and the new cycleway

Now and again, there is a young white guy
who sits on the pavement
looking purposefully miserable
outside the New World,
with his beautiful, over-fed black Labrador,
begging for change and low denomination notes.

Oh, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave New World.

P.S.

But bloody hell James, for all that,
what are you doing drinking Diet Coke?
If nonetheless you are still an addict,
FYI the 2-litre plastics are going for \$1.95
'on special' at PAK'nSAVE in Kilbirnie -
setting aside nearness and one-to-one!

Nippy And The Giant

Once there was a perfect princess
Bedazzled in beauty and success.

'Fee-fi-fo-fum

I'll take the soul of the gifted one'

'So young, so sweet, so smart, so fair

I'll hunt you down, devil may care

Fee-fi-fo-fum

Run if you can, hide if you dare'

Said the giant with each foot-step thud:

'I'll chase you down like an ogre should

Fee-fi-fo-fum

I'll catch you however you run -

'There's no escape from reality

Whatever your skills in alchemy -

Fee-fi-fo-fum

Run and run, you'll never be free'.

'Fame and fortune are nothing to me

You'll never have peace if you can't just be

Fee-fi-fo-fum

I'll get you yet, just wait and see'

'I'll grind your bones to make my bread

As I mess with you inside your head:

Fee-fi-fo-fum

There'll come a time you are better dead'

'There are no lines that will bring relief

Grief drowned out is more fearsome grief

Fee-fi-fo-fum

I take the souls of the woebegone'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

No Love Affair With New Zealand - Taking A Steak Knife To Denis Glover

I have a lot of respect for Margaret Foster
Who was born in 1902 in the grimy town of Dudley,
In the heart of the English Midlands 'Black Country',
But who ran off as a teenager in hot-blood
To spend two years in the cabaret chorus line
As a Bluebell Girl, traveling the world kicking up the traces -
Later becoming a German contortionist's assistant
And then dancing at the New York Winter Garden
Where she met and married a Spaniard -
Settling first in Buenos Aires and then on the Costa Brava
Where she had a passionate affair with a German anarchist
With both of them then joining an anarchist centuria
Called the 'Aquilochos' [or Eagles] of the Corts Tram Depot
Of Barcelona, fighting for the POUM in the Spanish Civil War,
With which she took part in the attack on Almudeva in 1936
Where she almost reached the Fascist trenches
But had to retreat when the Communists failed to provide support -
With she and Werner then organizing camps and relief
For refugee children until they were dismissed by
A communist delegate who did not approve of their politics -
After which they were eventually reunited in England
But interned for their anarchist and German links -
Though they eventually escaped to New Zealand in 1940,
Living in a derelict cottage near Paparoa in Northland
Until the authorities allowed them to move to Auckland
Where they met Frank Sargeson and his writers' clique,
With him encouraging her to write about her new country
Under a name she concocted from her mother's family forename
And her first husband's surname - 'Greville Texidor'.

Not altogether surprisingly, she was bored and thought that NZ
Seemed a wasteland by comparison with the scenes of her adventures -
A desert of emptiness peopled with men and women
Who were so repressed they could hardly bear to go near one another
And whose existence was so numb, it made existentialism seem positive
With Sargeson commenting diplomatically, that she was:
"unable to establish with this country relations which in any way resembled

a love-affair".

But what I like most about her is facing up to Denis Glover, the witty and brilliant Editor and writer who in addition to also being a notorious misogynist and obnoxious drunk

Was a Communist sympathiser, later awarded the Soviet Union war veterans' medal.

So when, at a North Shore party, the pissed-newt loud-mouth rat-bag taunted GT about the Fascists triumphing under Franco:

'She took a steak knife and held it to his throat until bystanders could overpower her'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

No More Porkies Please!

No matter then to some that truth is dead
And thought and action dulled by fakery
Or that slops of spin are served instead
Like feed for swine in shit and infamy

And we who thrive on simple honesty
Are left to starve on half-truth's bitter swill
And turn away from mocked integrity
To watch the porkers guzzle down their fill.

Remember still that truth was once restored
When greed and pride and lies were overthrown -
Then the brokenhearted prodigal returned
To feast on fattened calf when welcomed home!

Turn back - it's not too late - enough's enough
Let's scour deception from the public trough.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

No Separation

When sun has set and night has come
The road not taken leaves no trace
Of journeys once so near begun
All thought to part now left in place.

But all roads cross and come to ground
As dark paths shift and circle back
There is no loss there is no found
Thorns and flowers will edge each track.

And deep within the wily wood
Other lanes will branch in offering
Promises which are best withstood
Though such is neither bad nor good.

No difference then to choose
The high road or the low
No use to fear to gain or lose
If way there be, the dawn will show

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Not So Inclement

what a holy-f farrago
on St Clement's imago
reliquary attested
bone chip divested

bit of sanctified body
humped into the lorry
dustbin man leathers
tossing lost scapulars

come the end-time event
no more trash or lament

tip trip rag and bony
dumping sacramental baloney
higgins&doolittle yet may care
last load-drop compacted there

sorted out from refuse dishonour
ossiferous amulet almost a goner
rescued by a lower force
salvaging bin hire power remorse
scavenging souls its last recourse

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Nothing If Not Aware

Cartoons imagined as receptive

Frame senses to appear perceptive

Illusions spring without redress

Reality retreats in sleight recess

And what is real is just a guess

Caricature is loss preventive

More than this is just inventive

Watching now let mind confess

Blurred and blinded by pretences

Existence lives in half non-senses

Character and self are thus elusive

And skillful means at best evasive

Marking thoughts with patience

Breaths become my lenses

And absences my references

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Nutmeg Mannikin

It isn't over until the fat lady roosts
Or the bear wakes
Or the bat salivates or excretes.

Domesticated and smaller-brained
We sing elaborate songs now
That we have learnt from troubadours.

And prone to over-eating
We poison ourselves with sugar
That to the bear would be a little something.

And the bat which became immune
Coping with the stress of flight
Now hosts a crucible of viral spells.

Trills and warbles, bright and varied
The society finches are easy care
Though less robust than the scaly-breasted.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Occasioned On Some Infelicities By His Disgrace The Monetary Blogger Michael Reddell

Reserved Bankers with their brains have traced
And fixed the point where OCR is placed;
Mind then their petty whims and back-bite talk
Of pinheads where they dance and walk

So Wheeler spins from hard-bound brain
A funny-money sky of sun or rain
At Number 1, he brings us joy or pain
In settling there on those who lose and gain

But Reddell his fine judgment now contests
And in his blog a percentage point protests;
That Wheeler does not say the least right thing,
On how long or short's a piece of string

The blogger so grows waspish, arch and odd
At once for Mammon and for God
Thus vexing both who gave him worth
By hedging bets twixt heaven, hell and earth

Said Chairman Carr: his point is weak
Not justifying a media leak
He fails the test of citizenship
In divulging so announcement's tip

And Bascand tasks: he's just aggrieved
So his opinion should be disbelieved -
More than that he's got things out of kilter
Seeing everything through victims' filter

Now Hannah opines: his latest posts
Are little more than rants and roasts
And that he's lost Reserve Bank sympathy
With his clashing \$ symbols timpani -

His latest blogs have been emotional
With observations merely self-promotional:

So where and what's the point you ask
In arguing so on such a menial task?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ode To A Vegan Breakfast

Green the smoothie glugs with avocado
And, if the gods smile, a banana too
Nectar for the clean-gut slimming lardo
With flaxseed oil to help it through

Next the turn of dust and silt to sludge
So homemade muesli swells and plumps
As molars through the sandy desert drudge
And gritty bits betray inchoate lumps

Chia, quinoa vie now with kale and spinach
And the swamp is drained or rather sumped
So as breakfast stumbles to its scouring finish
The contents of the bowl are slowly chumped

This is the vegan medley melody of song
Long-dried fruit and roasted nuts inspire
The kindling of new growth the colon long
As oats and coconut some dental floss require

That madness and the inflatuate gut may breed
With yogurt, kefir, ancient grains and seed.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ode To An Australian Magpie

My head aches and throbbing numbness pains
My sense, as though of Bundy I had drunk
As I drag my bike out from the drains
One minute past where pavement-wards had sunk;
Tis through disdain of my unhappiness
That thou, pied-wing bomber from the trees
In some invidious leas
Of eucalypts and shadows numberless,
Chortle with glee in full-throttled ease...

"Quardle oodle aardle wardle doodle".

O for a draught of Fosters! That hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth
Tasting of hops with a dark tan sheen,
Garden bars, cask plonk, and sunburnt mirth!
Full of the true, the brashest youthful scene
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim
Past pouted jaw-set mouth;
That I might slink and spot the bird unseen
And with a shotgun make an end of him...

"Quardle oodle aardle wardle doodle".

Fade far away, shoot through and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here where hangovers give forth added groan
And headaches shake the morning's parted hairs
Where youth grows jaundiced, grey and sallow
With parrot-parched despairs;
Where sobriety cannot keep her lustrous eyes
And new rounds shout for us beyond tomorrow.

"Quardle oodle aardle wardle doodle".

Away! Away! For I will deal to thee -
You that were never in my best regards
Will meet my measure by Rule 303

Though the dull brain perplexes and retards;
Already fly thee! Tender is the pate
And unhappily I again make moan
Knocked about by dive-bomb ways;
But yet it is not too late
Save for what from heaven is with the flies blown
And murderous intent and vengeance pays.

"Quardle oodle aardle wardle doodle".

I cannot see what wrigglers are at my feet,
Nor what soft insects hang upon the boughs,
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each treat
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the eucalypt, and the gum-tree wild;
The wattle and the coastal turpentine;
Retiring serpents cover'd up in leaves;
And November's eldest child,
The scarce-born lamb athwart the twine,
The murderous haunt of flies on summer eves.

"Quardle oodle aardle wardle doodle".

Darkly I listen; and, for many a time
I have been in love with thy most painful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my choking breath;
More than ever is it right for thee to die,
To cease upon the midnight with some pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such cacophony!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I thoughts in vain -
That thy high requiem become a sod.

"Quardle oodle aardle wardle doodle".

Thou wast not born for life, oh mortal Bird!
The hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the heart of Sinbad, when, sick for home,

He stood in fear amid the darkening gloom
Bearding the Roc's wrath
On tragic battlements, louring on the foam
Of perilous seas, in feathery lands way-worn.

"Quardle oodle aardle wardle doodle".

Way-worn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back to thee to strip thy pelf!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is famed to do, deceiving self.
Adieu! adieu! thy final anthem fades
Past the paddocks, over the quaggy seep,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the acacia glades:
Waddle giggle gargle up the creek
Fled is that music - still I shake and weep.

"Quardle oodle aardle wardle doodle".

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Old Dog

Feeling stiff and sleepy like an old dog
Chasing cars in its dreams - desultorily
Rerunning chases from the catalogue
Of escapes that came with the territory

I am as they say - a bit passed it:
Pulling up short from cats scrambling up trees
Hopeless now at scaring postmen a bit
Or chasing gulls lifting off with the sea breeze.

Not the kind of guard dog you want on watch
Or a young pup to be shocked by Pavlov,
I'm no longer hard to keep on the porch:
Tending to scratch awhile and then doze off.

But every dog has its day or so they say
And I'd be barking mad to have had it any other way.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Olga And The Swan [????? ? ??????]

A steady blow - the pink swan inflated
Beside the turquoise lake of noxious dreams
She yearns their hapless breasts jugated
Is this much more or less than what it seems?

How can the lake in its polluted state
Beckon the maid so seductively
To dally with her rubber avian mate
Sharing their water-wings adductively?

And what fouled aqueous chemistry
Has mired this aquamarine surface
As ash and cinders fed lethality
And choked all living things with waste?

And does she now take up this shitty reality
With the Siberian Generating Company?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On Being Liked And Loved

I used to think that the best way
To deal with being and staying liked
Was to get to work on yourself
With make-up and jewelry
To cover the imperfections
That would otherwise be visible.

So that the cosmetic applications
And delicate, intricate metalwork
That I put in place artfully
Might substitute for virtues.

At least that is what I thought
When I was young and foolish:
It seemed to be the way to go
But it was not the way it turned out.

Out of all my fair-weather admirers
Nobody explained what is important -
Which is that love is deeper than looks:
That all your flaws
Tears and tantrums
Mood swings and evasions

May be viewed as mysterious depths of feeling
And delightful riddles by those who truly love you.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On Fine Fellowship, Understanding And Tigers

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When we were given a bill of passage
Through the southern margins,
As the wax seal grew hard,
We were warned of the tiger country.

How is it then that as dusk falls
We have reached the river's edge
And set up camp in good spirits
Having passed through unheeded danger?

Surely good fellowship has played a part
As we took delight in our company
And our understanding became fine wine:
Surely that is the way to reach the shore?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On Getting Out Of Bed With A Cracked Rib

We lie there together my broken body and I
Casting about for an approach to rising:
Right arm splayed out seeking purchase
Legs exploring the bed's edge for the floor.

We are aware that further pain is inevitable
That any heaving up will touch the unbearable.
We wait together, body and mind, fearing movement
Pressed to rise to meet the functions of life.

The best of mind is kindness and poetry and music
Visited by the clouds, kissed by the falling petal,
The songs borne from the glades and snowfields -
But powerless over pain and its jarred disharmony.

Nature is at no pains to conceal her imperative
That beauty and meaning give way to the unendurable
That she in the end will conquer with ice and fire
As we drag ourselves about facing up to indifference.

We will try again my body and I to get out of bed
To simply find our feet through the flinching agony,
To resolve once more into sentience and physicality -
Denying the basic truths of suffering and non-separation.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On Regent Street In 1976

In those days, things were a lot quieter
And out for a lunchtime walk
Down Regent Street to Piccadilly Circus
I was hailed by a boy on a large old bicycle.

It took me some time to recognize Douglas -
He was wearing a heavy tan-coloured coat
And dismounted somewhat clumsily
From what I took to be his Gran's sit-up-and-beg bike.

Here was a lovely and warm young fellow
Asking about my life - remembering
That when we had known each other before
I had been stepfather to a little girl.

Doubtless, he had been summoned
To an imposing Georgian house in Mayfair
To provide comfort and entertainment
To its insouciant and privileged occupier.

He had been the boyfriend of my gay cousin
Who was from the careless, hard and sharp side -
Family who were unscrupulous and cutting
But could also be witty and very entertaining.

Like Oscar Wilde, my cousin David believed
'It is absurd to divide people into good and bad
People are either charming or tedious':
But both reserved the right to draw the distinction.

I mentioned my cousin to Douglas.
He hadn't known David was now in San Francisco
Having taken his Bentley out there to impress
'I really liked him' he said, with a sad, shy grin.

Young Douglas never seemed tedious to me
Just a nice well-presented poor boy from the East End
And neither of us pretended to be charming:
Just half-strangers well-met at the heart of things.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On Robert Pinsky's Shirt

Stuffed shirt, patrician, creases ironed out
Something is not quite right I feel
About your parables - about your morals.

But then I am also one of the privileged
Although I am not of the neck-tie variety
Being open neck, sleeves rolled up for work.

Theory is, I would give you the shirt off my back
But in practice I just let my old t's accumulate
At the back of the wardrobe until they sour.

Perhaps then there is nothing between us
In our passing references to the others -
The ones who sweatshop the oster seams

Those who, unlike us, long for the days' end
Release from monotony and servitude
And homecoming to pegged out squalor.

Take off the shirt, singlet, blouse or chemise
And we are similar or such, being humankind
Feeling the air around us or the touch of others
Exposed and open to scrutiny and interpretation.

Consider the lilies how they grow, without spin
And yet their glory outshines Solomon's shift
And the grass clothed in heaven - cast into hell.

Perhaps a single poem can flower away the hurt
Of the pinned-up bib behind cellophane wrapping
A work of nature's art to offset the straightened material

But he said, if you wish to be perfect sell everything
Give the proceeds to the poor keeping half a robe
In return for treasures in heaven - and follow me.

He did not say, become a poet and muse on poverty
Opine on the misfortunes of others and their losses:

The girls tossed like bales of cloth from the windowsill

Their skirts billowing up, showing stockings and bloomers
Ready for the pavement ramming home the loose fabric
The sidewalk roped off by wardens from the thoroughfare

Or the descendant of slaves, the field worker pickaninny
Gathering the bolls into the basket to be weighed,
The mill worker among the dusty clattering looms

Desperately awaiting time's up to return to her baby
And Irma the old black lady who is a garment worker
Checking cuts and seams, pockets and button holes

Making certain that the pins have setback the collar
Showing its necklace to best advantage for the buyer
Ensuring the transparent packaging is stretched taut.

And the word is and manifests - the labels explain
Its cost, its clean smell, feel, colour, pattern and quality
And whether it fits - fits the bill - is fit for purpose

The separation that is inevitable between us all
And more particularly between the rich and the poor
Between those who labour and the department store shopper

Between the poet and the subject of his poetry and pity -
The pain that divides those who observe from those who suffer
Silently to provide us with the covering we need - the second skin.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On Sexual Freedom - 'like A Rocking Horse To The Highest Bidder'

I love talking to poets and I thought
That it was time for another chat with Hera Lindsay Bird
Such that I clicked on her website and brought up 'Bisexuality':

'There's such a thing as too much sexual freedom....'
Heidegger wrote that and he was bisexual too
always naked on a black leash, scrubbing the telephone
You think my heart is a shanty town...with fur curtains blowing

It's like turning your back on God.....but in a risqué halter neck
Like a rocking horse at auction you go to the highest bidder
You want to come home, but your home was destroyed in the war....
And carefully refurbished, with an elegant leopard trim ..."

Then I scrolled down and found a lead to Gonewild
And had to click on that - just two degrees on the Web!

Where 'C**tnugget-22 (f) acts: Age-24 Height-5'3"
Weight-Fluctuates Measurements-Who cares,
every GW girl is different and they all look amazing! '

...

Had posted a fetching rear-end selfie
Together with some loving hearts for viewers:
???????????????

Which clicks me back to Heidegger on a leash...
Though my mind immediately wanders to Nietzsche
Being yoked and lashed by Lou Andreas-Salomé
And I find myself searching again for the famous photo -

And then bringing up her poem 'Hymn to Life':

Surely, a friend loves a friend the way
That I love you, enigmatic life —
Whether I rejoiced or wept with you,
Whether you gave me joy or pain.

I love you with all your harms;
And if you must destroy me,
I wrest myself from your arms,
As a friend tears himself away from a friend's breast.

I embrace you with all my strength!
Let all your flames ignite me,
Let me in the ardor of the struggle
Probe your enigma ever deeper.

To live and think millennia!
Enclose me now in both your arms:
If you have no more joy to give me —
Well then—there still remains your pain.

... and pondering on the Wikipedia entry
Which notes that in her later years
Lou wrote a memoir 'Lebensrückblick'
Based on her memories of her life as a free woman
That sort of alluded, inter alia, to her relationship
With the poet Rainer Maria Rilke
Who she had noted 'was the finest Lesbian Poet since Sappho'.

'Whoever reaches into a rosebush may seize a handful of flowers;
but no matter how many one holds, it's only a small portion of the whole.
Nevertheless, a handful is enough to experience the nature of the flowers.

Only if we refuse to reach into the bush,
because we can't possibly seize all the flowers at once,
or if we spread out our handful of roses as if it were the whole of the bush itself

— only then does it bloom apart from us, unknown to us, and we are left alone.'

A few days before Lou's death in Gottingen in 1937
The Gestapo confiscated her library.

As one of the first female psychoanalysts
And one of the first women to write on female sexuality,
She had written a book published in 1911 called Die Erotik
And a well-regarded essay on anal-eroticism in 1916 -
Both of which were admired by Freud who was Jewish
And not popular in Germany at that time:

'You want to come home, but your home was destroyed in the war....
Why does everything have to be so on fire? you ask yourself'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On The Centenary Of The Death Of Rosenberg's Rat

I Cosmopolitan Sympathies

Being of follower of Tom Paine -
Like Rosenberg's Rat
I have cosmopolitan sympathies.
No doubt Remy would have said:
'The world is my country
To be a rat is my condition'
Though in its squeak
There would have doubtless been:
'Un peu de sarcasme - Monsieur'
[In an attempt to engage obliquely
We idealists feign the droll and sardonic].

Across in the opposition trenches
A German Corporal of Austrian origins
Would not have approved of Remy or Rosenberg
As he said some very nasty things
About rats and Jews, purporting
Both to be scavengers
Who fought bloodily among themselves -
With the latter hell bent on world domination -
But Isaac wrote simply:
'Nothing can justify war.
I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over.'

How the Gefreiter could have believed
What he did is hard to credit
Given that he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class
At the special intercession of his Regimental Adjutant
Leutnant Hugo Guttman who was also Jewish
And who personally pinned the award to his chest.
This he later wore as Führer und Reichskanzler.
Hugo had been awarded the Iron Cross First Class
Four years earlier to the day but was forced
Twenty-five years later to flee to St Louis
Where lived out his days as Henry G. Grant.

The Regimental Runner's life had been spared

At the Battle of St Quentin Canal in late 1918
When the most decorated private in the British Army
Henry Tandey had held his fire at Marcoing
After Adolf had tottered into his rifle sights
And as a sentiment the latter kept a copy
Of an English newspaper report of Henry
Being awarded his Victoria Cross
For carrying a wounded comrade under fire
And later acquired a copy of the painting by Matania
That depicted Tandey's courage at the Kruiseke Crossroads

Of which he commented to Chamberlain at the Berghof:
'That man came so near to killing me that
I thought I should never see Germany again;
Providence saved me from such devilishly accurate fire
As those English boys were aiming at us'.
Just a few short miles away my countryman
Wilfred Owen died crossing the Sambre-Oise Canal
Having won the Military Cross near Amiens
And two years later his mother wrote to Rabindranath Tagore
That Wilfred had said goodbye with:
'When I go from hence, let this be my parting word'.

After the shrieking iron had stilled, the flames had cindered
And the poppy was lustrous red, free of the dust of war,
When the silence had come - the rats had a lean time
With the end of their fresh meat rations
But the trenches were filled, the borders opened
And eventually dismantled in many places
So people came and went as they pleased -
Under Schengen and EU *acquis communautaire* -
And scion Remy Ratatouille became a famous chef in Paris.
It would be sweet to have dessert and sit back at this juncture
But true stories are a movable feast and there is no separation.

II Small Horizons

Growing up as a country boy of small horizons
I was much in awe of old Edmond Tickle
Who lived in a cottage on Long Lane in Wettenhall
And worked then as a platelayer on the railways
But who had been with the Cheshire Regiment

In Iraq 'chasing the Turks' - with his comrade Charlie Dickens,
Who souvenired a copy of the Maude Proclamation in Baghdad:
'Our armies do not come into your cities and lands
As conquerors or enemies but as liberators -
In the hope and desire of the British people that the Arab race
May rise once more to greatness and renown...'

Britain had fielded an army of half a million men
In the 'Mes-Pot' or Mesopotamia Campaign
Of whom three quarters were from British India.
Provisions and armaments for the sepoy were hugger-mugger
And there were 3-4 doctors for every 3-4 thousand wounded.
But conditions were not cushy for T. Atkins and E. Tickle either.
During a three week period in 1917, temperatures
Did not fall below 116 degrees Fahrenheit
And 423 British and 59 Indian troops died of heat stroke.
Though every effort was to be made to score as heavily as possible before the
whistle blew
And in October 1918 General Cobbe broke the Armistice of Mudros and occupied
Mosul.

Outback of Townsville and up into Cape York
I got to know Jack Kelly who had been a trooper
With the Australian Light Horse in Palestine
No doubt Jack have concurred with his English comrade Bob Wilson
That, on crossing the border from Egypt, the land around Gaza
Was 'delightful country, cultivated to perfection with chiefly barley and wheat
If not better looking than on most English farms.
The villages were very pretty - a mass of orange, fig and other fruit trees.
The relief of seeing such country after the miles and miles
Of bare sand was worth five years of a life.'
The charges of the Light Horse and the Mounted Rifles became legendary.

So in December 1917, General Allenby walked
Through the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem to show respect -
British Prime Minister Lloyd George having described its capture as
'A great morale boost and Christmas present for the Empire'.
Allenby was the first Christian in many centuries to control Jerusalem.
In 1099, Godfrey de Bouillon and the Roberts II of Flanders and Normandy
Had taken Jerusalem from a Fatimid Garrison and
'No one ever saw or heard of such slaughter of pagan people,
For funeral pyres were formed from them like pyramids,

And no one knew their number except God alone'.
And the Jews were incinerated in their synagogue refuge.

But things had not always gone to plan.
Sir Charles Vere Ferrers Townshend's 6th Poona Division
Had been besieged for five months at Kut-al-Amara
And surrendered with 13,164 soldiers being taken prisoner
For the British, this humiliation was followed by another
Defeat in the Battle of Gallipoli four months later -
Leading Curzon and Chamberlain to renew the campaign
With greater vigour, arguing that 'there would be no net saving
In troops if a passive policy in the Middle East
Encouraged Muslim unrest in India, Persia and Afghanistan'
So Jack and Edmond had to stick to the job.

And finally, the Australians under Chauvel swept in a Great Ride
Spear-heading the capture of Homs, Damascus, Beirut and then Aleppo
Traversing 800 kilometres from the Palestinian coast
Across the plains of Armageddon and into Syria,
As thousands of Turks and Arabs died and 78,000 were captured
And T.E. Lawrence snarled at the Aussies winning the race to Damascus
'Too sure of themselves to be careful... thin-tempered, hollow... instinctive'
Meanwhile Townsend was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath,
And given the use of a yacht by the Pashas in Istanbul,
Though they had executed, starved and brutalized his Indian troops.
And he eventually became Member of Parliament for The Wrekin in Shropshire

III What goes around, comes around

And now in the Pas-de-Calais and Picardy
Come the summer, the rape seed will be gold
Kissed by the deep high sky and the noble sun
And the poplars will rustle in the light wind.
But in the ancient land of the two rivers
The crescent moon fades on barren land
With sheep unshorn and the wheat unsown
Shells, wrecks and sumps in the wilderness
The sun rising pitiless where the shade is cut:
So its sculptors rule with sneers of cold command
And hands that kill let children go unfed.

And there will be wars and rumours of wars

Folk wanderings and escapes from bondage
Pillars of fire before, and writing on the wall,
Angered gods and stiff-necked supplicants,
Promised lands flowing with milk and honey
And homesick girls amid the alien corn.
That there is nothing new under the sun is sure
That we will wander following an empty ark
For a century living off the fat of the land
Or smitten by famine, plagued by boils and vermin
Visited with iniquity to the third and fourth generations.

What goes around, comes around
And what goes over the horse's head
Comes out under its belly or behind its arse.
So now we have thousands of dispossessed
Fleeing from Aleppo and Baghdad
The subject of a distant war and a want of peace
For the pity is in the hundreds drowned
And the thousands of fleeing children abducted:
Of small figures floated face-down
And brought to the shore and its pebbles
With their tiny faces posed for reportage.

Higgledy piggledy - it starts again
Rats in a hamper, sheep in a pen
Flies in a bottle, frogs on the boil
Trusting to sieves in seeking safe soil,
Longing for harbour, haven and rest
Risking it all - the worst and the best:
Food for the waves, praying for land
Children now mute with mouthfuls of sand
Hist! Square shoulders, close up your gates
We'll not let them in to our privileged states.

Now the dispossessed are again like rats
For them the world is their country
And to do good for their own is their denomination -
With no place for them, they take their place
In forced marches, in queues at broken fences
Dashing, evading... on the look-out for scraps.
But then the sea did not part for our own children
As fired with portents and miracles

They crusaded and sought Jerusalem
But were sold Into slavery by cruel merchants
Or played to the deep by the Pied Piper

'There must have been a moment when
There not being a war on went away -
How did we get from the one case of affairs
To the other case of affairs? '
'Do you mean 'Why did the War start'?
'The war started because of the vile warmongers
And their villainous empire-building? '
'No - the real reason was that
It was too much effort not to have a war'.

The logic remains the same.
There have been many villainies in pursuit of power
Many treacheries in pursuit of oil, land and resources
But the real reason is that life is not held sacred.
When a shepherd in Lemnos named Nasos
Milks his goats early to feed half-starved children
When a Croatian policeman turns away in tears
As a little girl embraces him for small kindnesses
When helpers who visit The Jungle in Calais conclude:
'Beneath the tragedy lies a painful, beautiful humanity of the most raw kind'
The world is still ours and doing some little good keeps faith.

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Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On The Cliffs Above Houghton Bay

FOR THE EVER-WALKING MAN IN THE WOOLLY BEANIE

Little man, you are walking
To a blank and darkened sky
Step by step advancing
However much you try.

Little man, you are blinking
Averting thus my smile
Step by step retreating
A fearful distant mile.

Little man are you thinking
Of times of joy that passed
Or are you just avoiding
The fact that nothing lasts?

Little man existing
No one takes your eye
Not even chance for grieving
As strangers pass you by.

Little man, you are trudging
Past a bench that's lost your name
No dates of life appearing
That celebrate the same.

Little man, you are faltering
Each footfall brings you near
The cliff top way still winding
Where spray may splash a tear.

Little man no caring
Only you can see it through
Time its tide is keeping
On the path that bears us two.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On The Closure Of Beeston Auction, Cheshire

In summertime at Beeston
The auction pens were few
The springtime heifers gone
The dry cows yet to come,
As farms brought harvest home.

The hay was sweet but short on sun
When dew was on the lea
And lots were cast on mowing then
Or tedding swaths once more
Or bringing heavy bales to store.

But if there was a spell
To take a break the while
And sell a bobby-calf or two
Some brass for beers was found
With whiskey chaser rounds.

And long upon the seasons
The castle kept its watch
On straight and crooked dealers
On tip-offs on the stock
And kickbacks paid for 'luck'.

Then at last the gavel fell
As those who bid held back,
The tricksters and the touts
The buyers with their doubts,
To hear the 'all done?' shouts.

Now the yards are silent
And the gates are closed
Weeds are finding purchase
The farmers' deals are done
The last lots loaded on.

Still the castle lours
Like a guardian lion
And bargains once hand-shaken

Are settled for a tidy sum
Paid up for time to come.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On The Inherent Nature Of Art

The dawning, the brightening, and the light of day:
Sometimes we see things as they really are,
As they are becoming, as they take on existence.

Perception, recognition and realization follow
The same path - in the noting of immanent moments -
In the undertaking of the crafting of a work of art.

And those who practice their arts well and fully
Can cast back the challenge to the ebbing shadows -
Creating moments from nowhere for our reflection.

'Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius.
Et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius,
ad perpetranda miracula rei unius.'

What is below is there for what is above
What is above rests thence on what is below
That the miracle of unity may be accomplished.

[Treatise of Hermes Trismegistos - the 'thrice-wise' divine patron of the arts]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On The New York Times Apology For Apathy

For the Exhausted Majority

I am sad that you feel so exhausted
About the political spats between
Those who think the others stupid
And those who think the others evil.

That it is not really about policy
Or decency or doing the right thing
But more about psychology-based
Tribalism and the dynamics of resentment.

That it only concerns the fruits of privilege:
Being a matter of competing narratives
Between nasty brutish and short Hobbes
And jaded noble savages de Rousseau.

Don't let the lies get you down
It's only a drama orchestrated by power
Go and have a good lie down -
The Evil will wake you when it's over.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

On The Philosophy Of Life

The news that the American poet John Ashbery
Had died, reminded me that he wrote, apropos
Of the possibility of promulgating a new moral climate
[In the slipstream of counter-culture Haight-Ashbury]:
'Still, there's a lot of fun to be had in the gaps between ideas.
That's what they're made for! '

Not only ideas - language is full of holes
Even down to the spelling.
Setting aside distinctions between fully peculiar and funny ha-ha
This is an opportunity then for me to register one gap
In my appreciation John - under my reprobation
At the form that your surname has taken in American English.

I had a fine, bright and dandy American friend once
Whose lustrous black hair betrayed his Italian origins
And his surname De Rosa. But he confided that his mother's
Family had English origins and that her surname had been Shrewsbury
Of which he rapidly averred his intense dislike
With its connotations to him of burying shrews.

This sounded appalling to me as I had been brought up
Thinking that the lovely old county town of Shropshire
Had a rather upmarket and sophisticated name
Even though it started life as Scrobbesburh / Scrobbesbyrig
Which may mean 'Scrobb's fort' or 'the fortified place in the bushes'
[It had been taken from the Welsh who knew it as Pengwern].

Many years later, when the British took Fort Duquesne in 1758, from the French
They built Fort Pitt around which the city of Pittsburgh grew up
After Lord Jeffrey Amherst ordered smallpox contaminated blankets
To exterminate the Amerindians who opposed western expansion
Adding sadly that England is not ready for hunting them down with dogs.
Clearly it could have been Pittsbury but even I can see the flaws in that.

Sadly, I reckon we have had a bit too much of clever ambiguity
About the triumph of putting possibilities into play
Or what the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette calls transformations, surprises, gaps
In the drama of the mind at work - where poetry is not about 'content'.

If we are talking about exploring the wild, uneasy, spikey, pesky places
Of a fully-lived life John, can 'u' say you did your best - come the spade or ash?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Once There Was A Garden

[for The Syrian poet Mohammad Bashir al-Aani and his son Elyas]

Like a lost boy as the fever peaks
I dream of the doorway of my home
Compounded by desolate abandonment

I have returned at last in my mind's eye
To see my mother making bread
And hear my father unroll his mat for prayer

And I am chilled and shaken by the beauty
Of the fallen facing stones and broken concrete
And the litter that rustles in the hot winds

Only rubble remains but there it is
Garlanded by burnt rags and severed flesh
As the sun's harshness brightens and burns

Once there were family meals and feasts
There was laughter and companionship
Our ancestry was recited and the future sung

And now my son you are brought to this
In the memory of your dear mother:
Would that I could die alone for you

Caught guiltless in the branches of a great oak
They will sacrifice you as well to bitterness:
'My son, my son - would God I had died for you'.

...

To calm our fears before the sword
They are giving us sherbet and water melon juice:
Lets us sip these in the garden where we will be still.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

One Equal Temper

I Ulysses have seen much and I repent.
Always when the storms cease, the horizon
Flattens and the circumference returns.
So must the ship seek still by star and lode
That at least there is some hope of harbour
Come to ground in calm clear waters.

Do not tell me again of mystery islands
Or the sirens seductive in their melody
Or empires to be conquered come the dawn.
Let me simply find a sand shore and footfall
Set down and landed on the ocean's edge
And feel again the particles of broken shells.

I will not be so foolish as to think of home
Or finding hearth and solace in an ancient hall
Or dream of sons to carry name and blazon.
My only thought is that the storms are done
And that the line is drawn so clear and straight
That sets the lesser and the greater blue.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

One Kooka Short Of A Barbecue - The Kookaburra

Cook-a-bite under the old gum tree,
See your steak go winging free
Laugh Kookaburra laugh -
Bang another snag on the old barbie

Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree
Casing all the lamb chops he can see
Stop, Kookaburra! Stop
Leave some there for me

Barbie-robber sits in the old gum tree
Counting all the burgers - one two three
Stop, robber-cobber! Stop
That's a mockery - that's mi tea.

Kookaburra lands on the old barbie
Merry, merry, merry little bird is he
Singe, Kookaburra! Singe
Singe your butt - beauty!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

One Woman Army

In Honour of Qandeel Baloch - One Woman Army

'So she that doth redeem her thence might wear
Without corrival all her dignities'.

'I know I am small but I am strong
Life taught me lessons early
As a woman, I must stand up for myself
As women, we must stand up for each other

I stand against false beliefs and old practices
For those women who have been
Forcefully married and sacrificed
I will fight for right. I will not give up

I will reach my goal: nothing will stop me
No matter how many times I fall
I am a fighter and will bounce back.
If you have will power, nothing can let you down

Love me or hate me both are in my favour
If you love me, I will always be in your heart
If you hate me, I will be in your mind

It's time to bring a change because the world is changing.
Let's open our minds and live in the present'.

She told me:

'Mum I'm so tired, of the cases and the criticism.
But my time will come.
Everyone says I have a bad reputation
But I'll show them all what a simple girl from a small village can do.'

...

'She was a girl just like you
She laughed a lot
She talked a lot.'

[In her own words - and those of her mother]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Our Lady Of The Six O'clock Shadow

FOR SAINT WILGEFORTIS

The first bad-ass bitch with a beard
Ignored her booty to become a saint:
She took no mind folk thought her weird
And traded beauty to emancipate.

A virgin queen with curls and stubble
Men loved her curves but grew deterred
By ticklish fuzzy follicle trouble
Whose closer shaves would best go unobserved.

She was a feminist with cheeks remembered
As prickly though she didn't give damn,
And happily with shades of growth encumbered
Her holy hirsute face dissed cute and glam.

Princess of the shadow and the cross
Remember me as I bewail your loss.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Our Life As Stars

Is it that, as we live, we burn like stars?
That in our deepest hearts, emotions
Are transformed into new elements
By the furnaces of hatred and love?

That starting simply with the commonplace
Living may progress the transmutation
Of stuff into the heavier rarities
Of understanding and compassion

That at our death - at the burning out -
New elements may be brought to alchemy
From the crucible of good and evil
That constitutes and represents our life?

And that those traces of ethereal dust
Be then cast out to seed the universe?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Overheard In A Pc Swamp

Nymph, nymph, flash me your boobs!
Piss off pervert. Why do you stare at them?

Show them me.

No.

Show them me. Show them me.

No.

Then I will howl all night in the reeds,
lie in the mud and howl for them.

Scumbag, why do you love them so?

They are better than stars or water,
Better than voices of the wind that sings,
Better than those of a mortal daughter,
The naiad's small pert water wings.

Hush, I stole them out of the moon.

Show me your boobs, I want them.

No.

I will howl in a deep lagoon
For your little maiden breasts,
I love them so.
Give them me. Give them.

No.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Overseas Love - For Reinaldo Arenas

That child with the round dirty face
Is always at my side in the street
As I walk to my air-conditioned office
Where I make plans for his better future.

He thinks me naive and easily inveigled:
But for me he is a temporary nuisance
As I engage in geopolitical engineering
All to his best interest.

Believe me, I know what is good for him:
I am an expat expert in development planning
And can recall theories, run models
And recount and apply my experience.

It's all very well young man asking for change,
I know you would prefer to steal my wallet:
I will not accompany you that's for sure
There is a kind of knowing evil to your smile.

Go back to your cardboard square on the pavement
Or to the thatched bough shed that's home
While I calculate how many days are left
To my assignment and what I am saving.

You are dirty and untrustworthy
And knowing you too well
Could raise a host of insanitary horrors -
Threatening even restricted camaraderie.

My work is for the long-term good
And little point is served in more than a 'hi'
And an occasional purchase of your chewing gum:
I bought your sister drinks last night.

The future is looking bright my little friend
There will be irrigation and factories:
And who knows, if you become a poet
You can write your vengeance.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ovid's Ode For The Getae

When I in Rome the Emperor displeased
I little thought the Empire so diseased
That at its margins lay the hairy Getae
And I an exile here with you - yet I
Now pay you tribute with my ode
Hirsute fellows with your breeks and woad.

Consider though the Roman world
Its culture, wealth and might unfurled,
The meanest tribesman must admire,
That trows for togas they must now retire
And take a bath and scrub their backs
Put down their weapons and espouse the Pax.

Once clean consider then my art
Forego the sneer and moderate the fart
I write of change and transformation
To civilisation for the former Thracian.
What then of freedom if you have the tub
Poetic conversation and a post-bath rub?

The nymphs will tender wine and treats
And luxury release its soft deceits
As steam and soaping mellow you -
Be clean behind the ears my newly shaven crew
And clear your mind of impious errors -
What's in between is now the Emperor's.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ozymandias - An Update

Whose is this lost and heartless arcane land
Of pride without pity, faced white with stone,
Whose monuments to power's excess stand
In mockery of simple flesh and bone?

And those who smile and sneer in cold command
Let children drown - jeering the stateless dead
Whose simple needs were scorned and then denied
At banquets set at which the rich were fed.

Instead let us commemorate the lost:
Let those who value kids and family
Dream of boundary rivers safely crossed
And girls and fathers brought to safety

Setting aside all pomp and statuary
For loving care and loving memory.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Padparadscha

Simple pure girl of the forest people
Conceived in desire of the doe deer
Cast like a fawn dropped into the earth
Deserted and left for the wolves
And then become a source of life

Guarding the clearing and the vines
Singing of her longing for the hunter
The mountain god of sky and springs
Master of the clouds' pavilions
Of the torrents, rapids and cascades

Tempted first by the young warrior
Who shrank back into the woodland
At the challenge of the villagers
Leaving a gift of honey and mangoes
A bounty she fed to an old man in kindness

Who then demanded her innocence
But she drew back from the embrace and shame
Cursing that neither young or old would suit
To take the place of the source of mists
And the jeweled rainbow above the waterfall

But when an elephant broke from the jungle
The old man promised to save the girl Valli
If she agreed to submit and marry him
And she having no choice took the hermit sage
Finding him become her quickening dream

The young warrior Kandeyaka peacock-plumed
Spirit of the river Kataragama gem-studded
Losing herself to the run of the stream
Grasping the sapphire treasures of realization
Becoming the consort of the divine mountain

Tracing her arms deep, dabbling down her fingers
Embracing the ripples for lights and flecks
The multi-hued essence of awareness

The sacred pinks and reds and golds and amber
Of the common stone become padparadscha.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Paean For Scruffy

The little girl-cat
Likes the wake-up
Coffee ceremony
Arching her back
For some stroking
Padding the duvet
And then kissing
Jane on the nose
She knows that love
Is being mothered
And then being mum.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Pain-Ridden

Weary palfrey, who is it kicks your hide
Stumbling along the way to journey's end?
... footfalls darkening the wayside
As tones of all too early dusk descend?

Husbandry and horsemanship disapprove!
Broken beast, he has left it far too late:
He brings the whip to bear from loss of love
And growing distance from care's best estate.

Sharing anger, he rakes the bloody spur -
All honour lost - his heartlessness impressed
.. and you the mount must this disgrace endure
With scar rent flanks in faithfulness distressed.

How heavy then to bear the penalty
Of ridership with star-crossed cruelty?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Parts

We like to see our lives as a whole
Coming to resolution - seeing the point -
Everything having progressed gradually
Despite the inevitable trials and set-backs.

What though if our lives are atoms of experience
Composing bits and parts and aggregates
That stand largely for themselves for a time
Such that there is no narrative or story?

The sequences and trajectories that we see
Being simply in the mind's eye, as comforters,
Allowing us the illusion of heroic singularity -
The intimation of progression and redemption.

.....

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Patrick The Blue Heeler Cattle Dog

Bright he bounds through opened door
He's my mate of that I'm sure -
Flashing a toothy smile for me
He sniffs my strides inquisitively.

A pat, he shakes a coarse grey paw -
A bowl and soon he asks for more.
Tell me Patrick 'How'd you be? '
Watch the sofa mate it ain't a tree.

Soon he's scouting out the floor -
And at the bin for something raw.
Hold on a mo mate, can't you see
That's no place to cock and pee.

Sam you had better take your saw
You should have done so long before -
Don't let your bloody dog make free
He's itching now against my knee.

Back in the truck and close the door.
This audience is ended mate - no more.
He's got the chops I bought for tea
And there's a wet patch on my new settee.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Pedra Senhora

In the natural and engineered stone showroom
Our small party turned down an aisle
Between sets of kitchen 'Slab Gallery' slices
Browsing a last look at bench top options.

It was a 'coup de foudre' or love at first sight
Or perhaps better in Portuguese 'amor à primeira vista'
Given that we are talking of black mosaic marinace granite
From the State of Bahia in Brasil

-

Cobbles, pebbles, boulders, rubble, rounded scree
Of grey marble, mottled vulcanite, gneiss and quartzite
Tumbled in an ancient riverbed, conglomerate compacted,
Imbedded in a crystalline matrix of gleaming black biotite

Brought to light from a deep polymict metamorphosis,
Under eons of extraordinary pressures and temperatures
1 billion years or so distant - possibly during the SAMBA orogeny
Caused by Norway encroaching on proto-South America

-

Like peering into a deep clear profound eye to the past
unconditional, unquestionable, undoubted, unequivocal,
unlimited, unrestricted, unrestrained, unbounded, unbound,
boundless, infinite, ultimate, utter, sovereign, omnipotent.

Turn away I must my supremely beautiful Medusa,
Reaching for Jacques Monod's talisman of Chance and Necessity:

A totally blind process can by definition lead to anything;
It can even lead to vision itself.

Man knows at last that he is alone
In the universe's unfeeling immensity,
Out of which he emerged only by chance.
His destiny is nowhere spelled out, nor is his duty.

The kingdom above or the darkness below: it is for him to choose.

L'homme sait enfin qu'il est seul
Dans l'immensité indifférente de l'univers
D'où il a émergé par hasard.
Non plus que son destin,
Son devoir n'est écrit nulle part.
A lui de choisir entre le royaume et les ténèbres.

Un processus totalement aveugle
Peut par définition conduite à n'importe quoi;
Cela peut même conduire à la vision elle-même.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Penguin Love Knot Sealed - Monty, Mabel And Willy

The wind was keening on the ice,
Billowing with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The snow drifts fluffed and light-
And to make things crisp and nice
Plumped ice sheets for the Penguins' sake.

The sea was rime as rhyme could be,
The rocks were smooth as smooth
As Monty preened a tap-dance
To let prospective lovers see
Groovy slippery flipper moves
Over easy egg without mischance.

Thinking of little happy-footed patter
And shuffling pie-bald down the aisle
A star-struck young bird named Mabel
Whose heart had begun to flutter
Watching Monty's Eggnam style
Told him she was up-for-it and able.

But Willy the seal was lolloping
With mischief and worse on his mind
Of having it off while doing his thing:
'Hornithological mollocking'!
He wasn't the purist of seals of his kind
When he saw the chance of a casual fling

He had no business to be there
A cad amongst the rookery
'It's very rude of him, ' young Mabel said
'To interpose his blubber here
When courtship's strictly birdily
For lifetime bonds when once we wed";.

Now Willy pounced or rather rollicked
Seizing Monty as he upped the dance
And squashed him in a fierce embrace
That dropped him as he frolicked

While Mabel gawked at this advance,
Squawking of an inter-trans-disgrace!

'I weep for you, Chilly Willy said:
'I deeply sympathize.'
As with ersatz tears he padded out
And left poor Monty iced and weak
While Mabel dried her streaming eyes
And pecked him squarely on the beak.

'O Monty, ' said the Emperor's daughter,
"My lips and yours are sealed
Come home with me and be the one".
No answer though was brought her
As this was just what fate revealed
When Willy left, young Monty followed on.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Perfect Spring Night

In the holiday let in the small hours
The battery-driven wall-clock
Goes tchuck-tchuck as the minutes pass
But time stands still - marking time -
And the big hand stalls on 'twelve to'
Bouncing back - tchuck-tchuck -
As I make no progress with my pain.

Somehow my bladder won't settle
It seems wrung out, strangulated, aching
No doubt a sign of things to come -
And the times past when there was no pain
Seem so distant now as the minutes agonize -
No sense in returning to the bed covers
And hanging my leg out beyond the duvet.

I push back the ranch slider and go out
Into the perfect springtime night-sky
And arrange two bean-bag seats to loll on
Gazing up at the extraordinary vastness
And the multitudes of stars that wheel slowly,
For I prefer the comfort of the heavens
Having no faith that misery can be held still.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Perfumed Kiss

After they had gleaned the wildfowl snares
She should not have smiled and cleared her mouth
But they were very young - out-daring scares -
Longings and being too near were enough.

Long-summer sunset light across the fen -
Come dusk, the brutal blow and depths for her -
Beheaded girl never to see the sky again
Lips betrayed by her fleeing lover.

Now here is that girl's face - envisioned!
Broad brow, sapphire eyes, dark amber skin,
After these years come to life, newly risen
Free of the peat grave - our kissing cousin

At once atoned - named now with reverence
Her resined breath outlasts the ritual axe.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Perhaps 2118

I am grown old in the years' contempt
And the rise and fall of the kind old sun
In lands late loved and dreams of lost content
Whose moments of ceasing are close to done.

But as I grow old, they are clearer now
The young who lost their youth that we should live -
They come and chat with me and tell me how
They smile at us and laugh as they forgive.

They come with heart-beat kisses for their kin
And boons of comradeship with former foe
Not caring who may lose and who may win
Keen that trust and understanding just grow:

"These tags and talismans we pass to you
Wear them, sweet friends and to our names be true"

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Personal Trainer

FAT WITH THE PROMISE OF LEAN STREAKS

Late harvest saw us lifting bales to trailers
And up from the trailers to shippon lofts
Using a 2-pronged pitchfork or pikel
Jabbed centre-bale and hefted up in one sweep.

At the glooming of a late summer's day
The last loads would be brought in
As a chill caught sweat and chaff
With aches akimbo as the tractor backed up.

Dank bales leaved with Cheshire autumn
From the flats along the Ankersplatt
A fair jag on and one last tussle
To put them overhead aired aloft.

"Tha mun shape lad
Dunna be like th'owd woman
With a belly-full of butter milk
An wimmy-wammy i'the bitlin.

There inna any way but reet.
Tha mun stand reet lad -
Jab an swing in one go
Shifting as th'weight rises".

Big men and me a youth of sixteen
Jokes and hard judgments -
But they are long gone
Mown down by salty home-cured bacon -
Fat with the promise of lean streaks.

....

Late in life I have come back to the gym
And succumbed to the debonaire charm
Of my personal trainer Maria
Who comes from Wroclaw or `vrotswaf.

She has devised a program to improve me
And I stand looking at myself in the mirror
Holding a weighted ball out-stretched
Balancing on a BoSu and bending low.

I try to think of new things to say or ask
About Poland to reduce the pain -
But then she has me bridging
And holding for 10 more - she can't count.

"That's very good"
She says unconvincingly:
"Lift your tummy up
And squeeze your glutes.

Take a break if you are dizzy -
Next time bring a water bottle.
Now for your favourite
The lunges, leading leg straight at first".

Beautiful people in pink and black lycra
Pounding music and purposeful endeavour
And I am still here
Ready for a chick-pea and kinwa salad at the Maranui -
Fat with the promise of lean streaks.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Plain Mr Robbing-Free T

Sir Robin banked some bonuses with great big options
As he went among the citizens and bilked them till they bled.
On Wednesday and on Saturday,
Especially on the latter day,
He vaunted o'er the populace - and this is what he said:
'I am Sir Robin! ' (Ring the till!)
'I am Sir Robin! ' (Rubber stamp!)
'I am Sir Robin,
'With my cold-faced lying!
'I'll take that, and that, and that! '

Sir Robin traded inside and practiced tax evasion;
A pair of dodgy doings of which he was particularly fond.
On Tuesday and on Friday,
Just to make the books look tidy,
He would edit the accounts with a fiddle-stick wand.
'I am Sir Robin! ' (That's gone)
'I am Sir Robin! ' (Blank space!)
'I am Sir Robin,
'With my cold-faced lying!
'Is there anything else they can trace? '

Sir Robin woke one morning and his credit took a dive.
His accounts had been sequestered and cleared of all the loot.
He was brought to judge and jury
And tasked to tell his story
While his victims waved a bankrupting salute.
'You are Sir Robin? My, my.
'You are Sir Robin? Dear, dear.
'You are Sir Robin
'With your cold-faced lying?
'Delighted to meet you here! '

Sir Robin went a journey and he found a lot of cell mates.
Who bullied him and shunned him and put porridge in his bed.
Erasing every minus sign
They scored and tweaked his bottom line
As they put him through the wringer - and this is what they said:
'You are Sir Robin - don't laugh!

'You are Sir Robin - don't cry!
'You are Sir Robin
'With your cold-faced lying -
'Sir Brian the Lying, goodbye! '

Sir Robin struggled home again and wound down his entities.
Sir Robin took his dodgy books and threw them on the fire.
He is quite a different person
Now he hasn't got his options on,
And he goes about the city as a dealer who's retired.
'I am Sir Robin? Oh, no!
'I am Sir Robin? Who's he?
'I haven't any title, I'm Treasury;
'Plain Mr. 'Robbing-Free' T.'

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Playful Moon

A bright hot clear day
On the bank at the Basin
Watching slow cricket

Southee is working
At dislodging Angelo
Matthews with bouncers

The oval below
Is flecked with white figures
The crowd is festive

Some young guys come up
And camp out under the shade
Of my tree - jostling.

Earrings, tattoos, beer
Good mates, good times under the
Pohutakawa

Look says one: "the moon -
I love the moon in daylight
A smudge on a lens"

Listening gently:
Poetry is everywhere -
It's my round next.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Poetry And Pastry

A trusty old poet in case he
Ran short of literary gravy
Baked poetry rimmed with pastry
Into pies that were rhymed and tasty
But conversed with recipes vaguely.

Said a prodigious old poet of note,
Wrapping pies in the limericks he wrote:
'Rimmed or rhymed - so long as they are tasty -
Oblivious of poetry or pastry -
There'll be crusty and juicy - whatever you quote'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Power Is Life And So It Takes Its Course

FOR RUPERT MURDOCH AND JERRY HALL

'Will you love me, as I have my way
When the prostate flares on cue?
Now the charms of youth have passed away
Will true love see us through?

'For ancient roosters, it's mostly swagger
With swivelled hips in walking frame
I'm off my rocker just like Jagger
Though fair and balanced still in name

'Oh, I love you for your catwalk art
And the blush the cheek has dusted,
But most I love you as a celeb tart
Whose bigger bang be busted

'When I'm riding round the world
I can get no satisfaction
Except with you my 6 foot girl
Now you supply my girlie action

'I don't want you to cook my bread
Just be there when I'm sad and blue
And leave some buns upon the bed.
So I can toast and spread a few

'Old men need to clinch a squeeze
With champagne and vibrator
The more to tease and please
A lanky Yankee captivator

'As the Sun goes down
On Fox and Friends and my Agenda
When there's no else around
I need your loving tender.

'For the eyes are all the soul has left
With you I see right through:

That wiles and aisles have purchase kept
With pearls and diamonds just for you

'I'll take you to the Rugby
An Aussie proud and free
Though when it comes to making money
It's the USA for me.

'From now on I'll set the tone
So see whose tricks are bigger:
Best not play around, I'll tap your phone
Just call me Dirty Digger!

'I may not be a Stone who sings
My blowsy groupie queen
But if you die a tone still rings
As wretched hacks despoil the scene

'So the ageing dingo sly and ruthless
Runs down calves without remorse
Though I'm old, I'm not toothless
Power is life and so it takes its course'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Prodigal

The world is in a bad way.
But if it could come to pass
I would watch out for it
And then take it in my arms
Clapping it with manly hugs and pats
Swallowing my tears
Knowing it had returned
From fain eating what the swine would eat.

And I would kill the fatted calf
Or provide the contemporary equivalent
Of a pot roast in the slow cooker
With a tray of roasted veggies
And some lightly steamed greens,
Taking the infusion
To make some gravy
For a good feed around the family table.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Prompter

There are clues that dialogue is ending
The routine cues no longer whisper back
And messages the silences are sending
Hint of declamation way off-track.

Deftly draw the curtain on the story
The mumbling of a monologue onstage
Life and its strange eventful history:
The seventh act reveals the final age.

"I'm losing my mind, aren't I"; he said
She replied: "I will remember for you",
Ready to prompt him in the days ahead
Coaxing what yet remains to see it through.

Rehearsing memory herself tight-lipped
She adds a note to margin on the script.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Pussy Riot Drowned Out

Ding, dong, bell
Pussy's in the well
Freedom's gone to hell!
Who put her in?
Little Vladdie Putin.
Who helped the dump
Little Donnie Trump.
What cocky boys were they
To grab her where they may
By quim and curl and velvet
They stiffened it as they felt it
And hastened her descent.
By drowning all dissent.
A snatch that couldn't fail
A wet patch in the pail
For a past-it piece of tail -
A sad and sorry tale -
See her downward sail!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Qrc

At the edge of sleep
Patterns of light
Coalesce, glow and fade:
The Quick Response Code
Of the enveloping absences
In our matrix barcode
Scanned when we pass
Through the check-out
Of the day's supermarket trolley
Salmagundi of experiences.

Hopefully no malicious codes
Will overwrite the legitimate
Contents of this portmanteau
And expunge it overnight
With a tagging or attack tagging
Upsetting the apple cart plus-plus
As the error correction function
Fades and the mask pattern
Is inverted, dwindles beyond a spot
And is finally turned off.

With a last reading registering
At the Lotto booth on the way out:
'This is Not a Winning Ticket'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Qualia And Instancy

SEAS END

The little stub-nosed ferry
Disappears behind the headland:
If I swept away the rocky horizon
Would I find her there?

She passes by and is past
Making way in quickening swells.
If we had shared that moment
Would your gaze vouchsafe

A passage, imprint or quality
Of sea losses to the land's edge?
Did you - do you see what I see
An instant the straight is crossed?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Quantum Infatuation

There are problems with relativity
And matching it to quantum mechanics
In trying to understand how
In the great scheme of things
The fabric of matter and time
Comes apart when existence is radically uncertain.

Perhaps quantum gravity and quantum entanglement
Provide some means of explaining spooky action at a distance
With the bolt and throw of things being composed of threads
Or perhaps minute space-time configurations that are quantized.

Speaking from my own experience I can only say that
All these things are likely to be intermittently attractive
And subject to sudden enhancement, swirling, and diminution -
In the equivalents of passion, enchantment and murmuration -
Such that may one reasonably talk about quantum infatuation.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Quietly I Catch Its Presence

The morning is one of the most glorious:
The sunlight is making surfaces shine
Transmuting their forms to treasures
Such that presence and beauty align.

Do what you must restless relentless time
To take away the lightness for shadow:
This pure sunlit scene will always abide
And I will protect it from foreshadow.

Time cannot devour this bright circumstance:
Aside the lion's paws, the tiger's jaws,
Like the Phoenix it is immune from fears
And will always signify existence.

Quietly I catch its presence then
And trace its beauty with a golden pen.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Rakiura Wren [for Sheila Natusch]

Diminutive, sticky-beak bird questing
Hopping hither along the window frame
Inquiring into life - looking, tapping
Always wide-eyed and eager ... spin-drift tame.

No housing-keeping for you Rakiura wren
No offspring to mind other than your books:
Only the shingle-wash as it breaks again
And the sky clearing snagged cloud bait hooks

The scream of the gulls and their shrill arising
Spinifex, sand tussock, native musk ... flax
Raukawa dolphins and whales surfacing
The whip of the wind with its foremast lash

The songs of the straits and the lost islands
Brought to reflection with claw-pen hands.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Reconciliation

The trouble is:

Our understanding of space-time,
And gravity in particular,
Is built from Einstein's equations of general relativity,
Whereas the extreme conditions of the very early universe
Can only be described by quantum mechanics -

No one knows how to reconcile the two

And as Rovelli has explained:

'The sun bends space around itself
And the Earth does not turn around it because of a mysterious force
But because it is racing directly in a space which inclines,
Like a marble that rolls in a funnel.
There are no mysterious forces generated at the centre of the funnel;
It is the curved nature of the walls which causes the marble to roll.

...

In short, the general theory of relativity
Describes a colourful and amazing world where universes explode,
Space collapses into bottomless holes,
Time sags and slows near a planet,
And the unbounded extensions of interstellar space
Ripple and sway like the surface of the sea'.

Just so are the mysteries
Of our relationships
Where spun by an austere imperative like love
We find colourful and amazing worlds
Where rainbows shimmer
As suns shine
And when it is lost
Time slows and the unbounded
Miseries of loneliness
Diffuse endlessly left untouched.

As for quantum mechanics

It seems that all exists in a haze of probability
So that we have a certain chance of being
At Point A
Another chance of being at Point B...
Ad infinitum.
And what is true of mass
Is also true of a particle's other properties,
Like its momentum, energy and spin
Such that there will always be imprecision -
As this is a fundamental property.

So my stars
My loved ones
I might never have found you
In the crowd
And my universe might never have become.

So my insights
My understandings
Might have been forever mute,
Out of place, out of time
And my heart and thoughts
Unreconciled.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Reflections On Island Bay

I live in a house with plenty of glass
So that vistas and perspectives and mirages
Are part of every day in plain sight -
Grandeur stretched across and beyond the little town.

I often rise early - as dawn's gold gloves
Finger the rims of the Rimutakas
And the stars start to fade,
Spilt like gemstones from the robber sun.

And Pencarrow and Baring Head,
Like jewels that have dropped to earth,
Sparkle on the steel grey cloths of the headlands
As fold after fold wraps back from shadow.

And the Bay below is still or wild or fierce
And though this may seem incongruous
And un-poetic, the blue frontage and night-long
Glare of the Fu Xian Takeaway retreats.

...

Skylines distorted and re-aligned by the windows -
A slice of the Orongorongo ridgeline matched
With the Oku Street Reserve; with the horizon
Levelled and the sea picking up the quilt.

The gap across to the Seaward Kaikouras
Shows no mountains, touches no new edges
But the reddening evening sky holds clouds
That hint of land, and I swear I see the sea beneath.

...

Rinsing glasses in the late evening at the sink
The lights of Island Bay are mirrored
In the windows that enfold my dreamtime
And the cars buzz across the glass and bolt.

Houses and streets spark against the hillside
A second world refracted in the panes -
Like a hobbit village, glowing with hearths,
Open to a visitation from the wizard.

...

And I am here, an oakenshield with a grey beard
And my straw Stetson hat bannered 'New Zealand'
On the black band - set and ready to retake treasure
From the pendants that flicker on the dragon's back -

And feast a summer's eve on paua fritters,
Spring rolls, and fish and chips in Shorland Park.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Reflections On The Arab World - So Much Lost

In the beginning the word made man
Keening for Eden where it all began -
Bargain a son for a better life
But bleed the ram in sacrifice.

Forsaking hunts and herds and skins
For riverside cities where science begins
Growing corn to the water's edge
Finding a founder in rush and sedge

Tablets and marks in mud as token
Pictures to sign where words are broken
Back from the desert the prophet utters
What scribes from Byblos seal in letters.

All revealed and then recorded
The covenant that God awarded
All concealed and then discarded
It only heals the broken-hearted.

So many cities but so much lost
So many pyres where books are tossed
So empires rise and empires fall
Divine the writing on the wall.

...

Our barber here in Island Bay
Is a neat little man from Iraq
Who is a lapsed Moslem
Because he likes bacon and booze:
I get to say: 'shukran kteer'
And he says: 'ma'a salama'.

And this morning I talked to May
Who runs the Blue Belle cafe
And is a Maronite from Zahlé
Whose sad dark eyes weep for home:

I get to say: 'shukran kteer'.
And she says: 'ma'a salama'.

It sets me thinking about the time I spent
In the Middle East back in the 1970s:

...

Zapping across the pitch-black Green Line,
In war-broken Beirut -
With a friend I met having coffee on shari' al-hamra -
In his backfiring jalopy during a cease fire
To visit a crêperie in Jounieh
Risking it all for a taste of life.

...

Negotiating a road block around a sleepy sentry
With a friend at in Beiteddine and being shot at
Only to be redeemed when a column
Of Druze army trucks came into view
And the firing stopped as the
Officer inspected our passports.

...

Stealing a weekend in Jerusalem
With a lovely curly-headed English nurse
And being buzzed past the Silver Star
In Beit Lehem where Jesus was born
By a Greek Orthodox Monk who was clearly
'Majnoon' beyond the point of crazy.

...

And spending time in the Gulf States

Half wisely - on reclaiming sand from the harbour
For industrial estates or developing
A milk-recombining plant and dairy
That used the emir's air-conditioned
Friesians as a selling gimmick.

...

Or sleeping out under a crescent moon
On the flat roof of the Authority offices
In the terraces or zhors of the Jordan Valley
Debating with my Arab friends
The merits of dehydrating irrigated tomatoes
For paste while the cities parched.

...

Or Damascus as it used to be
A glimmering but dusty Parisian jewel
And a trip to North East Syria
To the Caliphate where Halabiye or Fort Zenobia
Had been built as an outpost on the Euphrates
By the Romans - and left deserted.

...

And living in Dokki and Zamalek in Cairo
Troubled with heart's unease from loss
And seeing a little girl twirl before me,
Dress and no knickers, on the footpath at El-Gabalayah
Then being swept by an invisible force to
Smack against a bus and lie broken and lifeless.

...

And returning to an apartment block
With its dark steps in the centre of Cairo
Trying to find Clea in the confusion

Finding the right door but missing the right floor:
Starched crisp sheets tousled in Crete
And walls paved with mosquitoes in Mamoura.

...

And back further in the 1960s:

About camping with our Land Rover
In the grounds of Mena House near Cairo
And the yard of the Coptic Cathedral
At Sohag under the auspices of the archbishop -
And one of my fellow student adventurers
Casually squashing a scorpion under his sandal.

...

And how there used to be a Barclay's Bank
In the main street in Tobruk
And we tried to get photographs
Of a thermos flask in an unusual place
Among the totally deserted grandeur of Leptis Magna -
Where the August sun furnaced and forged.

...

And how my mind died to fragments in Tunis
Laid low by sunstroke and dehydration,
Moving into a nightmare limbo land
As the gates closed and the seas retreated
Only to recover to copious draughts of lime cordial
And the wolfing of fresh fig jam on baguettes.

...

Of trying to set to rights more recently
Now time is slipping underneath my feet:

When I returned full of good intentions
Bitter among the lemon trees at Marna House
In Gaza pondering the devil of a state
Of peace without promise, meanness without ends
Presaging dead children swaddled in white cloth:

'Shukran kteer - ma'a salama.'

Where will I find you my lost world
That youth's sweet scented text should close?

With Durrell in Alexandria?

'I have been thinking about the girl
I met last night in the mirror:
Dark on the marble-ivory white:
Glossy black hair:
Deep suspiring eyes in which one's glances sink
Because they are nervous, curious...'

Or with Cavafy - burning leaves?

'Don't mourn your luck that's failing now,
Work gone wrong, your plans
All proving deceptive — don't mourn them uselessly.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
Say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.
Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say
It was a dream, your ears deceived you:
Don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.'

Or perhaps with the Prophet Ghibran
Weighing impulses and the impetuous:

'The devastating wars which destroyed empires
Were a thought that existed in the mind of an individual.
The supreme teachings that changed the course of humanity
Were the ideas of a man whose genius became distinct.
A single thought build the Pyramids,
Founded the glory of Islam

And set ablaze the library at Alexandria

And all I love, may verse confide
A deeper truth mere breath may hide.

'Books are written in Cairo,
Published in Beirut and read in Baghdad'
Was the old saying - and before that
There used to be a library in Alexandria.

...

And who tried to burn so many truths?
Was it the ruthlessness of the pagan Emperors Caesar or Aurelian?
Or the mobs of the Christian Patriarch Pope Theophilus?
Or the Muslim army of Amr ibn al `Aas ordered by Caliph Omar?

So many cities but so much lost
So many pyres where books are tossed
So empires rise and empires fall
Writing must weigh and measure all.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Reflections On The World Refugee And Illegal Immigration Crisis

WITH EARTH OF MISERY BEYOND

These frolicked aisles of bling, these spoilt spots
Of worth and property, fenced and barred -
Heavenly consumer paradises -
Fastnesses armed for the fortunate
Against immigration with the writ of law,
These lucky breeds of men, these wealthy worlds,
These gated homes in global misery,
Which exclude by wall and strict patrol
As with a moat defensive to a keep,
Against the entry of aspiring hands, -

These blessed spots - the democratic lands.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

'Retard The Sun With Gentle Mist'

Let me watch you walk on alone
The dawn is rising, darkness gone:
The day will bring a closer death
And both must take a lesser path

'Retard the sun with gentle mist
Enchant the land with amethyst'
That we may sip and taste again
The anise dew and absinthe rain

But as you turn to bid farewell
Invoke the amaranthine spell
That we may drink in day-break's care
And not be taken drunkard there.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Returning From The Land Of Youth

There was a time and place no smile was feigned.
Once there was neither change nor death
In the land where youth and beauty reigned.
Each joy was blessed in kindly merry breath

All colours bright and gemstones fiery
Each fear felt lightly, careless then to harm,
No rules or law too strict, no task too weary
Bright and quick the eye to every spell and charm.

This Isle of Apple Trees, the better Eden,
Where the fruits of life and joy were hung
All now wasted, it cannot come again,
Except in mind's eye and the lilt of song.

So Oisín journeyed back and touched the past
And all was lost in dissolution at the last.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Returning To Miyanoshita.

Young Lieutenant Fujita has returned
In the early dawn to his village Miyanoshita.
His commander lent him his favourite mare
To make the trip across the mountains -
Slowly making his way through the mist
To his homecoming.

It was a boy who caught the train to Yokohama
In his navy greatcoat, buttons shining, kitbag packed -
But now a man returns from his duty to the Emperor.
How will he tell the village mayor of his service?
And speak to his own family - of steel melting as shells landed -
Of the losses of his friends?

He swam 18 miles to shore from the Hitachi Maru
When it was blown apart by Russian gunships
After spies had disclosed that it transported
A high calibre cannon that could win Port Arthur.
The morning is cold - when will he turn again
To seek his unmarked grave in Manchuria?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Returning To The Farm

No quay waits there - I will not build a ship
To reach that disadvantageous land.
It has no need of me, aged and paltry
As I am - its shores will not welcome me.
It is no country for old men it seems -
Neither those past, nor passing nor to come.

Rather I will saddle up the spent bay pony
And take him back to the lanes that we loved
Kicking up a canter along the verge
Past the hawthorn hedges under the oaks
Not seeking Ithaca or Byzantium
But homecoming to the farm's fields.

I have learned the names of many places
And travelled skies and highways aplenty
But when I was young the world was mine
There in the cowsheds, lofts and stockyard
And it will be well enough to amble back
To greet the boy who waits and never left.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Reverie

Summer came today
With sun bright across golden gorse and white arum lilies,
Glistening and glossy in the native Bush,
And flat with shadows amid the grey and beige
And white houses on the hillsides below.

In the morning I had sat
In a kind of ancient reverie
Half sleeping – half non-thinking
While I avoided the tasks
That I had assigned.

And I pondered on how,
Growing old, I had become more like a cat
Looking now for chances
To sun myself and slow the pulse
Of life and just be.

The thing with the cats though
Is that many dreams later
They can bound up and kill
While I am left to track day-dreams
And bring them to bay.

The musing become laziness
I finally set to planting some flax
And to weeding the terraced garden
Below the steps, watched by my favourite cat
Who made her disdain all too clear.

Occasionally I would throw weeds down
To the Bush below or wave a dead stalk
And the little tabby would get the wind up,
Her tail whip-staff steering
A galleon that had sighted pirates.

Tonight no doubt she will raid the Bush
For field mice and skinks
Or the early nestlings of blackbirds

But all that I will have to show
Is soil under my nails and these lines.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Riders To Avalon

Beautiful flaxen-haired one
Daughter of the Sea-King
Riding alone from the beach
Outlined on the hillside
As the sun sets westward.

Spindrift lady of the wave-crests
On your father's white horse
Chased inland by the deer hunters
The protectors of the shores
Brought to bay by their leader.

Too late in chastened hesitation
To break the encirclement
Fascinated by the strangers
So much like and so much not
In the meeting's enchantment.

Pale princess, fairy and bewitched
At the mercy of a love of the land
Taken aback by the hero youth -
The bright bronze bridle seized
That she should come to fastness.

But her horse stalled and would not move
At which, while holding her gaze he
Mounted the sure-swift steed
To take its reins and she for fear
Grasped his waist as the stallion flinched.

Then the wondrous horse Enbarr,
Shaking his mane, free now of curb and rein
Bolted abruptly, swiftly for the shore
Galloping down to the broad, dry beach
Thence into the sun-dipped shallows.

Until his furious hooves, plashing the surf
Bore his prize of lovers to the open sea
And across its waves and wastes

To Avalon the Blossomed Isle of Apples -
Home to the mares and fillies of his following.

It was thus the riders were borne to Eden,
Neve the pearl-pale high-born lady of the sea
And Oisín the land-guardian, hunter and hero -
Set down at last on the gold-screed beach
All former longings faint and only scarce recalled.

O treacherous and self-willed steed
Tremulous, headstrong and untrammelled
Bearing heedlessly, endlessly into the night
Those lost to the ride's enticements
Amidst the sea-spray moonlit storm

How many others have you deceived
Coupled by your breakneck homeward flight
Thighs and limbs locked against your flanks
Aching for release from clouded blissful pain
In the headlong riding of the tides of love?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ridge Attack

Whistle ready for the boots' clambering
At the off ... over the top ... shell-fire led:
An unfamiliar distance singing ... stinging ...
Bright from the wire and the ridge ahead.

The One-Pip's yelling, revolver firing
The sergeant curses and takes a fall
Stumbling forward stifles rifles' aiming
It's no longer the time for one for all.

Uncoordinated mindless chaos
Blood raised and spilled in clamorous terror
Emptied with killing, eddied with loss
A vortex of scrambling, fumbling error.

The company now ragged and tiring
Orders forgotten as the watch hands still,
With losses so heavy it's time for retiring
No chance today of retaking the hill.

Back in the trench, rum and stretchers out
Bound for the wounded in No-mans-land
They'll not get far from the first redoubt
The task is too hard for the war-worn hand.

At nightfall, sounds from the darkening lands
As the broken pray and the dying pass
The fingers of numbers of failing hands
Grasping and scratching tear-stained glass.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Riverton Dawn

I had been reading about Nietzsche
In 'The Consolations of Philosophy'
And woke early pondering
His strange walrus moustache,
Clumsy way with women, and the causes of his early death.

So I went into the purple blazoned dawn
Took my camera and tried to catch the ebbing night
As it cleared across the estuary
And the moon still silvered the mirror
Of the calm water behind the harbour bar -

And the lights of the little town
Led me down towards reflection,
Where walking on the grass strip
In my bare feet in that most beautiful of mornings,
I squished a dog's droppings.

Strangely there was no irritation
And as I cleaned my sole on the grass
Descended towards the bridge
And said good morning to the sheep
In the empty lot over the road

I clicked.

But gradually
That magic subsided as the moments
Between dark and light merged into colour.

It wasn't bouncing out into the Alpine mists
To stake a claim on the next striven ridge
Accompanied by a hound named 'Ego' -
But there was a moment of becoming

A destined over-man
Even if I had my feet in clay.

Rocky Time For Poor Conversationalist

[Bodhidharma's 'Four Essential Practices' versified]:

Practice of Retribution of Enmity

Having given up the fundamental
And followed the superficial
I have engendered much injustice
The evil of my past calamities has ripened
And I have left behind limitless harm:
Therefore I accept my sufferings.

Practice of Acceptance of Circumstances

The changing seas of circumstances
Have brought forth consequences:
Everything that is desirable will fail
And all joys are transient.
Therefore I seek a steady mind
Without increase or decrease

Practice of Non-craving

To be attached to things is delusion
I will try to rest my heart and ask for nothing
All existences are empty
Both merits and darkness follow in step.
I will set fire to the house
And find calm in the ruins.

Practice of Abiding by the Dharma

Though the self stains sentient beings
Instances are emptied by non-clinging.
There is no self in the dharma:
I will practice without miserliness
I will practice with generosity
I will practice without hesitation and regret.

Room 11-01

Another good man made love here

To his chaste and ever-loving wife,

In room 11-01 in the Moscow Ritz Carlton:

But the video held little spice for Vladimir -

Just kisses and caresses Chicago-style

Of a beautiful black woman and her man:

A prelude of sassy foreplay and passion -

A goodnight farewell of caring smiles.

...

'Not to worry Sir there is something else -

Your Presidential Security Service

Kept filming less salubrious encounters

During the 2013 Miss Universe Contest -

And in this very same suite we struck gold

When a real estate con man and swindler

Who later became President of the USA,

Made a special point of booking the room'.

'Watch as three of our girls from the FSB

Turn up as requested and peel back the covers

To delight the client, and please each other,

Before releasing the contents of their bladders.'

...

And this strange fellow celebrated hatred there

Reinforcing his insecurities in degeneracy,

In room 11-01 in the Moscow Ritz Carlton:

Becoming hostage with this video to Vladimir -

The subject of almost unutterable scorn

Among the dolls who donated their urine -

Playing perversion and deviance Vegas-style,

Netted into the gulag of subservient golems.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Roses And Wine In The Golden Weather

The brown cut grass on the estate lies rough
Beneath the bent and dusty olive trees
And welcome swallows lee-ho, pitch and luff
The fading light to hunt the sun-crushed leas.

So are the vintners poets to our tongues
With intense fruits from spicy forest floors
Sweet-scented pallettes ringed with Côte-d'Or tones
And berry truffle shades when sipping soars?

And are the artists poets to our eyes
Deep-delving Provençal perfection
Where iceberg roses brushstroke eves
And life must still to light's refraction?

So must words such revelations trust
That evening settles doubts with kindly dusk.

[High Summer 2015 at the Brodie Estate, Martinborough]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Rough And Blatant

The Rough Beast - the Blatant Beast
Has appeared in the ordinary places
Morphed in the supermarket car park
Transpired in the Macdonalds drive-thru.

It wasn't what we expected
Of strange times, interesting times.
Who could guess the shape of anxiety
Was so much piss, so little vinegar -

That what was eating us
Was more like a gigantic tendrilled fungus
Grown humungous though hyphae
Fine filaments massing enormous bulk

Or colonies of Argentine Ants
That cooperate and combine in vast numbers
Their sheer aggregation and huge appetite
Betraying the small individual mandible -

That what was bothering us
Was above all the product of proliferation
The inevitable spillage of profusion
The natural consequences of excess?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Rough Sleeper

Life itself is an unfavourable condition
And God himself is in rags at the doorway.
None can enter - the threshold is barred
Queue if you like, but you won't get in.

The doors are closed, the windows shuttered
Try explaining to the bouncer or the doorman
That you are an artist, a musician, a writer ... a poet
It won't work, they have heard it before.

It is not as though there is no heaven
It is more that everything is there on the pavement.
Late in the early hours the old man will sleep
And in his dreams things will open up.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Rounds With Li Bai In The Tavern

SAME OLD TIMES FRIEND

The portents are troubling
Armies of the poor march
Towers are raised in defence
Silent spring to empty harvest

Quiet ashes, grey embers
The phoenix chicks are gone
Their first songs are mute
Presaging interesting times

The pebble strikes
The bamboo thicket
Somewhere a z'tick
Nicks the sapling lath

Early summer
The lilies have passed
The flax is unfolding
Hatchlings and butterflies

Sinking his goods

Into the pond
The old merchant
Found a mirror

So much sadness
In the ten thousand things
Gaining so much
We have lost everything

Falling off a boat
Into the Yangtse
Taken by the river
Embracing the moon

Toppling into the water
Did you catch the moon?
Now the surface is still
The moonbeams still swarm

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Sailing Cook Strait

The white-sailed 25-footer
Out from Evans Bay for the weekend
Makes steady way across the Strait
Heading for Queen Charlotte Sound.

Her mast shoulders the 15-knot wind
Dark swells kick up defiant sprays:
Heading on she gives no quarter
Heedless of challenge or safe harbour.

She is ready for a rumble
Standing off or making ground:
White knife slicing fume blue steel
Striking sparks of sunlight.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Sappho's Welcome For Anaktoria

So you return, my repentant beauty
And I deny my kisses and my lyre:
I will match no notes to your entreaty
Our songs long since consigned to fire.

No lyrics left for us my worthless maid
My heart once shaken now is still:
My lips no longer voice the love I vowed
As oft they did before you played me ill.

...

Such indifference cannot count for much
A fever blush now runs upon my cheek -
I hear a strain that longs for finger's touch
The music tells me you are mine to seek.

Eros plucks the petals from the flower
So come once more into my arms this hour
Let us segue desire's awoken power
Breached walls and heaven's broken tower.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Scarlet Scandal

Dawn arose and left the Ocean sleeping
Smiling now for secrets she was keeping
With roseate cheeks she braves the light
Blushing deep to mark her night's delight
Her lantern tints her crimson dress
So hem in hand she feigns distress
And saffron trimmings o'er the hillsides pour
As golden shafts spill out from daylight's door.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Scrape Of The Cock

What dire offence from am'rous causes springs,
What mighty interests rise from trivial things,
I sing—This verse to sleazy Barnaby is due:
This, ev'n Turnbull may vouchsafe to view:

Slight is the subject, but too right in many ways
To keep close tabs on sporty interns that he lays -
And question what careless urges could compel
This Kiwi Reffo to knock up a Dinkum Belle?

And ask what stranger cause, yet unexplor'd,
Made Vikki not be sure paternity's secured?
In tasks so bold, can smutty men and sluts engage,
Let's change the sheets and turn the page!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Seeking Blessing

Saint Marina of Antioch be praised:
That this may gain your intercession
And we who love you be delivered
From the devil dragon and temptation.

You took the evil one and threw him down
Jamming your left foot on his scaly neck,
Pushing his slavering maw to the ground,
Demanding 'yield you scabrous wretch! '

Quickly he twisted - and then shook free -
Taking you whole within his ravenous jaws,
Swallowing your sacred body entirely,
At which your holy virtue rived his guts.

Breaker of the monstrous demon's substance:
Pray for us that we may live in heavenly grace.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Separate

'No man is an island'.
True - though some come close.

Amid racist hysteria
And panic about contagion
In 1903
A Chinese gardener
Named Kim Lee
Was marooned alone
On a tiny islet
Off Somes Island
In Wellington Harbour
New Zealand
Accused of having leprosy.

Left to live in an open cave
Given packing cases
From which to make furniture
His foodstuffs were delivered
By the lighthouse keeper
In a rowboat
Or by means of a jury-rigged
Overhead wire
If seas were rough.

Kim didn't last long
Before the howling wind
The isolation and the terror
And his TB did for him.

Today the sun was shining on
Mokopuna Island
And I thought of Liu Xia
Under house arrest in China
Now for eight years.

And her husband Liu Xiaobo
Who died in custody,
Hospitalised like Pablo Neruda,

Incarcerated for speaking out
For simply affirming
That any authority
Which creates or condones
Enmity has no legitimacy

And that freedom of speech
Is basic to being human,
Being the mother of decency:
That we are all the less
If we are not involved
In caring about its erosion.

Accused only of love and loyalty
In her isolation, Liu Xia says:
"There is nothing I fear now.
If I can't leave,
I'll just die at home.

Xiaobo has already left,
There is nothing in this world for me.
Dying is easier than living:
There is nothing simpler for me
Than to protest with death."

Does that make sense Kim?

Looking across from Days Bay
I was diminished by the islet
Of the island in the harbour
And the grief and anger
And guilt that separates us:
The remorseless grasping sea
Tearing away at compassion.

But addressing his wife
In statement to the court
In her enforced absence
Liu Xiaobo had this to say:

'I am full of regret
Become an insensate stone

In the wilderness
Whipped by fierce wind
And torrential rain
So cold none dares touch.

But my love for you
Though broken away
Is still part of the whole
And even if it is crushed
The dust will cling to you'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Shadow Fall

[For Jackie Trent (6 September 1940 – 21 March 2015)]

SHADOW FALL

Fifty years of shadows now have fallen
But the minding is recalled unbroken
Soft rain gently beating
Walking with only kisses spoken

It is winter now but wonder has not faded
Our lifetime love stays undefeated
Though clouds grow dark above
The light remains that love created

I no longer wonder what went wrong
Though lost and distant we still belong
And in my mind you come to me

To see how I've been faring every day
And watch the years pass on their way
So as my caring sets things to right
It gives life to you again in love and light.

There you are now my love
There you are now my love

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Sharing With Rembrandt

MUG SHOTS

Rembrandt van Rijn painted
Dozens of self-portraits
He liked a good face look.

Some of these were 'tronies'
Or mug shots -
'Selfies' without a smile.

But florid and pudgy
He was no oil painting
Most of the time

And as far as we know,
Thankfully, he never sat nude
For himself or his apprentices

'Saved As' to the Cloud on a Apple
Having given friends Permission
To 'Like' on Facebook.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

She Cried But She Could Do Nothing

There were other terrified children
Wounded - bloodied - brought
To seeing the reality that evil
Is everywhere and that love is
Ephemeral and always in need
Of renewal - and that hate
Can be more lasting than revulsion -
As told by those who insist
The day of individual security is past.

In the chaos of domestic terror
And the fear of foreign infiltration
The conditions are ripening
For making things new by force.
A self-perpetuating war for the future
Where the threat of surprise
Terror, sabotage and assassination
Arises within the masses themselves
Triggering the psychotic and deranged.

If you wish the sympathy of the broad masses,
You must tell them the crudest and most stupid things:
Tell them that liberty consists
Of one in five owning enough guns for every person
Tell them that success is the sole earthly judge
Of what is right and wrong and that
The victor will never be asked if he told the truth -
That human kindness is the expression of stupidity and cowardice -
That life never forgives weaknesses.

Popular support is the first element
Which is necessary for the creation of authority.
But an authority resting on that foundation alone
Is still quite frail, uncertain and vacillating.
Hence everyone who finds himself vested
With an authority that is based only on popular support
Must take measures to improve and consolidate
The foundations of that authority by the creation of force.
If popular support, power, and tradition are united together,

Then the authority based on them may be looked upon as invincible.

But then remember the young people seeking a life
Like 14-year-old Czeslawa Kwoka, tattooed 26947,
A Polish Catholic girl murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau
Deported and transported from the Zamosc region
To create Lebensraum for the Master Race.
And the photographs taken by Wilhelm Brasse
Who was forced to collaborate in this final solution:
"She was so young and so terrified.
The girl didn't understand why she was there
And she couldn't understand what was being said to her.

... this woman Kapo (a prisoner overseer)
Took a stick and beat her about the face.
The woman was just taking out her anger on the girl.
Such a beautiful young girl, so innocent.
She cried but she could do nothing.
Before the photograph was taken,
The girl dried her tears and the blood from the cut on her lip.
To tell you the truth, I felt as if I was being hit myself
But I couldn't interfere. It would have been fatal for me.
You could never say anything".

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Shelley's Sonnet For Theresa May

An obdurate robotic ruler dancing on a string -
Tories - the sparkles on an Eton Mess, all for show -
Immune to public scorn while muddying the spring -
Cozeners who neither see, nor feel, nor know -

Austerity a heist on which they've built their sway
An emptiness of empathy revealed -
They flaunt and fawn and then extend their stay
With massive laws - and liberties repealed.

All leech-like to their failing country cling
Blood-sucking liars in deed and reputation low -
A people bamboozled / conned with virtue veiled -
A government which should for God's Sake Go.

But given time the salt of sense and circumstance
Will plump and drop the slugs' inconsequence.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Ship Of Gold

Bright ship of gold under a silver mast
Are you safe to the twelve towns at last?
Have you come home from the green stone sea
Landing your wares at the crystal quay?

And are the markets now busy with trade
With filigree trinkets and jewels displayed
That each with his share will treasure that shore
And none go short as the stock comes to store?

Then let us settle by the side of the sea
And live out our lives in a fine white court
Amid the sapphire and jet stone tapestry
That the breakers and cliffs and spin drift wrought.

You promised me all this - I understood -
When the precious landfall came to good?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Shit Happens

Old monk shits himself in the dojo
A pebble hits the bamboo thicket:
In the sacred everything is profane
In the profane everything is sacred.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Short Sharp Script

She is small and perfect the young actor -
Playing the girl who runs down her friend /
And an attending mortuary doctor -
Avoiding a dissemblance to the end.

Perfect in the ceremony of art
Pleading for drama's rites with eloquence
Not looking for approval in each part
Oblivious to praise or recompense.

How do we know that her skill is perfect?
That what is revealed is the absolute -
That relatively there is no defect -
That what is intrinsic is resolute?

Her intuition unveils role, form and space -
All for truth and everything in its place.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Shot? So Quick, So Clean An Ending?

I hear from a friend that Wenlock Books is closing
And she has asked for a valedictory poem from me.

What to say?

More than 60 years ago now, a snub-nose round-top bus
Picked up my cousins and I from the village of Longville
And took us, part of a rowdy and excited group of youths
From the villages between Church Stretton and Much Wenlock,
To the 'Flix' on Saturday Night to see a Cowboys Western.

I'm not sure of the film - but I do remember the jostling and singing -
Not quite what A.E. Housman had in mind - he didn't do frolicking:

Right you guessed the rising morrow
And scorned to tread the mire you must;
Dust's your wages, son of sorrow,
But men may come to worse than dust.

Possibly, the Wenlock Cinema movie might have been 'Big Country'
In which Gregory Peck secretly breaks the stallion 'Old Thunder'
And challenges The Baddies for water rights from the 'Big Muddy'
After which he wins a stake-out six-shooter duel against Buck
And ends up marrying sweetheart Patricia after the Old Timers kill each other.

Perhaps A.E. would have provided a valedictory for the losers -
[Ignoring Gregory Peck's character the victorious James McKay]:

Far in a western brookland
That bred me long ago
The poplars stand and tremble
By pools I used to know.

And what of the bookshop?

"The sum of things to be known is inexhaustible, and however long we
read,
we shall never come to the end of our story-book."

Well that doesn't look so sure nowadays.

They came and were and are not
And come no more anew;
And all the years and seasons
That ever can ensue
Must now be worse and few.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Sketching In The Platypus

The Platypus is not monotonous
It's at the opposite extreme.
In fact it's quite preposterous,
This jumbled bush-land monotreme.

As with the curious brontosaurus
The platypus lays eggs
But is twenty meters shorter
And has stingers on its legs

The hippopotamus is perhaps analogous
In haunting stream and creek
Excepting an extra 4 tons gross
And any signs of fins or beak.

The whale shark, also relatively enormous
Shares sounding through its nose
But takes in plankton through a sluice
Discarding worms the sieving may disclose.

The elephant gives further room to pause
But diverges most dissimilarly
It does without wet fur or claws
And has big ears that radiate capillary.

It seems that likenesses are of little use
And similes just make plus the fuss
When sketching in the platypus.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

So Much Lost - The Arab World

In the beginning the word made man
Keening for Eden where it all began -
Bargain a son for a better life
But bleed the ram in sacrifice.

Forsaking hunts and herds and skins
For riverside cities where science begins
Growing corn to the water's edge
Finding a founder in rush and sedge

Tablets and marks in mud as token
Pictures to sign where words are broken
Back from the desert the prophet utters
What scribes from Byblos seal in letters.

All revealed and then recorded
The covenant that God awarded
All concealed and then discarded
It only heals the broken-hearted.

So many cities but so much lost
So many pyres where books are tossed
So empires rise and empires fall
Divine the writing on the wall.

...

So many cities but so much lost
So many pyres where books are tossed
So empires rise and empires fall
Writing must weigh and measure all.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Some Limericks For Melania And Donald Trump

Pity Melania Trump
Who was sculpted out of a stump:
This rough-cut clump
Was wooden to hump
And came down to earth with a thump.

O beauteous Melania
Our modern Cytherea:
An Aphrodite
In a rough-bark nightie
Become our sylvan Galatea.

Pygmalion searches the bare-trunked trees,
Getting wood from boles he sees:
He comes, he saws, he chops
And falls in love with what he lops -
Chipping 'such a dryad's not so hard to please'.

A girl called Melania from Slovenia
[A frontier forest or so from Transylvania]:
Was naughtier than Little Red Riding Hood
And turned a few tricks in the wood -
Winding up notching 1600 Pennsylvania!

The woodman saw a pussy up a tree,
No finer judge of cougar cats than he:
He had no need of love - just power -
Knowing that for him the good grew sour -
And so he carved a wooden kitty - isn't she pretty?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Song Of Everlasting Regret [for Hong Kong] ??? [??]

???

???????????????

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Song of Everlasting Regret

A certain Emperor longed for perpetual civil peace

And this he thought would be obtained by uniformity

Such that all would conform to his mandates of beauty -

Though there were those with integrity who swore loyalty

And averred that strength lay in difference and diversity

Bound by a common understanding of interdependence -

But for the most part, the majority feigned adherence,
Coquettish and purportedly delicate like Yang Guifei,
Their subservience presaged an empire drowned by the tide of history.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Sonnet For Ithaca

A little song will sound out fear and hope:
Play out the knots and ease away the rope
To fathom out the depths and rocky floor
To skirt the reefs and safely land to shore.

These are songs for which the Sirens yearn
And steal away to hear at Circe's court,
Leaving the furious breakers left unsung
And giving pass to those who dare the strait.

These are the songs to calm Charybdis
And assuage the mountainous oceans
Staving impending wreck and castaway
With mystic chants and lyre-played wave-spray charms.

And we the crew that served Odysseus well
Will sound all out in songs we sing and tales we tell.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Soul Taker - Judgment Day

What if that past should mute a life-end song?
It cast my heart, stranger, with darkest spell
And worse for years was nothing I could tell
Or ever bring myself to voice that wrong.

All along, down along, memories be
I still reassemble the terror of thee.
Poor old man acting the devil a spell
Molesting a child and leaving him hell.

Wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned
Though half-forgotten in a youngster's mind
All this and more left bare and lost behind
Peak a boo pops up when hopes unwind.

Poor old soul taker fumbling with fright
Will you be present at the world's last night?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Source Of Irritation

Sprung from the horse's arse or gouged by hooves
There is a stream of desperation
That carries fools on viewless wings of poesy
And stains their lips with inspiration.

Improbably feather-winged Pegasus
Equine aerodynamic stallion
You certainly farted or kicked up a fuss
Knocking a wet spot on Mt Helicon:

The later source of much irritation
By those who abjure the beaded bubbles
And consequent inebriation
Attributable to poetic fantasies -

Avoiding maddening draughts that might have been
'Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Spring Sunshine Plays With The Wind

Spring sunshine plays with the wind,

What thoughts come to mind?

Delight, like children at the beach

Playing tag - plashing the rippled edge.

Delight like the bushland birds,

Wheeling in joy - alert, newly paired.

Delight like the old man without regrets,

Free of the demons of success and failure,

Throwing a poem into the stream of time.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Stable Node

When the phone rings 12-thousand miles away
You don't quite know what to expect
As somebody finally picks up the receiver:
So it was a great relief to know that they
Were all alright and then to find that
Hollies Croft was flush with Aussie visitors -
My niece having come home for a spell from Brizzy
With her daughter Immy who adores England.

I know that feeling so well as you adjust
To the pale-green lens of Constable's pince-nez
And the mizzle-drizzle that makes the oaks bulk out,
Picking up the smell of swaths of new cut grass,
Listening to the song of blackbirds and whoop of the cuckoo -
Everything suffused with a sort of crazy glamour
That comes from an absolute delight in the old ordinary
Suddenly rediscovered from a Rainy-Day Box of Treasures.

While I chatted to my niece, one Antipodean to another,
The conversation rapidly drifted to blackberry and apple pie
Though she had been charged with preparing an Oriental dish
For dinner that involved something or other with coconut vinegar -
But both of us had to set aside memory and reconciliation
As I had to make sure that I asked about her father
Who is a bit middling, knocking on as he is on 83
And who gets a bit bothered one road and another.

John was as well as you could be expected Di assured me
As at first one and then a second grandfather clock
Began to chime eleven o'clock in the morning though it
Was coming to the end of that self-same day in Wellington -
There being two clocks because my sister had inherited
The antique clock left by her grandmother Gladys when she died
And been bequeathed the 'twin' from her mother Meg when she died
Not having the heartlessness to choose between them.

And I knew that in my mind's eye, I could walk away from the oak chest
In the recess where the phone was kept, out through the front door
Onto the sandstone forecourt and be bedazzled by white and red roses

And all manner of wildly thriving plants in-flower from the garden centre,
Looking to where my older boys used to play forts and shops in the hay-bays -
And that, now that the hayshed had been taken down,
If the day had been clearer, I would have been able to catch a glimpse
Of Beeston Crag - as I had from beside my mother's deathbed at Crewe Hospital.

[For when she had been first struck down she had been taken to Leighton
Or what we always knew as Letton - like we knew Cholmondeley
As Chumley and Cholmondeston as Chumston before our betters put us right -
With the new hospital being less than half a mile from Hoolgrave Manor farm
Where my stepfather grew up between Church Minshull and Minshull Vernon.
'A man who loved the land' as I said in the Foreword to my PhD Thesis
On the Northern Territory Beef Industry - a man of whom our neighbour
Fred Elwood used to say - carrying top-weight with a skin-full after Beeston
Auction:

'Horace - I like him'].

And my niece chatted about how it would be lovely to keep the old place on
Though as we were both well aware it was not really ancient
Having been, along with another two fine houses in the terrace,
Constructed in the footprint of farm's old cow sheds or shippens.
Not that it's history of less than thirty years was uneventful
With all manner of family gatherings in grief or celebration
Like my lovely old 'Wharfedale Terrier' Rangi straining every fibre
To entertain my young sons in a ball-throw even though she was more than
past-it.

All of which set me musing on how time can heal and make things right
From what had been a very crimped and damaged family
For my sister and I, what with the loss of our grandfather David in the First War
And the death of our own father Jay in the Royal Air Force in 1943.
I told her how much the house was loved and that it would be classed
By sociologists as a 'stable node behaviour setting' - but she was off to lay the
table
For lunch and when I let slip that one of my poems had been selected
For a 2017 National Anthology she added kindly: 'if it makes you happy Luv'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Steel Enema

It is no secret - what passes
Just thunder in the thickets -
Guns - wild anger - a gold mine.

Confused by deception
And predatory gangs
Capital flows to their pockets.

Greedy dogs and black sheep
Which tail is wagging now?
Tufts of hair or hanks of wool?

According to the creed
Meanness is not a vice
Now that's the secret.

In America there is gold
And coal and iron ore aplenty
For both greedy and unfed mouths.

But it is no place for dreams
Every second counting the \$
The rivers turning to dust.

Everything is linked by tracks
Covering moaning sleepers
Rails that carry off - carry out.

The trains whistle and rush by
Leaving the work crews in the shit
Tending to the miles passed over.

And greed is the locomotive
Of banditry - a steel enema -
Can't you hear the farting?

Come the swept-gold sunrise
The rich will have feasted
And be ready to gorge again.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Sticking Point

Poems are like a Pooh Stick -
You hunt around for something gnarly
That can be recognized
But that irrepressibly
Has pretension towards fluid dynamics.

When you have found your stick
Pare off the redundant twigs carefully
Leaving only what's designed
So that inevitably
It projects personal ergonomics.

Then take a cast and launch the stick -
Run across the bridge eagerly
To see it bob and broach the other side
Hopefully incredibly
Taking leeway free of snags and hitches.

Too often though the stick sticks
Stuck against a barrier irritatingly
Dead in the water or tugged aside
Though ineffably

The wise old stream flows free and wide.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Stirrings In The Gruel Sea - For The North Pacific Gyre And Its 100 Million Tons Of Garbage

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The void will not impede the reveller;
Things cast aside; an empty tale is told;
Banality is tossed upon the world,
The speck-filled tide is loosed, and everywhere
The purity of Eden's shore is littered;
The best lack understanding, while the worst
Regale in pleased apathy.

Surely some retribution is at hand;
Surely a Second Fall is now at hand.
A new exile mocking our Garden Genesis
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the seas of earth
A shape of plastic drifts where listless currents run
A haze blank and pointless as drunken daybreak fun
Is moving its dark slime, while all about it
Reel shadows of the flocking starveling birds.

The darkness deepens yet again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of slop have marred the deep
Have made the ocean Bumble's ladle,
And we the silly, greedy festive crew at last
Slouch to perdition and still ask for more.

[with acknowledgement to William Butler Yeats]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Stonestacker

He lies on the footpath looking up
Admiring his handiwork stalagmites -
Pinnacles of beach rocks raised high
Composed of smooth stones super-glued together.
Does he see any more than you see
After you have finished your briefing paper
For the Minister or the plumber sees
After he stands back to admire his new tap fittings,
Or I see after I 'finish' a writing and move on
Calmed, more content and self-satisfied
To a cup of coffee or to watch an old episode
Of Midsomer Murders or flick for sentimental reasons
To the Last of the Summer Wine -
Or perhaps hit Channel 89 'BBC World'
To get a gutful of saddening and sickening events?
That said, I drive my wife nuts looking for relevance
Trying to make a difference, trying to save the world:
'Just relax', she says, 'the world does not want to be saved'.
But is an inherent property of mankind
That we seek to create, to leave a legacy,
Conscious as we are of our limited lease
On life and the necessity or desirability
Of generativity and passing something down to posterity
'No stone unturned', as Moses would have said.
Who is to say then that the shoreline pinnacles
Do not represent something profound
And that their builder with his infinite care
Is not adjusting the very foundations to our benefit?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Stop

Somebody just flew
A full plane of passengers
Into a mountain
Proving that if
You fly a plane into a mountain
It will stop suddenly
And disintegrate.

But as the new day came
I looked out to Baring Head
And saw the lamp
Of the light house winking
Protecting the ships from the rocks
Proving that if
You are careful

And let your mind

Come to a full stop .

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Summat Not Reet

Words have been bothering me.
Sometime back I wrote a poem
About returning to the farm
Where I spent my growing up
Among the intricate expanses of the Cheshire Plain.

I talked of returning to the cowsheds
And stockyards that I knew as a boy
Sixty or more years ago now -
When I really meant the shippons
And stackyards of Corner Farm.

I thought that it was better
To look forward and please
The occasional new reader -
When I really wanted to talk
With the past and of what was gone.

And hearing the poem
Read by a robot Siri
In American on PoemHunter
I feel sorry for the botty lady
When she talks about 'co -sh- edds'
As oo flummoxes the word.

I will go back and please the past -
To hell with the odd understanding.
I love the word shippon
And it needs my comfort now
That most of them have been converted
Into £500,000-plus swanky terraced housing.

The standard etymology is that
It derives from 'sheep pen'
But I find this unsatisfactory -
Preferring derivation from
The dialect word 'shape'
Much used to denote careful purpose.

'Tha' mun shape up lad'
Was a common admonition
And 'ee dunna shape up gradely'
Was a chastening criticism -
So, I am afraid that I can't let this go
And will have to straighten things.

And it makes sense that the cattle
Should have been enclosed with careful purpose -
Though animal husbandry is a thing of the past
Now that money and morality have been split
And carelessness is regarded as cost-cutting
And a necessary adjunct to profit and greed.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Take The Chance

Karma is a bitch - it comes back at you -
Nothing lacking, no safe space, losing ground
It comes right back at you - false becomes true.
What goes around, goes around, goes around.

Time is always short, time to make amends.
If we want a better life, then we must change -
Pacing our responses after challenge -
Right thinking - whatever bad karma sends.

What is given light must endure burning
But true light always shines above the flames:
Answer for your life, you only live once
Kill sequels - break sequences - take the chance.

'Live as if you were living a second time
As though you had acted wrongly the first time'

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Tane And Hine-Nui-Te-Po: The Maori Legend Concerning The Permanence Of Death

May verse seed hope in death,
Being spent in bliss of love,
Into that great darkness
Where Tane came in dread
To seek redemption and redress.

Formed from the earth
His wife gave birth
And their daughter
The girl of the flashing dawn
Was born in sunlit splendor

But he took this daughter
As his slave and plaything
Until shame caught her
And she fled and sought
The spirit world.

And at its gate
She stopped her lover-father
Bidding him return
To care for their children

Saying: 'I will see them again
They will come to me in due time'
So death itself was born
And she became the night.

But Tane grew angry,
As those he loved were claimed,
Hating the Dark Child-Mother
But lusting for her still

Then he sought to enter her,
A once and final act,
This time to claim her forever,
Becoming a penis for the task,

Penetrating so deep
He would leave through her mouth
To void the curse.

But vain as he was,
He had summoned the birds
To watch his vengeance
And the little pied tumbler
Or pi'waka'waka laughed,
Waking Hine-nui-te-Po
Who slew Tane with her thighs

And she appointed
Thenceforth the tiny fantail
As her messenger.

Then was mankind lost.

Now as we seek release
Each little death quietens
To an after-silence
Sacred to the dark daughter
And only poetry betrays
Our longings and regrets
For that ever-risen dawn
Still misted from her breath.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Tau

A young carpenter would use a T-brace
Nowadays to lock support and house beams
But then tenons, joints, pins and mortices
Were crafted to close together the seams.

Regardless, the workman crafts the lattice
To set out the frame on the foundation
Working with care under the open sky
To bind together design and creation.

Set in such a fashion to bear loads
With ribs of joists readied to carry boards
The body of the building can be floored
Topping out spaces - closure the reward.

And each upright speaks of the mystery
The arcane letters of the bridging cross
Tau, iota, eta - and Christ's mastery
At last of death itself and the soul's loss.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Te Amo Mi Chorizo

FOR MARIA

That I had been kinder would have been better now
You like the driven snow, me like the driven sleet.
Your mother told you: 'Older men have sharp teeth
Beware of lust and desire and the storms beneath -
Cuidado con lujuria y el deseo'.

That I had been kinder, it would have been better so
You with your angelic freckled face and flame-red hair:
'I will fill you with babies and leave you in a council flat'.
And you pouted and held back tears: 'Don't be malo:
Te amo mi chorizo - I love you silly sausage'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Te Kahu - The Nz Swamp Hawk

E hui o nga kahu
Ko te whenua i haroa e te kahu:
Let those of noble intention
Meet in the lands soared over by the hawk.

Te haaro o te kahu ki tuawhakararere
E hoa ma, ina te ora o te tangata:
Let us view the future with the insight of a hawk -
My friends, this is the essence of life!

Te kahu i runga whakaaorangi ana e ra,
Te pera koia toku rite inawa e!
The hawk keeps watch from the heavens -
Let us do the same, inawa e!

Me haere i raro i te kahu korako
Manaaki whenua, manaaki tangata:
Give us the keen discernment of the hawk -
Let us care for the land, care for the people.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Tell Me Everything Is Now Forgiven

The needle tears a hole in every dream

And there are livid scars that can't be seen

The cloth once white - its threads now give and fray

As heaven's fabric wastes and wears away

The stains of time have marred both hem and seam

You can't repair what is or might have been

So tuck me tight, hold fast my hand and stay

As eons fold against the lifelong day

From the liar's chair give hope tight-lipped

Puff the pillow ere the bed be stripped

Shush my broken thoughts as I awaken

Sweetest friend before the cloths are taken

While the peace in token sleep is kept

Remember he who rose and he who wept

Tell me everything is now forgiven

And that Lazarus has since arisen.

Text For The Day

Early this morning I woke in dull persistent pain,
From the disease that is slowly enveloping my life -
And alone, I tried to deal with these demands by
Preparing 10 milligrams of 'quick release' elixir in a little plastic cone
But struggled hopelessly with the unopened bottle top -
And having already decided against a fold-over breaded smidgeon of the 'wacky
butter' supplied by a kind friend -
I finally settle in desperation for crimping two more paracetamol tablets from a
blister pack.

And In my almost tearful confusion,
I am haunted by the concrete furrows
of the streets of New York -
A drone skimming the grand canyons -
As I rearrange my duvet -
The city and I folded in synchronized
Secluded vigil.

And like the good book itself, we settle on chapter and verse,
The city and I in our dark imaginings:
'For thou whose property is always to have mercy -
Not weighing our merits but pardoning our offences' -
With the empty streets / the sweat-stained sheets as our texts for the day.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Bellinger River Snapping Turtle

Ms Bellinger River Snapping-Turtle
Would happily rarely stir till
It was time for a gin
And an accompanying grin
That showed when Myrtle was fertile.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Bilby

How are things in Yooka Murra?
Are the bilbys still snuffling there?
A pixie, pootling mixture rare -
Of chihuahua, wallaby and hare?

How are things in Yooka Murra?
Is that black stump still baking there?
Does that bilby with the beady eye
Still come a'lolloping by?

How are things in Yooka Murra?
Amid the creeks and coolibah -
Does bracketed [macrotis lagotis]
Still fossick lizards, seeds and flies?

How are things in Yooka Murra?
Is the bilby species there still rooted
By shrub and log and burrow,
Sniff and snouting bandicooted?

How's that little pinkie down in Yooka Murra?
Does he hide from prying kangaroos
And never stop to jabber in his yakka
Except to sing extinction blues?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Bramble Cay Melomys

Drat we missed and now we miss
The Bramble Cay melomys:
A mouse-like rodent on a cay
First washed up then washed away
It's kicked a clod - like us one day.

Any loss like this diminishes me
When a tiny creature's lost at sea
It's the first but not the final one
And I'm the lesser that it's gone
When all is said and Donne.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Bridge Over The Brook

Sometimes I'm Pooh
And sometimes Tigger
Sometimes I'm Roo
Only somewhat bigger

Sometimes a boy
Where the ripples gleam

But mostly a donkey
Swept by the stream

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Bronze Girl

The rising sun trapped the willow princess
As she bathed hidden among the shallows.
He had plaited a copper basket to catch her
That first she thought a palace not a prison.

But the sun rose in the sky and shut the door
And forced himself upon the frightened girl
Who fought and set herself against him,
Caring nothing for his overarching majesty.

Then spent in his lust and rage, the risen sun
Gave the girl to the demons as a plaything
And she became a helpless, friendless outcast
Visited and revisited endlessly by nightmares.

Set free, she sought the willow water's edge,
Unable to smile or love or feel or heal her terror,
Turned hard as bronze to match her hated cell
Whose copper laths grew tarnished green - and wept.

But then her father, the river ruler, returned
Righteous in his anger at the violent rising sun
And set to work to clear the debris of this folly
That osiers might greet again the rain of evening.

And this same sullied girl became a goddess
In her suffering, weaving talismans and charms,
A source of spells protecting hearth and child,
In quests for justice, honour and compassion.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Bryde's Whale

Bride's or brooder's either way
This dinky whale's a party animal:
It only lives from day to day
An Auckland swell ephemeral
And likes to spout and bask away
As JAFAs do in general.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Budgerigar

NOT SEEN FOR DUST

So trills the Budgie - in the curtains high
As vacuuming the housewife lists his cheeps.
Missing awhile the avian treasure nigh
Changing the dust bag, lax attention creeps.

Now Joey downward from the pelmet flies
And mounts a shoulder on the matron's blouse
To strut his stuff, as she the draw string ties!
A journey out to void the bag brings open sky

And from the very temple of deceits -
Its cuttle bone and swings and bells and treats -
Bidding adieu the bird soars out the house.

Empty now the melancholy sovran shrine
Joy's bubble burst, he mounts the washing line
Disclosing dusty deals from parakeets.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Calamity ('aitua') Of Creation

Night had conceived the seed of night;
The heart, the foundation of night,
Had stood forth self-existing even in the gloom.
The shadows screen the faintest gleam of light:
The procreating power, the ecstasy of life first known,
And joy of issuing forth from silence into sound -
The progeny of the Great-extending filled the heavens' expanse.

[Tane's chant for Creation]

Our ancestors and the elders
Tell of how the sky father Ranginui
And the earth mother Papatuanuku
Were locked together in the ecstasy
Of nothingness, darkness and chaos
Until they were torn apart
Giving birth to Te Ao: the creation
Of the elements and sensation,
Of light and the natural world.

Consider then the pain with which the lovers were parted

Consider the flames, their dangers and their warmth
The lull and anger of the wind in storms and quiet,
The splash of water against your cheek, and the wild seas,
The grounding of the earth as it receives endlessly.

Look again at your lover's smile beckoning:
Hear her say softly or in passion 'I love you'
Sense again the scent of her hair above the ear
Taste her breath and the saltiness of her lips
Touch the shy curl at the nape of her neck
Or the clefts and furrows that show she is a duality
Joined in symmetry by seams and couplings.

Look again at the sun and its light, and its loss in shadows
Hear the music of the wind caressing and scolding
Sense again the scent of earth after the rain has ended
Taste the dew, and the salt spray from the ocean,

Touch the land that is raised and the land that falls away
That has come together in foregrounds and horizons:
This is the body of the earth mother given anew for you.

'Fire is hot, wind moves,
water is wet, earth hard.
Eyes see, ears hear, nose smells,
tongue tastes the salt and sour.
Each is independent of the other;
cause and effect must return to the great reality
Like leaves that come from the same root.
The words high and low are used relatively.
Within light there is darkness,
but do not try to understand that darkness;
Within darkness there is light,
but do not look for that light.
Light and darkness are a pair,
like the foot before
and the foot behind, in walking.
Each thing has its own intrinsic value
and is related to everything else in function and position'.

Consider then the pain with which the lovers were parted

Then there was the impenetrable and profound darkness -
The inestimable presence that permeates the universe.
Of only dark matter and the matter of darkness
That constituted two lovers locked within the essence of touching.

Then there was no source, no clarity, no brightness
No subjective, no objective, no relative, no absolute:
The lovers were inseparable, dependent, interdependent
There were no edges, no boundaries, no erasures in their love.

Nothing could be lost, nothing pulled away, nothing broken
And they loved each other coalesced, congealed, entangled
Without recognition, atoned only by a raw emotion
The passion to quicken the primordial chaos with our reality.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Canterbury Knobbled Weevil

Leave well alone that scabby little devil
The Canterbury Knobbled Weevil
Hadramphus tuberculatus
Is almost no longer with us
So beetling past's the better lesser evil.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Carpet Pythons And The Banana-Bender Laocoön Grandma

Under the shade of the hood
Under the domed canopy
We seek the grilling gate
And the ancillary hot plate
Come to light with a switch
And the spreading of our meats
Given a light oil spray
And the promise of cauterization.

Lo! In the summered garden
Invested with seasonal flies
Sauced family members wait
Oblivious to burger or sausage
The anticipated breaded slot -
Except at times when a friend
Jostles to the fore to have a gander
Out of his place at the bar
Temporarily, mutters an advisory
About the necessity of onions
And the advantages of mushrooms,
The longed-for accessories -
Not for ourselves, indeed,
Seeing that this is our hope,
But for our children and wives!

So, under Brisbane skies
Compass the inebriated throng
When the barbecue is opened up
Neither anxious nor afraid
Of unseen labyrinthine gloom -
But quickly lost to consternation
When the pythons wreath
Out of place in this festivity
Unwelcome serpents at the feast -
And in the crowd, the cry goes up:
'Who will save us from these snakes
Infesting as they do the grills and jets

Denying sustenance from cinder
Seeing that a good feed is our right
For us, our children and our wives? '

Neither miffed nor feared
Of the Lamia of this circumstance -
The marbled coils of mishap
That girdle the unlit griddle -
Grandma reaches in
Grabbing serpentine musculature
And tugging free the first of two
Drops it into a waiting chilly bin
Followed soon by a second -
Unencumbered unlike Laocoön -
Unafraid, putting all to right
The snake-snagged barbecue.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Chesterfield Skink

The Chesterfield Skink
Liked to plump and sink
On a quilted roll-armed sofa:
But fate has forced a rethink
And now its sits upon the brink
No staid lounge lizard loafer.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The City After The Storm

In the silent movies, a girl will smile slowly
And the camera will linger as we fall in love:
She will glow and the vision will shimmer
[The results it seems of rubbing Vaseline
On the lens or optical flat sitting before it,
Suitably and softly lit by subtle chiaroscuro,
Aided by skilfully-caked theatrical make-up].

Being a person at the mercy of illusion
Especially of wiles and ethereal pretence,
Easily captivated by gloss and halalation,
Artifice or not, I am hopelessly smitten..

Cue camera action: the object of obsession
Daubed with sunlight bewitches the scene
Setting herself in a steady gaze that turns
Slowly to amusement at devotees' sighs
Her tumultuous wayward storms now past
The tantrums of the dressing room forsaken
Her presence haloed hauntingly with glamour.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Copper Beech

[A visit to the family graves at St Mary's Churchyard, The Barony, Nantwich]

Home to haven, thanksgiving and prayer
Where earth had settled the ferryman's fare:
Safe from the crossing, at refuge from care,
Rows of skiff-kists beached to memory there.

Guarding the landing where they had come home
A grand copper beech resurges the graves
Tumbling gently both kerbing and headstone
In quiet relentless insistent waves.

Magnificent homeward-harbour tree
Channeling blood and bone, both tide and quay
Swelling your crowning bronze to ecstasy
At one with the slipway and the sea

Brimming and breaking and welcoming me
My loved ones at one in your majesty.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Crossing - Mid-Atlantic On Tuesday, September 24th 1850 On The Three-Mast Ship The Charlotte Jane

I needed to know who you were,
The neglected and hidden child,
Borne to paradise with porpoises.

Nobody seemed to care.
The ship's surgeon Dr Barker
Received 10 shillings for
Every passenger safely delivered to Lyttelton
But had to pay back 20 shillings
For every passenger who died.

Economists have a label
For this kind of arrangement –
If you write the script -
It is 'moral hazard'.

But there is a name
Crossed out in the Passenger List –
Bridget Maitland, aged 11.

It seems that she was travelling
With George and Ann Allan
And their daughter Ann Elizabeth
Aged 9.

And that George and Ann's indifference
Betrayed the fact that she was an orphan
Tagging along as a shadow -
A sometimes servant
A sometimes playmate -
At the ragged sleeves
Of the family of a poor labourer.

But how majestic Bridget
That you should be welcomed
To the deep by heavenly creatures,

Following God's purpose
Across Enchanted Seas
To the Land of Beulah.

[After reading: 'The Journal of Edward Ward – Canterbury 1850-51']

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Darling Buds Of January - For My Wife

Somewhere between Collingwood and Takaka
I watched the paddocks skim by
As you drove my Corolla -
I didn't know then
That you drive an automatic with two feet.

Shall I compare thee to that summer's day
Or simply say
That you are the Love of My Life?
And add that
I avoid watching the brake and the accelerator.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Drop Bear

ONE day young Elsie Randle
Cooled off at Swaggie's Run,
Her bra straps and her girdle
There flashing in the sun.
'Twas New Year's Eve, and slowly
Across the ridges low
The sad Old Year was drifting
To where the old years go.

The New Chum's mind reviewing
The Facebook pages of her life —
Her love for Pommy Breeding
Ere she became an Aussie wife;
She sorrowed for the sorrows
Of a heart not nobly won,
And she pined that she was trouble
Out there on Swaggie's Run.

The sapling shades had lengthened,
The summer day was late,
As Elsie quickly hastened
Beyond the homestead gate.
And if the hand of trouble
Can leave a lasting trace,
The lines of care had come to stay
On poor sweet Elsie's face.

She walked among the gum trees
As the shadows gathered there
Lost in thought of Brucie Humphries
Whose manners drove her spare.
And great black clouds of menace
On Bush and Creek descended
'No gent will ever show his face
'Where politesse has ended'.

Then a Drop Bear's rude descent
Knocked poor Elsie flat -
It heard her Pommy Accent

And couldn't stomach that.
Lord save her from that hell
I beg in girlhood's name!
For if it gives a vampire kiss,
That ends the bleedin' game.

Could England or its sisters
Hold up their heads again,
To face the Outback's malice
Or claim the love of men?
And if it plants a smacker
It were better were she dead -
As when its fangs retracted
Its premolars glowed bright red.

Just then up came the Squatter
Riding on his thoroughbred
He saw the maiden in distress
And this is what he said:
'Relieve yourself young lady
And rub it on your head'.
And so young Elsie sprang a leak
To shake the Drop Bear dread.

The sad Australian sunset
Had faded from the west;
But night brings darker shadows
To hearts that cannot rest;
And Bruce the Cocky sits rocking
And moaning in his chair.
'I cannot bear disgrace, ' he moaned;
'Disgrace I cannot bear.

'In hardship and in trouble
'I struggled year by year
'To make my homestead better
'Than other Bush Runs here.
'And now my girl's a squatter's sheila
'How can I show my face?
'I've nothing left but Mutt the Heeler,
'And a slip rail bough-shed place!

'Ah, God in Heaven pardon!
'I'm selfish in my woe —
'My girl is better set now
'Than many that I know'.

But Elsie on her big verandah
Rocked and pondered her relief -
She thought of Brucie only now
And missed the Vegemite between his teeth.
And ere a two year's dawning
They set up home at last;
And this is but a story
Of woes now long since past!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Druids' Hymns To Cernnunos The Horned

“To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy.” [Martin Heidegger]

THE DRUIDS' HYMNS TO CERNUNNOS THE HORNED THE FIRST TRUTH

That the sky is our father
The earth our mother
The sun our elder brother
The moon our elder sister
And the stars our kin
Is not to be doubted.

But there is one ruler of all
The creator and destroyer
The one who also sustains
Knowing things must be:
Bringing the changing seasons
And the night that follows day

The sunlight, air, ground and water
Nourish and the greenness grows.
Nothing is more harmonious
And the rain, snow, lightning and rainbow
Are edicts and signs, as the mists
Rise from the marshes and return.

So the trees are born
From the smallest tokens
To reach for the heavens
From tangled roots
Linking and branching
From the common stock.

That the hunter will track his prey
And the forests will come alive
When the young girls dance
And the ploughman will break the earth

The harvest will be brought home
And there will be feasts with joy.

THE SECOND TRUTH

The trees shed their leaves at the Fall
When the stags bring their horns to full
So is the green tree left bare branched
And the sun-deer in winter crowned
After the hunt and forays to the bounds
The feasts with venison and elfin sounds
The sport of hunters, the lap of maids
The cauldron filler with dearest bloods:
That at the waning of the green one
Herne will dance to return the sun -
Antlers aloft, dressed to the greening,
Priests intoning, maidens keening.
Then come the Spring, the horns fall
As the deer lays its head to velvet
And the sun takes lengthier time to set.
Let all rejoice - in warmth is born the fawn
The carnyx played, the brightest colours worn.

THE THIRD TRUTH

Beware the criminals and the evil
Threatening the even level of things -
The heavenly rhythms in cycle,
The ordered radiance the sky sings -

Beware intruders of our shire oak marks:
Stranger enter not at all or with dread -
Deep in the forest hung with captive torques
Our god will deck his horns with your half-dead.

There oak and holly are garlanded in sacrifice
With captives hanging as fruit for cropping:
Our druid priest invoking plenty thrice
As the cauldron fills with vein-bled sapping

Each year of flesh-fed growth the axe arrests
Felling the cross tree like an antler crown

The branches laying down their hallowed guests
Interred to rest as the woodlands' own.

Where lightning strikes the forks at first are bare
And galls will form where the bark is broken
The mistletoe will root and prosper there
With our chieftain's daughter's sash in token.

At summer's start our maidens dance their dance
When our life-tree is born again as its greening swells
Take care not to feed its roots in grave mischance.
As the sun-deer kneels to the green one's spells.

Bow deeply then to the Ever-Changing -
Horn-crowned, broken-noose / torque-holding:
He who may grasp death's serpent's writhing
Where the wolves await the carcass tithing.

THE LAST TRUTH

Men and women have three natures:
A form which warms the earth
A force which challenges the heavens
And a shade or mist or wraith
Whose stories, songs and poetry
Tell our best thoughts in words.

And there are paths and ways
That lead to understanding
For the great truth is that order
Is divine - and that the wayfarer
Must leave imprints heading home
That those who follow may find.

History, mystery and immediacy
Define us.

The first tells of stories
And sagas, the greatness of some
And the struggles of the commoners.
The second tells of fear of death,
Of the vast beauty of the night sky,

Of the need to cry out with humility
And the need above all for love.
The third tells of the life we live
Hand guarding hand, step by step
Where the wagon makes its way
Where the wheel grinds the knife.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Dust Of Love Is All We Have At Hand

A photograph of a small girl
Taken by her heart-broken father
Shows his daughter in hospital
Pretty, bare-chested but in dreadful pain

Her mouth rictus clinched
Tears in her desperate eyes
Waiting for something, anything,
That offers relief and reliving -

She is only four years old
Dying in torture from cancer.

If I or perhaps more likely you
Had faith as much as a grain of mustard
This mountain could be moved
But then again not a speck or mote

Has ever been brought to atonement
From the very beginning of the universe
Though seeds have been long planted
And offerings asked of the bereaved:

Faith is too fine a grain for us it seems -
The dust of love is all we have at hand.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Eastern Barred Bandicoot

The Eastern Barred Bandicoot
Is diminutive, furry and cute
Snuffling here
Snuffing there
It needs special care
From becoming too rare
So guard dogs are now in pursuit.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Eastern Rosella

Harlequin Eastern Rosella:
Dandy Little Aussie Fella
With his bright rainbow suit of light
Now our Bushland's flashiest sight -
A spruiker from Australia
Right at home in Aotearoa!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Echo Of Love

As the stars reverberate
I cup my ear to listen
And hear repeated
Resonating
The tones of our voices
The echoes of those sounds
The longings in those echoes.

We are echoes
We are echoes
Immemorial
We are a memory of each other

And whatever the distance
It can touch your heart
I will reach out
In love
Holding you tenderly
Holding you with tenderness
With longing in that tenderness.

And as the darkness gathers
Towards sunset and dusk
Night will not part us:
Stay close
I will recall you then
Cherishing our remembrance
Sharing memory and recollection.

We are memory and remembrance
Each sound, each touch
Has its response
A shadow
And a reflection
So that every echo is timeless
The tone and timbre of memory itself.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Fine Print Of Purgatory - For Seamus Heaney

Like Seamus Heaney, I was a farmer's boy
Or rather I became one
When I was four and signed my lease
In hearts' loss -
Paying my ingoings
In mud and shit and love.

I too saw kittens drown -
And pigs slaughtered
Squealing at hell's gate,
Blood caught in an old tin bath -
And dogs shot in the drive
Slinking as the 22 rose and leveled.

There can't be many of us
Who felt white-washed walls
In the dark, as the cows respired -
Smelled the poetry there,
Looking up the stock at night
By torch and latch and moonlight.

Those cattle died of plague
And ended in a bulldozed pit
Near the stack-yard -
And my almost father
Broke his heart for loss
While I was bush-bashing outback tracks.

Few I'm sure will know now
The turnip shredder in the picture
Or have eaten a slice cold from the handle swing.
Now and again, we used to feed turnips
To my Connemara pony Jonty
Before he was knackered by a winter's standing.

There is cruelty then in much remembering -
But life it was in deeds that dated
With death foreshadowed in a codicil.

The Fouling Of The Throne Must Bring The Dearest To Disaster

IPHIGENIA AND THE SACRED DEER

Cutting down reason and resolution
Her father slew the sacred deer Telos
Impiously coursing to negation
The milk-white hind beloved of Artemis.

This end of innocence presaged slaughter
When the goddess pressed reparation
From the father demanding his daughter
Dead to call the readied fleet to action.

So wars are born of foolishness and pride
And children sacrificed to circumstance,
And dreadful means are often justified
By chains of error, hubris and mischance.

Being so bloodied at the altar stone,
Betrayed by her reckless, heedless elder,
Did she perceive the fouling of the throne
Must bring the dearest to disaster?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Garlands Once That Gaped And Graced My Head

I was the symbol of new life arising
The cross reborn in resurrection -
But carelessness and pride despising
Sense has brought sweet nature to rejection.

Recovery lost in this betrayal
You have cut too hard, too deep to the quick
Rhyme and reason, rhythm and renewal
Have been stilled and the wounded earth grows sick.

From teeming autumn with its rich increase
The barrenness of winter you have won
And silent spring its wasted power gone
Mouths only now of summer's sad disease.

What scarring have I known - what dark days seen?
Man come stow your axe, you have hewn far down
My strength is gone to heal and then redeem
I can no longer raise my green-cleft crown.

The garlands once that gaped and graced my head
Are lost to greed, adorned with gold - and dead:
There was no honour in the blows you dealt
You were not equal to the love I felt.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Goddess Of Protection

Economists are generally unromantic creatures
And visiting Hyderabad to make a presentation
On Public Sector Finance
I was more interested in buying cheap silk
At the tourist emporium,
During a break organized by our hosts,
Than in the line of trucks along the roadside
Which were being fussed over for the puja,
Carrying representations of the Goddess Durga
Preparing to promenade serenely on her tiger + Tata.

And now, grown gnarled and sage, as a poet of sorts,
I find myself writing:

Doubtless now it will come to women
To have the last word in the last days
In a world run from the alpha to the omega
To the seventh seal and the seventh angel.

This is the dawning of the Age of Amazons
...

To take arms against a sea of male foibles
And rescue the world from perfidy and dishonour.

-

But ladies or better perhaps women
Surely you already have your own familiar -
Armed eight-fold by the gods themselves.
The female form which, when the male Devas had been bested
By the Buffalo Demon Mahishasura, rose to the challenge
And defeated the ignorance and chaos that he represented,
By killing the fearful, overwhelmed and outwitted horned one,
Piercing his heart, while riding him down on her liger Dawon.

Shiva your supposed better half
Gave you three pointers as to when to act;
Vishnu gave you a discus to spin the world

Around your index finger and bring down evil;
Varuna gave you shell to put against your ear
So that you could discern justice and truth;
And the sword or spear that Agni gave you
Will cut fine and sharp in judgments, free of doubts.

Maruta gave you a bow and two quivers of arrows
The sources of energy and action;
Indra gave you the thunderbolt of confidence
The flash of understanding that strikes home;
Krishna will clothe you with righteousness
And the garments of forgiveness;
And then there is the gift of Vishvakarman
The enlightening lotus flower born of muddy waters.

And Himayat, the spirit of the mountains tamed the snow lion
As your proud and playful jousting steed,
With the tiger from the jungle of the terai,
Meek but boundlessly fierce as its alternate -
And a snake at your feet promising a transformation
In consciousness to the highest state of pure bliss.

Then there are additional gifts like the bell of Indra's elephant Airavata;
A replica of Yama's staff of death;
A noose from Varuna, the lord of waters;
The string of beads and a water-pot donated by Brahma, the lord of beings;
With Surya bestowing his own rays on all the pores of your skin;
Kala providing a spotless shield;
And the milk-ocean chipping in a pure necklace,
A pair of undecaying under garments,
A divine crest-jewel, a pair of ear-rings, bracelets,
Brilliant half-moon ornamented jewelry - armlets for all your arms,
A pair of shining anklets, a unique necklace and rings for all 80 fingers;
Visvakarman also providing an unsurpassed axe,
Weapons of various forms, and impenetrable armour;
The lord of wealth (Kubera) setting up a drinking tab, ever full of wine;
And Sesa, the lord of all serpents, who supports this earth,
Treating you to a writhing-necklace bedecked with the best jewels.

So that overall you have your hands full riding high -
Regardless of having 8,10 or 18 arms;
Whether winking one or more of your three eyes

Signifying moon-desire, sun-intimacy
Or the middle eye of fire, intuition and perception;
Or being transformed into various avatars
Like Kali, Bhagvati, Bhavani, Ambika,
Lalita, Gauri, Kandalini, Java, and Rajeswari
Or appearing in any one of nine manifestations
Like Skondamata, Kusumanda, Shailaputri,
Kaalratri, Brahmacharini, Maha Gauri,
Katyayani, Chandraghanta, and Siddhidatri.

I could go on and the very mountains would ring
But suffice to say that Hollywood giving Wonder Woman
A sword and buckler, isn't the half of it.
And now I see that passing the line of floats
Being prepared for the puja in Hyderabad
In 2008, I should have been more respectful.

- - - - -

I am the Queen, the gatherer-up of treasures, most thoughtful, first of those who
merit worship.

Thus gods have established me in many places with many homes to enter and
abide in.

Through me alone all eat the food that feeds them, - each man who sees,
breathes, hears the word outspoken.

They know it not, yet I reside in the essence of the Universe. Hear, one and all,
the truth as I declare it.

I, verily, myself announce and utter the word that gods and men alike shall
welcome.

I make the man I love exceeding mighty, make him nourished, a sage, and one
who knows Brahman.

I bend the bow for Rudra [Shiva], that his arrow may strike, and slay the hater
of devotion.

I rouse and order battle for the people, I created Earth and Heaven and reside as
their Inner Controller.

On the world's summit I bring forth sky the Father: my home is in the waters, in
the ocean as Mother.

Thence I pervade all existing creatures, as their Inner Supreme Self, and
manifest them with my body.

I created all worlds at my will, without any higher being, and permeate and dwell

within them.

The eternal and infinite consciousness is I, it is my greatness dwelling in everything.

—?Devi Sukta, Rigveda [1500 - 1200 BCE] 10.125.3 - 10.125.8

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Good Swineherd

As a farmer's boy in Cheshire back in the 1950s
I read the Bible extensively with the Scripture Union
But some unlikely things bothered me
[Gentile that I was, gathering crumbs under the table]
Like the Gadarene Swine going over the cliff:

And they came over unto the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gadarenes.

And when he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains:

because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him.

And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones.

But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him, and cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not.

For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.

And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many.

And he besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country.

Now there was there nigh unto the mountains a great herd of swine feeding.

And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them. And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine; and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, (they were about two thousand,) and were choked in the sea.

And they that fed the swine fled, and told it in the city, and in the country. And

they went out to see what it was that was done.

And they come to Jesus, and see him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind; and they were afraid.

And they that saw it told them how it befell to him that was possessed with the devil, and also concerning the swine.

And they began to pray him to depart out of their coasts.

And when he was come into the ship, he that had been possessed with the devil prayed him that he might be with him.

Howbeit Jesus suffered him not, but saith unto him, Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee.

And he departed, and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him: and all men did marvel.

Now Gadara was at the very edge of the deep cleft
Of the Jordan Valley and the last staging post
For trading caravans from the Fertile Crescent and beyond
Before they wound their way down to Galilee and Nazareth
And thence to Caesarea or Ptolemais-Acre and the Med.

And we neglect I think that Jesus was caught between two cultures
And that he would have visited the Decapolis cities
Smelling pork roasting and bacon frying
Perhaps even listening to a mendicant Buddhist teacher or two
Preaching the virtues of tolerance and compassion.

As for me, I always loved pigs and it seemed so sad to me
Sending those beautiful animals to the Devil -
So here I had to differ with the quiet young man
From Nazareth with his mesmeric admonitions
Wanting me to forsake all and follow him.

Years later I had to farrow four sows
Over the space of a week and my sometimes midnight
Midwifery resulted in 42 healthy piglets
That I sold at 12 weeks old and lost money on -

Having been far too generous with the weaner nuts.

And we had four saddle back gilts that I became very fond of
Though they didn't prosper on a concrete floor
And needed to be run free – notwithstanding
My going over the Larkey's paddock to the big oak
On Cornhill Drive to collect acorns for them in a bucket.

Years later again, I found myself on mission in Bangladesh
In the Chittagong Hill Tracts as we toured a Hill Tribes village
And my excitable young Bengali guide asked me a tough question:
'That animal you see there – What is it? '
And I found myself telling him to his consternation that pigs were not halal –
haram
Where I came from and that I had once been a pig-farmer.

Now my charismatic young Yeshua tell me something:
Why the Good Shepherd and not the Good Swineherd?
Does it simply boil down to the fact that pigs
Like humans are inquisitive, gregarious, awkward and indolent
And resent being herded with the camels in the desert scrub?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Greater Short-Tailed Bat

The Greater Short-tailed Bat
Being prey to stoat and rat and cat
Goes incognito in a furry hat:
A refugee on Big South Cape
With disguise it may yet escape -
So now forget I told you that.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Grey Nurse Shark

The Grey Nurse Shark is much misunderstood
Being best regarded not as bad but good
Calm and gentle like the Killer Whale
A sort of fishy Florence Nightingale
It would bring a bed pan if it could
And check your stool for signs of blood.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Grey-Headed Flying-Fox

The Grey-headed flying fox
A wise nocturnal frugivore
Keeps apricots in its socks
And it's where it likes to store,
Eschewing any kind of box,
A plum or two in fruity paw.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Heroes And The True Treasures

There is more to be told about Death and Sin and Satan
About the shroud spectre, the tarn hag and the dragon
And how sin coupled with the dawn-devouring serpent
Bearing in her turn the loathed all-consuming adversary -

And how the Christ himself gave his life in redemption
Of that dreadful compact of a daughter's rape and incest
That the ghastly child, the unremitting arbiter of life itself,
Should feel the loss of hope as resurrection triumphed -

And how Beowulf the hero also gained honour at the last
By ripping down the indiscriminate slayer of our kinfolk
And descending into the dark mere to seize a tokened sword
By which to kill the fish-tailed harlot and crop her son's corpse -

And how our heroes bested the fire-unleashing guardian
Of hell's treasures and all its beguiling wealth and plenty
Taking nothing from this earthly realm in just reward -
Leaving only the steadfast gifts of honest hearts and wholesome life.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The House Of Life: Non-Renewal Of Subscription

Pale Dante Rossetti - wan and intense
('Might-have-been, No-more, Too-late, Farewell') :
Upon the beach, nought but a soundless shell
Is left of noble thought and faith's pretence.

Heed me, how pissed off I am old bean:
One moment through thy soul the soft surprise
Of cast up life and its foam-fretted sighs
And next the emptiness where beauty's been.

Mark thine eyes the tweets where that is seen
Which had Truth's form in Lies but by their spell
Are become rampant memes intolerable
Of things best left unuttered, best unseen

And shamelessness spins tides of ignorance
That foul the shore with washed-up bitterness.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Identity Of Relative And Absolute

"Everybody's shit is relative to their own shit":
And shit just happens -
Even if you don't give a shit
You have to get your shit together
No shit -
Because life is a shitty business.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Inky Raindrops Of Calligraphy

Finally at the furthest point of my walk
I prepared for the harbour to have its say
But first popping into the Academy of Fine Arts
I found myself almost alone wishing bright life:
Listening to Hokai Shibayama's brush strokes
And the imaginary inky sounds of Japanese calligraphy.

Apricot blossoms on the way
Are in beautiful bloom
Spring birds are calling in a sweet voice
Everywhere in the mountains:
I have help while I am unaware of it.

I have no container
I will take it in my hands -
Is it the sound of drizzling rain?
Go into the rain and listen
And understand feelings with heaviness.

And Akiko sort of materialized
In a most beautiful kimono
Smiling that sweet, blinking slight smile
That is something of a Japanese speciality
And I said: Are you the calligrapher?
'No' she replied 'But I also practice'

As for me, I am at home I told her
Having somewhat studied Zen -
Minded of the Paramita Heart Sutra
And the Identity of Relative and Absolute -
Like the foot before and the foot behind in walking:
We are nothing special but nothing is lacking.

Let me respectfully remind you
That Life and Death are of Supreme Importance:
Time Swiftly Passes and Opportunity is Lost
Each of us should strive to awaken
Awaken! Take heed:
Do Not Squander Your Life.

And we bowed to each other with gentle hearts
But cynic that I am, I later recalled
That everything in the sacred is profane
And everything in the profane is sacred,
When mulling a wheat beer by the harbour.

So I watched a young crowd joss and dance
To a lazy Sunday afternoon of groovy music
The girls jumping into the laps of their men
Playfully smooching and mounting other girls
With one brave-heart tipsy sailing a skate-board.

As the froth fell in my glass - foam ring by foam ring
I thought again of one of my earliest memories
Of the farm that we had moved to when I was four
And of sitting at the window of the farm kitchen,
Watching the raindrops in the darkening autumn,

Waiting for them to coalesce and resolve
On the glass and for the heavy droplets
To suddenly streak down, racing each other
To the broken paintwork of the window sill
Disappearing like mirages in mirror form.

And how this always reminded me of the first story
That I had been read by my primary school teacher
About a scarecrow that had come to stuffed-straw life,
Miraculously animated by her stern but smiling face,
As she communed with words and their mysterious letters

And how all my conscious life, words had befriended me
With their letters like the gentle patter of rain -
Or droplets of words rushing to a meaning -
And I laughed, as I walked near Frank Kitts' Park,
That somebody had written in chalk in an excellent hand
"Save the Whales - Eat the Japanese".

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Italian Cross [????????????? ??????] By Mikhail Arkadyevich Svetlov (1903 - 1964)

A 'translation' by Keith Johnson

There was a black cross on his chest
No engraving, no design, no patina:
A treasured heirloom charm
Bequeathed to this alien Italian.

My Neapolitan boy what will be left
Of you here on the Russian fields?
Were you not happy enough
On that magnificent bay?

I shot you dead near Mozdok
As you dreamt of distant Vesuvius!
As I dreamed of the Volga flowing free!
Perhaps we could have shared a gondola!

Mind you, I did not come with a gun
To ruin an Italian Summer:
My bullets didn't whine
Above the sacred land of Raphael.

Here I killed you! But we were both born
Where there is friendship and pride
Where there are epics and sagas
That defy translation. But I ask you:

Are the meanders of the River Don
Much studied by overseas geographers?
Has our ancient homeland Russia
Been ploughed and sown by outsiders?

No! But you were armed and marshalled
To seize and dispossess distant lands -
That cross of yours from your ancestral home
Destined to overshadow your grave.

I will not let you take my country
And enslave it from foreign shores!
I'll shoot - it is not a matter of justice
Ultimately just a matter of bullets.

You have never had the right to be here!
But glistening in these snowy fields
Your eyes tell of Italy's blue skies
As they glaze and their light fades.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Kaka [nz Parrot] And The Kuku [nz Wood Pigeon] – Funny Old Birds

The kuku loves domestic bliss
The kaka likes life's turns and twists

The kuku is at its best at home
The kaka though is prone to roam

While kukus plump for picturesque
The kaka goes for picaresque

For the kuku absences are antithetic
Contrast the kaka - he's peripatetic

Like Zorro the kaka wears a red bolero
Not so, the demure and retired kereru

The kuku is polite and workaholic
Where kakas are ever prone to frolic

At a party, you can guess who's most shambolic
The kaka always gins without the tonic

The kuku rarely doffs its vest
While kakas often dance a wild burlesque

The kaka will raise the decibels with yakka
And soon he'll ask his mates to haka

So all in all, the kuku's just an early player
And it's the kaka who's the party-stayer

Birds of a different feather they may be.
"Have a drink! Which of them do you think is me? "

'He kuku ki te kainga,
He kaka ki te haere.'

["He is a wood-pigeon (kuku / kereru) when he's at home but a noisy parrot

(kaka) when he's out and about."]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Kakapo

Let me elaborate on ambassador Sirocco
A bird whose trysts are often quite rococo:
This kakapo is all trundle, boom and bust
And indiscriminate in terms of lust
So before your scalp reflects the light
Beware this flightless 'parrot of the night'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Kea

DOUBLE CROSS DAYS: [Whereby Picnickers Are Forced to Attend an Annual Torment in the Southern Alps]

Mischievously wickedly back they fly
Clowns from the clouds, with tricks from the sky
Pulling out rubber, pecking on wire
Loosening the windscreen, slicing the tyre
Skating the tiles and sliding the roof
Looking for weakness but charmingly goof

Seeking out back-packs and shiny white plastic
Dissecting pack lunches and twanging elastic
Out from the mountains and skirting the snows
With tumbles and jokes and red furbelows
Nodding so sagely but eyeing its chance
The Kea is ready to lead us a dance.

Hist! Square shoulders, tidy your crumbs
And clean up the teacups — here he comes.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Kune Kune Piggy

The Kune Kune is a sort of Maori Pig
Whose face is dewlapped with a whiskery bib
These wattles, tassels or piri piri
Make them look both cute and silly.

Their name in Maori means fat and round
So much so, they seem to lard the ground
And when they grunt they make you laugh -
And look for slops to fill their trough.

Pot-bellied, friendly hairy creatures
They beg you: 'Mrs - kindly treat us! '
So save the peelings, bread and cold spaghetti
And drop them off ere you forgettey.

[Pronounced 'Coonie Coonie']

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Last Word?

They may never come again who knew the joy
Of youth among the mountains there
As time and use degrade and then destroy
All but the memories those hearts alone still bear.
But yet the hillsides graft a gentle scar
To bind the happenings of those who care
So that neither time nor loss can mar
The roots that land and lives forever share.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Legend Of Morven Mere

It was thus in the time of siege and famine:
A poor farmer sold his little daughter
To the asrais and nixies of the mere
So that the harvest might not fail again.

Then the farm prospered and all were fed
So no more was thought of the bargain
Though the reeds at the water's edge
Sang of the prize that was expected.

And Meggan, growing fair but also strong
Took to ploughing with her horse,
Coming on her sixteenth birthday
To till the rich silty fields by the lake.

It was springtime and fine weather
And she and her horse Meadowmane
Worked quietly from shore to headland
As the gulls followed the turned turf.

On a start, a milk-white charger appeared
Its golden mane and tail flashing in the sun
Its dappled flanks afire with rainbow flecks
Snorting and prancing in courtship and display.

'I know you Brookenhorse', said the girl
'The mount of Jenny Greenteeth Grindlelow
Sent from the dark depths of the mere
To claim me as a prize for the tarn-hag'.

Then the enchanted stallion came up
And nuzzled Meadowmane on the cheek
Nipping the old cart horse on the neck
At which the Brookenhorse shape-shifted

And took up the plough collar and traces
Heaving the ploughshare and coulter
With such force that the task was soon done
And the meadow seared with perfect furrows.

At which the Brookenhorse bolted for the lake
Taking with it both the plough and its mistress -
And she trapped by the reins that she had wound
To the handles was dragged beneath the water.

'Welcome my beauty' said Mother Grindelow
'You my drowned princess are my catch now
Take up your deathly pallor and sleeves of green
And sing with us amid the mere of midnight silver'

'I have my prizes now - my temptress Morgwen Fey-
And the sharp steels of the foreshore and coulter
With which to forge a sword of endless enmity -
The enchanted plough become the stuff of strife'.

But Meggan shunned the hell-bride and her watermaids
And dreamed of the bright spring meadow flowers
And the warm sun and scent of heaving Meadowmane -
Finding at last the Brookenhorse in its watery stall.

At which it flared its nostrils, reared and stamped,
Abject in its thrall to the monstrous Borrage Queen,
Now become once more an ancient broken steed
Mere knucker bones and hide, bleached by the depths.

But Meggan wept that it had lost its rainbow glimmer
And placed her arms around its neck in comfort
Reaching to her kirtle purse to find a scrap of bread
That she had kept to share with Meadowmane.

At which the Brookenhorse glowed fine and white again
Lustrous and resplendent in its strength and beauty
And she broke down the stall gate and freed the horse
Leaping to its back as it bolted for the sunlit sky

Seizing the sword of enmity now become destiny
That mystical Cut Steel - Cleft Evil wand Excalibur
Until at last they came to safety and the light of day
Where she became her maiden self with Meadowmane.

And her father threw his arms around her with joy

Lamenting only the loss of his much-loved plough
But handling with amazement the magic sword
That shone among the peaceful fields of plenty.

So in time a knight came, seeking justice and love
And found at last the sword beaten from the share
Taking it up reverently from the Lady of the Lake
Bringing her and her treasured milk-white foal to Camelot.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Longer You Live The Force Becomes The Farce

How do you translate black laughter?

Medical professionals in Australia
Have devised a 29-point predictor
Of death within the short term -
Thirty days, thirty pieces of silver,
And the medium term of 12 weeks -
Eighty-four days, Three Moons.

In the hope that treatments are not wasted
And honest discussions can be engaged
With Older People who are frail and sick.

We speak of release: we speak of the quick hit,
Even as preferable to the thing that lingers.

If you are over 65 and admitted to the accident ward
In an emergency
You have a 25 percent chance of
Popping your clogs or dropping off your perch
In the next twelve months.

And one of the causes of dementia
Is that older brains slow
Knowing too much and getting jammed.

And many of us will not do it well
Although we have carried its mark for a long time.

"He or she died following a short illness"
The obituaries note.
At least now I know that a short
Illness is one lasting less than Lent or Ramadan
And that a medium illness is one lasting
Less than the payment schedule for your property rates
Providing absolutely no relief
For what may be outstanding.

At the last, some can only be seen as they were always seen

Not ennobled by it but reduced.

I did a quick check of the twenty-nine points
And scored eight
But my wife who is a nurse
Hadn't a single tick
In my boxes
So from a clinical perspective
There are no thieves evident in my night.

Why we are frightened is that we in part
Know ourselves and what is possible.
Walls fall; doors slam on daily lives more
Often than caution prepares for -
Where there is blood some is likely to spill.
And whether the kiss or the curse is the truer
Metre of passion is difficult to foretell.

NOTE: Quotations from 'True Confessions of the Last Cannibal' by NZ Poet Louis Johnson (1924-1988].

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Loss Of Everyday Goodness

There revealed from a bend in the river
Was the most perfect of little towns
A cathedral's cupolas crowning the bluff:
At the wharf a nose-bagged nag
And his tipsy, sleepy drosky driver.

Sophia, this is peaceful perfection
A place for us both to paint, to love:
I will be your frog here by the river
And you can sing to me from a terrace
And kiss me that I become a prince.

I have one small secret though
As an artist I despise the ordinary
And as a frog, I eat grasshoppers:
Be sure that you can set aside
The loss of everyday goodness.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Metamorphosis Of Laura Into Liberality

Then Herpes thus:

A nymph of late there was
Whose heav'nly form her fellows did surpass.
The pride and joy of far America's plains,
Belov'd by Murdochs, ador'd by Ailes:
Laura her name, by Republicans pursu'd,
As oft she did the lustful Gods delude:
Like Megyn clad, Megyn's lesser self she seems,
So tall, so streight, such well-proportion'd limbs:
The nicest eye did no distinction know,
But that the goddess bore unblemished brow:
Distinguish'd thus, the sight she cheated too.

Now while the lustful God, with speedy pace,
Just thought to strain her in a strict embrace,
He fill'd his lips with sores, new rising on the place.
And while he sighs, his ill success to find,
The tender limbs were parted for the wind;
And queefed a mournful air, unheard before;
That much surprizing rump, yet pleas'd him more.
Admiring this new musick, Thou, he said,
Who canst not be the partner of my bed,
At least shall be the confort of my mind:
And often, often to my lips be joyn'd.

Thus form'd the pustules, proportion'd as they were,
Unequal in their blain, yet wax'd with care,
They now besmirched the cheeks so former fair.
While Herpes mocked, her suitors stare
And Impatient to revenge her injur'd head,
She wreaks her anger on the blisters dread;
And Furies sting her from her native home;
To drive her gadding, round the world to roam:
Nor ceas'd her madness, and that all should know
Deep throats the co-hosts of her Fox News show.

Then Herpes spoke in publick, told it to her face;
Nor durst she vindicate the dire disgrace:
Even she, the bold, now sensible of wrong,

Restrain'd by shame, holding thus her cankered tongue.
To hear an open slander, is a curse:
But not to find an answer, is a worse.
Make some sure sign; and be you liberal shown,
To right my honour, and redeem your own
And then he plastered Zovirax liberally about
Her face and limbs and beg'd her to resolve the doubt
By kissing Hannity's erupted pimples snout.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Northern Quoll

The importunate Northern Quoll
Finds its hunger hard to control:
For snacks it's a sucker
Scoffing cane toads for tucker
That rissole its last patrol.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Nz Bellbird

If you should read these lines or hear
The bells sound deep in the forest
Then those you loved of old will near
And in your sweet thoughts find their rest.

Toll for them for heaven's sake
As the bellbird chimes at daybreak
And in the incantation
Ring their celebration.

And if your love for them grows faint
Let the wise world take up the song
And sing of them without restraint
In tones to which all dawns belong

'he rite ki te kopara
e ko nei te ata'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Nz Internet Party And The Kim Jumblies - Sieving Knaves And Fools

I

They went to beg from a Kim, they did
From a Kim they went to beg
To sell themselves and their ethics betray
On an autumn morn, on a stormy day,
To a Kim to grovel and beg!
And when the Kim turned round and round
And every one cried 'You'll all be drowned
In cash for hire' they called aloud
'Our Kim's so big, he can spread it around
So we don't care a button! We don't care a fig!
With a Kim we'll win just see! '
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to beg from a Kim.

II

They went to beg, they did,
In closet cars with tinted glass that just sailed past
To a Coatesville Mansion on a pocket book trail
Stuffed with deals in a craven tale
As the voters turned and looked aghast
And every one said, who saw them go,
'O won't they be soon upset, you know!
For the sky is dark, and the voyage is long,
And happen what may, it's extremely wrong
To sell to a Kim what's asked! '
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to beg from a Kim.

III

The bilge it soon gave in, it did,
The bilge it soon gave in;
So to keep them dry, they wrapped their feet
In secretive papers folded neat,
And they battened it down with some spin.
And they passed the night in Kim's cocktail bar,
And each of them said, 'How wise we are!
Though the sky be dark, and the voyage be long,
Yet we never can think we were rash or wrong
To pan handle the Kim with a tin! '
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to beg from a Kim.

IV

And all night long they sailed away;
And when the sun went down,
They whistled and warbled a phony song
To the echoing sound of the chamber's gong,
In the shade of the mountains brown.
'O voters o! How happy we are,
When we sail by expedience's darkened star
And all night long in the moonlight pale,
We sail away with the leavings stale,
In the shade of the mountains brown! '
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to beg from a Kim.

V

They sailed to the Southern Sea, they did,
To a land all bestirred with breeze,
And Kim bought a Brash, and Peter's First,
And a Norman nice, and a Corkery Tart,

And a teacup of slippery Banks.
And he cashed a Cullen, and some Green Gee-gaws,
And a sad old Mallard with paddlepop claws,
And 30 silver pieces of Harawira,
And some clandestine openings from Keys -
And no end of political tease.
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to beg from a Kim.

VI

And in six months they'll all be back,
In six months or more,
And all will say, 'How fat they've grown!
For they've been to the Trough, and the Pocketing Zone,
And the slops of the Bankroll Bore';
And we'll drink their health, and give them a feast
Of dumplings made in Asia's east;
And all will say, 'If he'll only give,
We'll cut our cloth and our haircut too for Kim,
For the slops of the Bankroll Bore! '
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to beg from a Kim

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Nz Kakapo: The Nocturnal, Grounded, Lek-Breeding Parrot

Randy but bandy and late

The kakapo booms for its mate

As skyward it trudges

Not the least like the budgies

In its rotund and flightless state.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Nz Kingfisher Or Kotare

Anticipating... it holds harmony
With the surface in reflection -
Life and death in quiet economy
Perfect in its delved completion.

So does te Kotare, the kingfisher,
In stillness and silence dive deep,
As it hunts the perilous river
In reaches that fierce spates make steep.

No need of whetstone or stropping
This knife in the water stays keen -
Its point and its edges redeeming
The intent of patience unseen.

Take heed of this sacred privilege
That sharp awareness keep its edge.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Particularity And The Dream

The impressively monikered Karl du Fresne
Has just given 'social scientist' Camille Nakhid
A good wiggling for expressing the view
That immigrants should be given longer shrift.

Karl grew up in a small Hawkes Bay town
And he walks across his lawn every day
In the Wairarapa to write in his shed
For the Pakeha Establishment in Wellington.

Actually, I'm amazed at how tolerant
Our new immigrants are about how stuck
Up and up themselves the Old Chums
Are about their tightly-held corners.

And I think Karl is missing something
When he snides that we can safely assume
That people immigrate to New Zealand
Because it's infinitely better than the place they left.

...

And I get pissed off when the Oxford Companion
Makes a big point of the fact that Allen Curnow
Was a fourth generation New Zealander
Who lived in a succession of Anglican vicarages in Canterbury.

And that the keepers of New Zealand literature
Quibble about whether Greville Texidor or Eve Langley
Exhibited a sufficiently restrictive desideratum
In articulating a New Zealand particularity or 'common problem'.

And that Kendrick Smithyman slags
Tanned, earnest Slavic Polynesian faces
Or that David McKee Wright assumes that
The native who is a brother is a Pakeha.

Or that my beloved Iris Wilkinson
Talks so casually - so disparagingly about Nigger Jack...

Or that Tariana Turia cites an enormous public ignorance
That is starting to become actual hostility towards Maori.

...

Time to give some ground, time to move on
Time to open things up and make some space.
Let's face it, a quarter of us were born abroad
And then there are the more and more mixed.

Maybe the New Chums from Cambodia, Tonga
China, India, Iraq, Somalia, Nepal and Kingdom Come
Really need a bit more slack so that we can all pull together
To bring up the future with a golden tether.

The young, the best, the intelligent, brave and beautiful,
Have made a long migration under compulsions they hardly understand -
New generations are homing from distant shores
Imprinted with this destination by their dreams.

And an extraordinary thing may be happening.
From the edge of the universe, New Zealand
May become not only the site of our own dreams
But a place where the world wakes refreshed.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Ploughman

The team moves forward taut to harness
As I the teamster brace to join the toil -
Good as gold my shires named Tom and Jess,
Their hooves hold firm to break the yielding soil.

An honest ploughman under God's great sky
Turning the earth as the shadows lengthen
Each furrowed meridian straight as a die -
Readied to sow when the sun's rays strengthen.

Come the headland and we will take a break
And I'll sit by the hawthorn hedge and eat
From bread and cheese and apple and cake
Gifting crusts and cores for an equine treat.

More than content with the lonely furrows
We'll share the fields with our joys and sorrows.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Poem Writer

The slurp sucked at the brimming bowl
The porridge caked the baby's hair
The toddler dodged the food-crust towel
And drove her mother spare
By questioning which day's tomorrow
And whether it's today's to borrow.

'Let's get a rabbit then' the mother cries
'God no' the father interjects -
While spooning still the mother plies -
Her bunny offer Lucy curt rejects
As with a hamster preference lies
[a furry brontosaurus in her eyes].

Now the mother's sadly overwrought
With dinosaur and pet shop pain
As endless sleepless moments sought
Hush and order for her brain again:
'Darling, help me change the baby's nappy
Maybe that will make you happy'
But Lucy skips to subjects new and brighter
She wants to be 'a poem writer'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Poetry Of The Valley And The Hills

'The subtle source is clear and bright:
the tributary streams flow through the darkness.
To be attached to things is illusion...'

Every mountain is a source
And every source is uppermost
If time is sought.

Every river leads to the sea
And grades the hill-side slopes
If time is taken.

Everything that comes to grade
Becomes becalmed or stagnant
If time stands still.

Every step becomes rapid
And every flow a fall
If time quickens.

Every river is fit for its valley
And every valley fit for its river
If time is given.

Every upland is an encirclement
And every cup will overflow
If the hills rejoice.

Every tributary is a vein
And every vein flows empty
If time runs out.

Every main is a trunk
And every branch its subject
If time conquers all.

Every catchment is a system
And every tract is caught up
Time after time - over time.

Every juncture is a nice adjustment
Of feed-back and declivity
If time is not wasted.

Every estuary is a revelation
And every revelation a new beginning
At the end of days.

Every landscape has its own silence
And every moment is empty
If the truth be known.

Every journey along the way is a joy
That unites the source and the sea
If time flows freely.

'If you do not see the Way, you do not see it even as you walk on it.
When you walk the Way, it is not near, it is not far.
If you are deluded, you are mountains and rivers away from it...'

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Poetry Reading

THE POETRY READING

There are five young women on the dais
And four of them read their poetry
In fits and starts - sometimes hesitant
Sometimes assured and bold
Speaking from the floor that represents
What is well-founded and fertile
The earth mother Papatuanuku
Above which extraordinary images
Traceries, totems and grotesques
Make claims for the world of men,
And questions are asked about
Forms and motivations

One of the poets mentions
The high seat or sky-throne of Odin
With an unpronounceable name Hli?skjálfr
And a tree big enough and old enough
To grow roots right through the earth
To become sea-serpents in the welcoming oceans.
But I think of Yggdrasil and the Norns
Who draw water from the Well of Fate
To sustain the tree - and tell of what is
What was and what should be
Drawing up meanings cast as runes or names
For what is lost but may yet be found.

Doubtless now it will come to women
To have the last word in the last days
In a world run from the alpha to the omega
To the seventh seal and the seventh angel.
This is the dawning of the Age of Amazons
As beauty awakes and ancient veils are lifted -
Of the Warrior Princess and Wonder Woman
Bouncy, chosen daughters in leather pelmets
Trained and equipped with sword and buckler
To take arms against a sea of male foibles
And rescue the world from perfidy and dishonour

In a maelstrom of improbably costumed martial arts.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Poetry Round

TAKING ON WATER AS I TACK HOME

Up at the bar, the timber looks new
Shiny, stripped back and light in colour.
I have moored my yawl on reclaimed land
And set my money down for an IPA
Here at our oldest pub, The Thistle.

As I enter, a sign claims 'Founded 1840'
And I browse between the prints and photos
Showing the building's sepia history,
Circumnavigating a table of bright young things -
And a dark lady in the corner.

She notices my trawling and asks
Are you interested in the past?
She brings her drink and then her hand bag over
And we sit and share a conversation
At first about the Wearable Arts Show.

Soon, we share common ground at the shore
And I remind her that the great Chief Te Rauparaha
Used to drag his waka up the muddy beach
And order a whiskey or two, while chatting to the whalers,
Yarning stories about his kids and his massacres.

Then we exchange names at which she is playfully precise:
'Hine Mahoney but you can call me Jenny -
Don't say Maloney - don't say baloney.
You say you are a writer, let's do rounds of poems'.

This more or less was one of mine.

When it has come to my advantage, I call
'The Love of My Life' to tie the rondeau.

She responds - dreamily, insistently
'My whakapapa: for I am wahine atua
From te whare tangata (the doorway of life) ...

They took our language not just our land'.

I chide them for her, the Founding Fathers:
The only country in the world founded
By Real Estate Agents, who divided before they grew -
Still speculating on a housing or a dairy boom.

Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black.
In the old age black was not counted fair
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
That every tongue says beauty should look so.

The fisherman has tide and fish to catch
The sea has beach and cliff to own
The heart breasts waves that ebb and die
Swimming deep it falters by and by
And those who grieve are oft bereft alone.

Two is my limit, I'm afraid -
I don't want to wrap the car round a lamp post.
My young sons were overwrought from
The school production and set to watch a Pokemon film
And there is a 20: 20 later tonight from India.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Pohutakawa On The Driveway

Into the stark retaining wall
Formed of planking and stanchions
Seed-dust was blown in late autumn
Finding a foothold.

Thin sustenance and moisture:
But a form, a chance of life
For an indomitable spirit
Seeking the light, and the hope of grounding

As lost and distant as the early earth itself -
Where flowering first cast back the sunlight,
And stem and leaf drew nectar from the soil -
The dreamt land for which all hungers seek.

Slowly the seedling crown is formed
Its roots edging apart the piles -
Coming increasingly to culmination,
Branches standing out, standing up.

And then hope against hope and more
Adventurous adventitious rootlets drop,
Trailing, searching red-ragged for crevices
And pockets of dirt - for a place to stand.

Come this summer, bedrock has been gained
Interminable to calculus and ecstasy -
And happy in that delightful, loose release of ease
Festivities of flowers now celebrate in fountain sprays.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Possibility Of Refuge

No doubt love was born in attraction and protection.
The attraction of sexuality to ensure procreation
And the necessity of protection for its creations -
The ability to foster the defenceless and needy young
And the partnerships that protect and defend caregivers.

And the age-old pain, chronicled in numberless forms -
Of being apart and being together, of return and farewell,
Of intimations of predation, famine, disease and madness -
Is an inexorable and necessary precursor and condition
Of universal joy, universal sorrow and universal life.

What then of the light of the lode-star, the guiding star
Piercing the immensity of the dark sky and its eternity?
Such stars we know are not fixed but trace out circles
On the celestial sphere aligning, revolving and retreating
Timelessly in our reckoning but also inevitably finite.

The starlight brings us back to what we feel and hear
Touching the clear stream, listening to the necklace
Of songs remade of the spellbound heart, born of affection,
Given life by desire, coition, neediness and sustenance
And the possibility of refuge as the stars endlessly align.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Pukeko And The Kiwi

RED-NOSED STICKY BEAKS AND QUIET ACHIEVERS

Pukeko:

You wouldn't come down from the tree
To grub the forest free
Like the good Kiwi.

Quirky- perky; gawky-jerky,
Clumsy-lurky; swampie-turkey

Pukeko:

Now a stubborn mean old marshy
Poking a red flash nose
How would you be?

Quirky- perky; gawky-jerky,
Clumsy-lurky; swampie-turkey

...

Kiwi:

Once aloft flight-borne and feathery
Adorned in coloured finery
Nought left to see.

Quaintly-quietly; darkly-shyly
Dimly-dainty; delving-nightly

Kiwi:

Brave one, flying down from the tree
To grub the forest free
Loved by Tane.

Quaintly-quietly; darkly-shyly
Dimly-dainty; delving-nightly.

The Raspberry On The Window Sill

And so after twenty years I returned to her cottage
There is an otherness to its steps and roof and lights
But the porch still creaks, the awning still moves in the wind.
I am twelve again – I run barefoot across the rough ground
Having picked raspberries and held them in the palm of my hand.

I stretch up to the kitchen window and there is grandma at the stove
I put one raspberry on the window sill as a keepsake
And then I hide. The time has gone to pick gooseberries
Eat veggie soup or water the garden flowers.
But this scene will always be with me.

Still we must gather and eat - there will be black bread with white salt and
golden oil
And loved ones around the fire – though here the hearth is cold and we have
parted.
I simply can't pick gooseberries without grandma.
The house grew tired of waiting for me but now at least it is happy
That I am standing in the kitchen sensing a whiff of home-made soup.

[Translation / adaptation of a poem by the contemporary Russian poet Anna
Horwitz]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Red-Tailed Black Cockatoo

Lonely and lofty in the Stringybark Gum
With scarcely a chance of seeing a chum
Even with a bright red flash on its bum
There's rarely two of this black cockatoo:
Which gets it down and makes it blue
As would be true too for me and you.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Reproof

The old king reigned over bounty and plenty
But justice failed and none respected his rule -
Until a warrior came who stood firm in renown
Pledging honour and truth at the hill fort gates.
And the king, who was enchanted, wagered
The highest prizes of the kingdom's manifest
For the emblems that the warrior displayed
Signifying the everlasting beauty of what is true.

For the warrior held a staff bearing nine apples
Of red gold bonded from the orchards of Avalon,
And at his waist was hung the sword Answerer
That none could gainsay with lies at the last,
While in his pack he carried a golden bowl
That would break three times if lies were spoken
And meld three times, becoming whole again -
Bringing the dead to life - if the truth was spoken.

'Take them all old man, for what is right is right -
That there be no more deceit or double-dealing,
That honour becomes the mainstay and cornerstone
Of your kingdom - the music of justice a delight
And amusement for those who are well, and a healing
For those who are ill - bringing joy, sleep and solace.
And as for me, I will take in return nothing that is special
Simply that which in nature is love and therefore truest.

And betimes the warrior returned to take up the bargain
Standing fierce in the power that honour brought -
First taking the king's daughter and then his son
And then his beloved wife - leaving only the honesty of loss.
Then the king saw beyond the excess of what had been -
Beyond heaviness, sadness, jealousy, envy, and pride -
Hearing true melody when the bough was shaken
The sword tested, and the golden bowl resealed.

Watch! Riders thatching with the wings of swans
Will not close the roof tree against the stars:
And the young lord turned profligate and wastrel

Will burn fine oak beyond replenishment:
See! The five streams of scant understanding
Run to sand from the Well of Knowledge:
And silence beset men of artistry and deception
As lies, dishonour and discredit come to nought.

For what was given must be received
And the cattle which stray be returned:
Such that which was brought is checked
And each ones' granary holding affirmed:
And the milk of the seven cows is yielded
As the fleece of the seven sheep lies shared:
That the king and his kindred be then restored
And the debts of the Land of Promise redeemed.

And so the old king slept, awakening to the truth
That to safeguard those he loved he must rule well,
That truth is to be seen in the smiles of those beloved
And that the commonplace is the source of what is sound.
And it passed in a dream - the sword was not put to the test,
The bough was not brought to harvest and the bowl held whole:
And the warrior who wrought the judgment reproofing falsehood
Returned to the sea's enchanted realm and its righteous constancy.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Right Tempo

ROAD PATROL

I was on road patrol this term.
My team Hannah and Claire
Did a great job.

I was supposed to have been
With my ten-year old son
Theo and his mate Otis.

Theo said: "please dad don't
We'll be fine";.

Anyhow, Hannah and Claire
Were always on time
And used the lollipops well

Weighing up the traffic
And the kids, mums and strollers
Carefully.

'Poles out - Cross Now'
Looking left and right
And left again.

The one time I did it with Theo
He nearly totalled a toddler
With a lollipop backswing.

It's just a shame
That the world is not run
By ten-year old girls.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Scarcely-Seen

There are signs from past places that find us
Times from past phases that surprise us
Presences drawn from beyond the veil
From other lives, other planes, lost regions.

At the drop of a latch at midnight
The guttering of a spent candle
The start of a droplet of rain or blood
Can you sense them, the scarcely seen?

At the passing of the moon into cloud
The wolf's howling come to silence
The charcoal hand-print on the rock wall
Can you sense them, the scarcely seen?

At the black rising of the rookery
The alertness of the fox at earth-break
The dropping of the burning stave
Can you sense them, the scarcely seen?

At the failing of the winter sun
The gathering of bats in the eaves
The hiding of vermin in the wainscot
Can you sense them, the scarcely seen?

At the enfolding onset of slumber,
As dreams are wrapped sleep-tight
And there is a sudden violent tumbling
Can you sense them, the scarcely seen?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Seat Divine Sees Monarchy Renew

TO THE DUCHESS OF CAMBRIDGE

MADAM

Thus we have welcomed you with bare delight
And shown the promise of our swelling throngs
So we display our best within thy sight
And you may share our native thongs and songs.

But soon the reasons why you're loved by all,
Grow infinite, and pass what glimpsing teaches,
Regardless of the straps that rise or fall
Betraying gaps the Maori challenge breeches.

Since you are then Will's masterpiece, and know
His token for our loves, do as you do;
Make your return home gracious, and so
Vouchsafe this sight for us - the best of you.

But as, although a squint short-sightedness
Be ungracious, you cannot leave our lands;
Without a moment that I might express
My love, when I perceive the zephyr lift your dress.

As the helicopter eclipses and despoils
Royal modesty when the rotors ground,
Amid the turmoil so the vesture roils
And photographic flashes there abound.

Venus help me, I could not miss you there,
Your Kallipygos guise has claimed my token,
And any ills that flesh may bear
Erase with awe and majesty awoken.

Plain and sweet the left, plain and sweet the right;
By these we thus divine the absence of tattoo
The rumps which have the blessing of the light,
The seat divine sees monarchy renew.

In everything where nature grows
Are winds to keep it fresh and new
And turning cheeks the rear end shows;
Your birth and beauty are this balm in you.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Sentence Of Sentience - And All That Bulldust

What Richard Dawkins can't seem to get his head around
Is that our creation or evolution or whatever you want to call it
Is just an enormous joke - a life form jest punctuating eternity

So now we have seven to ten billion of us standing at the edge
Of a kind of cosmic black hole wavering on the brink of
Our own subsequent anonymity - largely oblivious to the abyss

But there is a kind of collective half-understanding
That we are reaching an impasse and that there may be nothing
Sensible to be done - that our time is disappearing into singularity.

Sometimes steers go mad when they near the slaughterhouse
And although they are limited in terms of imagination and intelligence
They sense the horror of the end - upsetting the equilibrium -

And the abattoir guardians of the stun-gun impose order on chaos,
Just as strong men and women are now arising amid human confusion
Appearing to promise hope - and a return to an ordered processing.

But more generally we infer that space and time may exhibit 'holes' or 'edges'
With singularities that are best defined as some kind of 'pathological behaviour'
That takes place on the swilled floor provided by infinity - inevitably.

Anyhow, as gates are closed on the mob, I'm determined to stand back
And cherish the small glimmerings of collective empathy
And noble purpose that we glimpsed on our stock-truck trip - what a laugh!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Seven Sisters Lost

In the dreaming time
The Napaljarri sisters
Were wooed by Wardilyka
An old Jampijinpa man
Whose skin-token
Matched the tribal taboo
But the seven girls
Did not love him.

Then as the sky darkened
Jukurra-Jukurra
A Jakamarra brave
From a rival caste and clan
Also sought the girls
Though his skin was forbidden
And in delight the seven maids
Loved him from afar in fear.

And so the seven sisters fled
From both shame and love -
Sought by the unwise old man
And the young stranger warrior -
Until in their haste
They fell from the edge of the earth
And were chased into the dark sky
Becoming pure but pitiable stars.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Silvereye Or 'stranger' [tauhou]

Farewell my love, the ship slips hove
With mollies set shore-side
Our whalers' rove in Sydney Cove
Has reached its time and tide.

Finches flocking high above

Pigs on deck, rum and cheese to hold
Sails are furled out-wide -
A whale-ship bold with harpoons stowed
And eyes now quickly dried.

A cloud to mast-trees tied

Beyond the heads the course is set
For Tasman's eastern isles
To Zealand's coast where whales are met
And lads must face their trials.

The flock ne'er once resiles

The skipper looks up top and smiles
To see the sweet birds wheel
With passage fair, far the miles
The shadows rigging-resting steal.

And the mascots sleep aloft

The tops break white and bright
The weather light in breeze
A sea with greenstone azure tint
That sparkles bright turquoise.

Stranger now the die is cast

Twenty sunny endless days have past
Amid the rocking trees -
The flock grows weaker at the last
Abreast the western breeze.

A nau mai haere mai tauhou

The morning dawns to gulls at sea
And fresh dews on the deck -
See long white clouds at distant lee
With land a hinted speck.

A nau mai haere mai tauhou

And soon the old brig draws to shore
Near Paritutu Rock
And warriors to whalers roar
While gifts are taken stock.

A nau mai haere mai tauhou

As Maori break the musket chest
Whalers gather daughters
But silvereyes are now at rest
That wide calm sea has brought us.

A nau mai haere mai tauhou

...

'Kia korero koe i te ngutu o te manu,
Kia hoki ana mai to wairua ki te ao nei—i—i! '

[Welcome - welcome stranger.
Speak with the bill of a bird
Reincarnated to this world.]

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Slow, Low Ache Of Seasoned Testing

I very much suspect that growing pains
Continue as our substance lays down rings:
Like the monsoon trees that grow with the rains -
Or the temperate trees that winter brings

To stasis and sleep for the time being
When the frosts and snows value strength not growth -
With the Spring mere creed for the believing
And Summer's prophesy a doubtful oath.

Rough bark, thin-skin, bast, sapwood, heartwood, pith
They are there within us. Cut through and see
The outer shell sawn back to seedling birth
Each scarred circle the making of the tree.

Can't you feel the deadwood and its dying
The slow, low ache of seasoned testing?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Song Of The Cicada [[maori 'tatarakihi']]

Singing children:
School platoon on the march,
shepherded carefully
by the harbourside
to Te Papa.

I listen
to the song
of this wiggly taniwha

telling of the cicadas
lost to the night
... and Parihaka.

Tara ra ta ki ta ki ta
Tara ra ta ki ta ki ta

Stumbling-bumping,
kerfuffle-shuffling
clumsily-queuing:
chanting their haka.

Nga tamariki e waiata
ana i te Tatarakihi

The children
and their song
about the cicada.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Southern Cassowary

The flightless Southern Cassowary
Casuarius casuarius johnsonii
Has a dad who is customarily
Abusive
So is understandably
Shyly and warily
Reclusive.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Southern Corroboree Frog

The Southern Corroboree Frog
Used to sing in the tussockland bog
With squiggle-top skin
It hopped out and in
To serenade logs in the fog.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Sthenurus

COMING OUT AS BI

Roo keep movin' - youse swankin' something dilly
Something's up your pouch so confess
You've been flammin' when you should have been griffin'
And now science has put it to the test

Youse roos were made for walking
And that's just what youse did
Spruikin' won't unsure us
Youse struthin' Sthenurus.

Yeah, you keep amblin' when you oughta be hoppin'
And you keep stuntin' when you oughta upped it
You keep slopin' when you oughta be a scotchin'
Now, what's right is right but you ain't been right yet

Youse roos were made for walking
And that's just what youse did
Spruikin' won't unsure us
Youse struthin' Sthenurus.

You keep strollin' when you should have be stillin'
And you keep thinkin' that you'll never get caught
But I've just found me a brand new box of fossils
That ends the lies I never should have bought

Youse roos were made for walking
And that's just what youse did
Spruikin' won't unsure us
Youse struthin' Sthenurus.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Stubborn Fragility Of Orchids

We have two orchids which had become very much neglected.
The one, though apparently healthy but barren and austere,
Denied sufficient water and nutrients, overtopped its pot
And struck roots deep into the emptiness below the glass cabinet,
An ugly, straggled tangle, in places scarring the surface of the wood
Desperate for sustenance and an opportunity for life -
The other, in a small pottery box, was beset with a hardy weed
That grew like tousled cress and came to tiny blue flowers
But the container, lacking any kind of drainage,
Ponded what little water had been provided, stunting
The second orchid so that only two shriveled, scarred leaves
Protruded from its alternately saturated and dessicated cup.

After I had visited my sister and seen how her orchids flourished
The reproaches of the Buddha that guarded the glass cabinet
Became too much to bear and I resolved to amend my caring.
I bought two deep identical plastic containers that hold basal water,
And a sufficiency of enriched wood chips appropriate to orchids.
In the first place, I carefully wrapped all the excess roots into the container
And packed the flakes of bark around them leaving the plant standing proud
In the second, I gently nestled the damp and half-decayed roots
Among a cornucopia of woody detritus that simulated a tree bole
And then I reminded myself to water gently, considerately, consistently
My two adopted green orphans, new charges for my daily rounds
In setting things to right and creating space for growth in homely order.

This morning when I learned of the death of an old friend,
Heavy with regret and reminiscence I wrote to his wife:
"Heather, I was so sorry to hear your news - a wonderful man.
Please accept my most sincere condolences and best wishes".
Now I don't think that he would have complained of being neglected
And nor can I claim indifference in the great scheme of things:
We have had good lives, well lived with friends and family,
With consistent caring ultimately making all the difference -
As for the orchids, they are going gang-busters under the new regime
With the larger one parading a bunch of magenta blossoms
And the smaller and most neglected first opening and greening its two leaves
To then disclose the promise of tight overlapping buds at its centre.

No doubt there are lessons to be learned here about men and orchids
About the processes of renewal and transcendence
But considering the mix of nature, nurture and fragile vitality
It is beyond me as to exactly who or what is contained.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Swift Parrot - Love Is A Many Splendoured Thing

NAUGHTINESS OF THE SWIFTIE: Canto 1

AFTER ALEXANDER POPE

Nolueram, Velocita, tuos violare pennae;
Sed juvat, hoc precibus me tribuisse tuis

I was long unwilling, Swiftie, to violate your feathers
But am pleased now that I acceded to your entreaties

(Martial, Epigrams: 12: 84)

What flighty congress rises up on rainbow wings
What dire distress from polly-amory springs?
May I suppress this verse though it be due
That even Long John may forego to view:
The subject is the Swiftie and its lays
And If the Muse conspires, its sexy ways.

What strange motive, Polly, could compel
A reclusive forest dweller to a polly-androus hell
O say what stranger cause, yet unexplored
Could make of innocence a promiscuous bird?
And in the trees the lure of casual dalliance
Give all but pornographic parrots deep offence?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Taipan

The taipan is an 8 foot snake
Whose treading on is some mistake.

Deep in the Aussie Outback yonder
If off the beaten track you wander
You may feel an elapid mandibular crush -
Then a shikkering neurotoxic rush
While its haemolytics clot the blood -
And curse the spot where once you stood.

Its coagulopathics should not be vilipended
You may be short on time to be amended.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Tasmanian Devil

A handsome Tasmanian Devil
Strayed from the straight and level
He preyed on the chicks
And tricked them for kicks
In tandem depravity revel.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Thrymskvitha [?rymskvi?a] - In Modern Poetry

Then Thor the son of Odin and of Mother Earth
Woke to find that his thunderous hammer
Had been taken as he slept and that his power was gone.

And his beard and hair afire with anger
At the loss of the moulder and melder of fates -
He sought out his sly brother Loki

Raging that the striker down
That grounded sky to earth
Had been stolen by the giants.

Then Loki went to Freya the Fair
The Mistress of the Heavens
And asked to borrow her cloak

And fearing massive devilry
She gave her cloak willingly
With its silver clouds and golden dawns

And Loki flew far abroad with the sky-cape
Coming at last to the Home of the Giants -
Cunning and enchanted from the Elf-kingdom

There Thrym the mighty giant king hailed him,
As he flexed the golden leashes of his hounds
And stroked the flowing manes of his steeds.

"Ghostly one, how are the gods faring now
Have they sent you to bring me good news? "

"Alas" said Loki, "things go badly now with us
The hammer that anneals and tempers has been lost".

Unwisely Thrym confided to the spectre
"I have taken the hammer and hidden it
Eight miles deep in the heartless iron beneath

It will no longer ring for the making of things -

It will be locked within the anvil itself
Unless Freya the Fair becomes my wife".

Then Loki returned to the realm of the gods
Meeting Thor in the forecourt of Asgard
Both downcast with their separate sorrows.

"What news do you bring from the far realms
Tell me truly - is there an answer for our loss?
Quickly speak before the understanding fades".

"My honest brother, the news I bring is bad -
Thrym the king of giants has stolen the hammer
And will not return it until Freya is his wife".

Then they went to Freya, telling her the news
That she should bind on a bridal veil
To safeguard the bringing together of things

But she grew angry and snorted her disgust
At the thought of slaking the King of Giant's lust
Bursting the Brising-elfin Necklace on her breast.

Then the far-famed gods met in counsel
To plot for the recovery of the lightning-striker
And its return to the hands of its wielder Thor.

And Heimdall the white - the wisest of all -
Who foresaw the waxing and waning of fate
Said: 'Thor must wear the bridal veil and necklace -

Dress him in a woman's pretty skirt and shift
Let there be keys hanging from his perfumed girdle
Gems in his hair and a fetching little cap for his head".

But Thor answered bashfully, blushing with wrath:
"It speaks badly of my honour and manhood
That I should be brought betrothed behind a veil."

Then Loki spoke up: "Thor accept your trial -
If you can no longer temper the earth with heaven's fire
The giants will become the rulers of Asgard".

And so they decked out Thor for the bridal feast
With the keys to pleasure rattling from his sash
And his beard well-hidden beneath a silken mask

And Loki went first as the bride's maid servant
Announcing to Thrym the arrival of Freya the Fair
Bringing the dowry demanded from the gods

And the giants made ready the beasts of sacrifice
And as the blood ran into the altar cauldrons
The mountains burst and earth burned with fire

Then Thrym ordered the giants to make ready:
"Put fresh straw on the floors and benches
Cleanse the tables and unseal the mead flagons

Now they are bringing Freya the Fair my bride -
Beyond compare to the gold-horned cattle of my byres
The jet-black oxen of my yards, and my gems and jewels -

She is come and with her beauty I will lack for nothing;".
Then the feasting began - and beer and mead were served -
And Thor ate an ox, ten swans and eight salmon

And all the dainty treats that were set for the women
And out-drunk all the other wedding guests together
Quaffing three tuns of mead and many horns of ale.

Then Thrym the leader of the giants became uneasy
"Whoever saw a bride with such a bite on her
Or a maiden who drank to the dregs of mead like this? "

But Loki the arch and artful handmaiden
Answered convincingly for her mistress:
"She has fasted eight days longing for Jotunheim and you".

Then Thrym lifted aside the silk - longing for a kiss
But became fearful and leaped back in dread:
"Why do the eyes of my beloved burn so fiercely? "

And again Loki, serving the goddess, answered:

Have no fear, her eyes are over-bright with dreaming
She has not slept for eight nights longing for Jotunheim and you"

And the giant's luckless sister asked for the bridal fee:
"Take off the rings of red gold that kept you whole
And take up willingly the welcome of your husband".

Then Thrym set to seal the wedding with spells:
"Bring in the hammer that it may hallow the bride
Let it lie on the maid's lap that we may be bonded".

But Thor, the hard-souled one laughed cruelly
Seizing the fiery hammer of the heavens to beat down
First Thrym his giant suitor and then his warriors and followers

Until finally, he slew the giant king's uncomely sister -
And she who had demanded the bridal fee of rings
Received scot-free a death blow from the hammer.

And the hammer Mjolnir was returned in triumph to Asgard
The moulder and melder once more of outcomes
The bringer of victories - the creator of lasting harmonies.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Titipounamu Or 'rifleman' Wren

Seeking escape from enslaved beguilement
The young warrior turned against the crone
Who had kept him in enchanted confinement
Persuading him her love fused them to one.

But he took heart and courage, when she left
The cave to hunt the forest floors and shades,
And killed the trophy captures that she kept
To celebrate her bloody sharp-toothed raids.

Fearing her wrath and reprisal, he fled
Thinking none survived to tell the tale -
But one small agate-jewelled wren hid
And brought the news to her of his betrayal.

So she, tracking her mocking, faithless lover
Found him hidden within a monstrous stone
That shone bright with jade from core to cover -
Seizing there a precious greenstone boon.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Tui

The Tui chortles mid the trees
With cheerily yodelled ease -
A ruffian with a vicar's collar
He fluffs it up, and then lets holler:

'ck 'uk gerk garr quolla!

He flits among the flaxes
To extract the nectary waxes
And lodges where he pleases
To dodge refractory squeezes

'ck 'uk gerk garr quolla!

Tuis never sing the Blues
And almost always come in twos
One plus Tui rare makes three
Oh my, oh boy, how could that be?

'ck 'uk gerk garr quolla!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Wisdom In The Rending Wind - The Ruru Or Morepork

The storm is shifting rafters, lifting eves.
It's dangerous to walk against the wind
And black rains lash and sting the hillsides blind
As now, so then hau puhi howls and heaves.

Those born of rutting sky and earth have sinned
And sorrows blow against the cliffs and trees.
The children rend the darkness, seize the light
And grief and yearning strain the breaking seas.

Now owlsh eyes can turn from side to side
And guard as spirits stray and wander wide.

Dark and emptiness flee before the sight
Of warmth and wisdom as the gale retreats -
And you my friend will croon ruru tonight
When the waking Bush its dusky lover greets.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The Wombat

Apparently the wombat sucks its thumb
Away from home and missing mum -
Very sensitive and shy it seems
It's prone to nerves and scary dreams.

Hairy bottom, hairy nose
And none too clean between the toes -
With hygiene less than ones desiring
It's not surprising it's retiring.

Left without shampoo or soap
The lovelorn then run out of rope -
Lacking cuddles, grope or hope
They stay at home and simply mope.

And when they seek a pal or mate
They're oft too meek to score a date -
Eschewing roots and fruits the while
Neither philogynous nor androphile.

The numbers in the Warrumbungles
Face brooder's droop and lack of bundles -
And things are hardly fine and dandy
In Warnambool and Dirranbandi.

Across in Broken Hill just broken hearts
As dating agents wait for starts -
And bunga bunga's out in Cunnamulla
Wagga Wagga, Toowoomba, Bulla Bulla...

With baby wombats rare in Hay
The gastronomes just stay away -
In Gundaroo there are so few
They're using mutton now for stew.

But veterinarians are planning scripts to suit
With Viagra applied to stump and root -
Plus anxiety suppressing medication
And an social network application.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

The World It Seems Is Ending In Fire

The world it seems is ending in fire,
As favored by the more passionate,
Whose first thoughts are of desire
Which kindles like the quickest element.

And whatever else comes to pass
It consumes its three rivals indifferently
Water and air to void and pallid gas
Earth to ash and cinder indiscriminately.

Not with a bang nor with a whimper -
Nor that hateful ice would ever suffice -
We will burn baby, spark to ember
In tender embassy of love - nice eh?

Dead water, dead sand, and burnt roses
Are where the story's ending smolders.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

This Is How They Ara: The Tuatara

Our Te Ara
It's the be's and he's

Our tuatara
He's a fossil tease.

But I will bet
Your gold tiara
You won't find
No three-atara.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Those Girls

I used to keep a score and tick the list
Of names of girls who'd graced my bed
And on command they'd keep a tryst
And parade their beauty round my head.

It was a dream that froze and broke
As time took down my selfish youth
And I began to hear when women spoke
And saw when beauty was or wasn't truth.

'I love you' were the words so lightly said
To lively smiles and curves and curls
Amusedly among the years that fled
Leaving loss and wonder in their stead

Now as careless boys and older lovers will
I set you free but hope you love me still.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Three Hares

Tell me, how can you distinguish

The male from the female hare?

Is it that the male sits on its haunches

And that the female has moist eyes?

Is it that the buck goes hoppity-skip

And the doe's eyes are misted and glazed

Or that he tucks his legs when sitting

And that she dims her gaze when he is near?

For the male has a lilted, scampering gait,

And the female's eyes become wild:

And the male's feet strike and kick

When she is fearful and at the edge of tears

But when Jack and Jill run together

How much alike they seem -

Who can see which is he and which is she

As they bound away side by side?

And when two hares are fighting, it is clear

A third, whether he or she, will refrain;

Unless perhaps in a shared innocence

That presages peace and tranquility.

Alone in likeness they have become an illusion

In fighting and pairing they become a dream

In the possibility of the third way a mirage

Nothing distinguished - impermanent, insubstantial

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Thursday Morning

BLOSSOM THROSTLE

Every morning, I say:
"Do you want some coffee
Blossom Throstle? "

And you say:
"That would be great"
Or, "Maybe"
Or, "I have to have a shower
Because I need to do my hair"
Or, "I'll just do my make-up".

You like it strong with a dash of milk
I like buckets of Trim
But we both abjure sugar
As it is a modern-day excess.

After my heart has stopped
Palpitating, I settle
In my favourite green chair
And meditate.

I always look at the bank
Under the mustard-coloured house
And try to see how far
My planting is coming along.

On Thursdays, we take out the rubbish
In our green wheelie bins
Because the trucks might
Damage the road.

This morning, Joanne scurried out
Through the morning rain
With her bin and sprinted back -
More of a wet chook than a thrush.

And you are taking the boys

Early for road patrol
And then on to sort the clothes
With Justine for the School Fair.

Now the rain has died down
The birds are singing again.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Time, Place And Absence

As the world is closed and bounded,
The new world beckons -
And our place is both free and captive
And absent.

There's a special anguish that writers have
About where the world stops and starts
Whether they are egoists for whom the world is small
Or introverts shrinking from the world at large

About whether they are pushing the boundaries
Or interrogating the encroachment of reality

And they talk into the space that stretches in front of them
Trying to find a seam, an edge - a horizon
That marks out their own experience or understanding
That defines a hinterland they can claim and settle
Or a homeland that can be made secure for sharing

This question of separation and its suffering
Is at the heart of things - in where things find a place.

And as for time, as Anna Akhmatova has commented:

'As the future ripens in the past,
The past rots in the future' -

And the present is both sweet and tart
And tainted.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

To My Tart Mistress - Enough Of The Hissy Fit Storm Wellington

You were in a foul mood this morn
Tossing your curls at every turn -
As the sun rose, there were salt tears
And shrill scolds and glowers fierce.

Hell hath no fury like that gale
That puts hearts down to shrink and fail.
Had we but world enough and time
This temper lady were no crime

We would sit down and think which way
To quieten and set to rights the play
Across the storm-tossed harbour side
Where lingers love upon the tide.

Still unchecked blasts bemoan no good
As breakers cross the beach and flood
And so I must forgo your praise
As on destruction wide I gaze.

Once adored now a harpy beast
I set you now amongst the least.
But smiles will come on other days
When freshling conquests test thy ways -

Lady none can with thee compare
When skies are blue and sun is fair.
No more complaints - I love you still
And see it clear and always will.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

To The Objects Of Our Desires And Any Necessary Objections

Everything is talking to us - if we stop to listen.

Look out then for the notes in signs
The sounds in the unsound and the sound
The melodic in the iconic
Even the symbolic in unclashed cymbals.

Take a crank shaft - it is indicative
Or an egg tray as an ideogram
Or a plant become a pictogram
Or a Rubik Cube that is transformed.

Look out then for the clear notes, the strong sounds
The signs, the symbols, the icons, the ideas - the emotions
Picking up the rhemes, themes and memes that are fundamental
To our own wellbeing and the safety of society
Picking up the rhythm - letting things strike a chord.

No doubt it is easier if you are versed in Chinese writing
Where chunks of text are sorted and arrayed and clicked into place
And more difficult for us in that our sentences are strings
That run on loosely - largely lacking in form -
Depending more on punctuation and instrumentation.

But we can still listen deeply to the sounds of objects -
To the objects of our desires and any necessary objections -
To the essence of things - transformations and translations.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Toad Redux

If you stay still you will freeze
Even with a blanket round your knees.
Purposefully I search for a florin
In my pocket seams to slot in.

The waning gas has popped
Growing shallow, yellow ... greyed.
Huddle still towards the fire's lattices
Oblivion and hibernation crevices

Soaking up the last rays
In the final passable days:
'Girl there's a better life, can't you see
For you and me' - you have to agree.

As the cold gathers and the coin is slotted
Move now before the toad has squatted.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Traces

[Losses brought forward from 1970]

An image retrieved from the USB
Shows a girl in a drill-knit turtleneck -
High cheeks, her hair swept up. She looks at me
She is strong, she is afraid - she turns to check.

Kindly, she has been scanned as a keepsake.
Such likeness no longer hurts me or her:
For goodness sake, long lost, our joy's mistake.
But I too turn from present strength to fear.

Traces of love that didn't work out right
Memories of guilt in bits and pieces
Smiles that were better never brought to life
I close my eyes until the prayer ceases.

Two score years and five and still I live
Trusting we who failed must now forgive.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Tragic And Novel

The first of my four wives
Once described my life
As a Bad Russian Novel
And this morning my
Current and fourth wife
Responding to my observation
That after going Up to Cambridge
I wore cravats and breakfasted
On wild strawberries and pink champagne
In the company of my teddy bear Algernon
Said that it had been all downhill since then
And that my life had all the bathos of a Greek Tragedy.

Australian and New Zealand girls
Can be very cutting
But as Ned Kelly said
In less fortunate circumstances:

'Such is life'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Train Time

In the TV room
Trains on the floor
Down in the hallway
Trains by the door

Up on the bench
Engines galore
Pile on the table
More than before

Thomas is tugging
Troublesome trucks
Bill's in the siding
And Douglas is stuck

Spencer needs water
But Gordon's in luck
Salty loves fishing
And Percy hates muck

Daisy is smiling
And purring around
Settebello is cruising
With scarcely a sound

While Diesel is plotting
Tram Toby is found
And Harold is whizzing
Way off the ground

Steam in the funnel
Down at the zoo
Trains in the tunnel
Got to come through.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Trucking Fatstock By Road Train From Urupunga To Katherine Meatworks In The Northern Territory

This is a country of rushes and ringing in,
Of clean-skins and bang-tailed musters,
Of hunting strays from the shrinking waters
Of the smell of leather and horses and diesel
Of yard gates closed and road trains rolling up.

This is a country of scrub bulls and trap cattle,
Of endless plains and dead-end tracks
Where insignificance rolls onwards and forward
Under red dust through sparse scrub
And the rigs will find their station late of day.

This is a country where the land falls away
Behind the horizon as the brutal sun
Glowes ochre-daubed and heat glimmered
At close of play and the loading ramp goes quiet
And the driver checks tires and couplings

This is a country where stock is broken
And those untamed are fenced and penned
And even the wildest from the bush runs
Are lulled by rubbing girths and stifles
As the road train runs on into the night

Come the deepest dark the lights shine out
Across the red country and its dusty trails
Into the black soil plains, fighting for the hard top,
Culvert by culvert, marker by marker flash-lighting
Tremors and shadows from the convoy.

Hands too tired and lips too dry to seal a roll-your-own,
Come the dawn and the bitumen straight as a die
Leads on to Katherine, stun gun and skinning knife:
This is a land of small and very grudging mercies
With no holds barred on driving hell for leather.

Trump Koi About Muddied Waters

BIG FISH HAIKU

Orange and flaky
Floundering the closing net
Fishy to the gills.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Twenty-Five Degrees Celsius

... as the political temperature rises:

Can you hear a ripple of imminence?
The sense that things are changing impalpably
That we are being morphed to a new state
Amused, bemused, beguiled, placated
Locked into a soporific sauna of clammy lies
And that those who tend the embers envision
Our frog consciousness will slowly dwindle.

Can you feel the rise of prescience?
A fear that rights are degrading irremediably
Being eroded gradually without debate
Abused, refused, reviled, negated
As the fug stupefies and the will dies
And those who intend to rob us of decision
Slop the coals with a swindle ladle.

But also conceive sentience in the silence?
The dictate that lines must be drawn finally -
That soft-soaping set aside, it is never too late
Awakened, goaded, riled, rededicated
To step up, green as we are, blinking our eyes
Rejecting the parboiled amphibian option
To fight for truth and love as best we are able.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Two Chairs

Take a seat, let it take your weight
And let us sit together quietly
Setting aside stories and end-points
For presence and being.
Look - the space between us is open:
An altar if it suits your purpose
Or a surface for the prayer mat.

...

God's very own the West
God's very own the East;
As also the North and South
Gathered in love and truth.

...

Set aside racing the run of day
For the time the seconds chase
Will never show a fairer face;
Come close and let the stillness show
Where we must put the world away
To draw it closer as the silence grows:
Let's tell unheard our secret sorrows
To the shadows that the sundial throws,
For what goes forward and what is past
Will never alter time or stay its haste:
Then let what's left unsaid in quietness strengthen
The amity that calmly sharing space will lengthen.

...

God's very own the West
God's very own the East;
As also the North and South
Gathered in love and truth.

...

So let us study distinction and its absence:
That there is no separation
Of what is apart and what is in contact;
That there is no form or formlessness
As edges and envelopes are unsealed;
That there is no resting or resolution
As emptiness and decay are inevitable;
That thusness is fleeting and yet perceptible
With reality and illusion in mutual shadow;
That life and its converse co-arise
The sentient born of and returning to the insentient;
That we may distinguish the qualities of people
All special - but then there is nothing special;
That when we get up from the chair,
And return to the world from the mountain,
Or from the wilderness, it is in the natural order
That we should recognise compassion.

...

God's very own the West
God's very own the East;
As also the North and South
Gathered in love and truth.

...

The place between has now been won
Our streams of thought together run
And in the catchment likeness grows
Perfect in the peace that confluence knows.
Set down the books that mention blame
And hear our hearts make thinking tame:
Catch the breath and count its pulse
Still the drives that thoughts convulse
Quicken so the quietened revelation
That kindness alone is ample adoration
And togetherness itself a heavenly dedication.

...

God's very own the West
God's very own the East;
As also the North and South
Gathered in love and truth.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Two Points - For Damian Mackenzie

He settles into his kicking
Looking to convert a try.
Just what is he thinking -
And why is he smiling?

The heart's own quiet gathers
Looking for the sweet spot.
At this moment nothing matters
Just a memory and slotting the shot.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Unconditional Acceptance

It is a fine autumn morning
In the riverside park
Backed by bush-clothed hills
At the start of the trail run.

The flats are green with long-mown grass
Specked with celandines, dandelions and daisies
And the trees curl leaves to the retreating
Northern sun - catching the best of the day.

There are oaks, sycamores and willows
And plantings from North America
Like the maple that is turning bronze
Mimicking its forbears in the Fall.

I talk directly and tersely to God
Offering a brusque thank you for it all.

I don't do obeisance and obedience anymore
We have come over the years to an understanding:

When I sit and then kneel
For a which art in heaven
Or thy kingdom come
I don't do reverence when I stand up

When I pay my dues
And burn a candle
For what I have lost
And for those I love

I stand back determinedly
Turning quickly on my heels
Walking away without regret -
After all we have come a long way together.

But I recite my prayer nonetheless:

Of those things that you forgive

But that I cannot forgive
Of those things that I forgive
But that I cannot forget
Of those things that others did
That rankle still
Of the things I think
But would rather have not come to mind
Of the ending already compromised
And the promise only part fulfilled
Of being sometimes without skin
And feeling the pain of others like my own
Of being neglectful and unthinking
Averting my eyes and shrinking back my hand.

Yet as the sun shines and the birds sing
I know that we both mean well.

Along the river bank, the path narrows
And there is a giant *Macrocarpa* Cypress
Massive and magnificent (its partner stumped)
Singled out now by a red-painted cross.

I go up and give it a hug
Turning away determinedly.
I don't do reverence anymore
Only unconditional acceptance.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Unlike The Stateless

In the pitch-black of the pin-drop night
Deep-sleep awakened to an estranged bed
Unsure of flight or fight, or wrong and right
I toss in nightmare of the life I led.

I am at the end of a work assignment
In a far distant and hostile country
Alone - trapped deep in a predicament
Of suspended payments not knowing why.

Unable to access the funds I need,
Packing, unpacking, missing my plane flight:
In despair to resolve things and make speed
Doubling-back desperate to make things right.

But I am here at home and all is well
Unlike the stateless in this living hell.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Up Grogan's Creek

What the f**k ago-go
In the lip-trap embargo
Secular segmented
Variously allocated

I will outline your body
With a terminal array
Of schist louvres
Claws hors d'oeuvres

Come the tessellated moments
Pitching horseshoes and tents

the bunyip in the wadi
camel akimbo humping lonely
Burke and Wills upskirt queer
Drop bear, digeridoo - dig here

Leering the taipan surviving the goanna
A selfie-starting Pianola login or Joanna
No more quarter or stock horse
Neither here or there a matter of course
A tool-scarred coolibah the last resource

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Utility And Creative Licence

And I said
I don't see how it helps you
To humiliate me
And she sobbed
I don't want to humiliate you.

And later that night after
Grand-standing and sulks
Thong and high heels
We made love
And she thought of the ironing
And I thought
Worriedly - hurriedly
Of the clandestine
And I slept that deep dark sleep
And she tossed and turned.

So my country
We survive
You and I
Utility and
Creative Licence
Rubbing along:

To you I am full
Of misplaced arrogance
Questioning everything
Taking nothing for granted
To me you are full
Of misplaced ignorance
Questioning nothing
Taking everything for granted.

And yet you sobbed
Deep heaving regrets
And I offered
To clean the bathroom
Saying
It's not about Tall Poppies

It's about taking stock
And then turning the page
And you said:

The everyday is everything
We don't do too badly.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Wanderer

The year has drawn to a close
And the shortest day is near -
Another winter for the wanderer.

Just as the evening traveller
Nears the fireside of an inn
Only to find ruin in a cold hearth

There is no feast to enliven us -
Not even wild grain and mallows
For wasteland gruels and stews.

Having made haste on the highway,
The river has swept away the ford -
Turning back, the roads are longer.

We sleep finally under the sky
And our solo lifetime journey
Passes like dust from our heels.

Vitality and decay follow in season,
Metal and stone are more enduring -
Awareness is the only true treasure.

The muted dead have gone ahead
The old graves have become fields -
Rather than look west to the new sun

And set aside some time for the record.
An archer who can pull a strong bow
Falls short of the writer of a single character.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

War Is A Shitty Business

Hannibal traipsed thousands of men,
Horses and mules and 37 elephants over the Alps
At the Col de la Traversette in a brilliant ruse
That saw a bog en route being seeded
With the faeces of ruminants like elephantidae
And that of their accompanying primates,
Such that the hunt is now on for tapeworm cysts
Which were deposited in the peat as keepsakes for posterity.

Humans create around 1.4 litres of urine a day
And around 125 grams of faeces:
Assuming a Punic army of 40,000 men
This equates to 56 cubic metres of urine
And 5 tons of human excrement a day
[Never mind the elephants] -
Because as we all know
Armies march on their stomachs and like a drink or two.

And if Darius had an army of one hundred thousand
At the Battle of Gaugamela [modern Erbil in Iraq]
It would have been relieved of 12.5 tons of poop
And 140 cubic metres of pee on the day
Of his catastrophic battle against Alexander the Great -
But you could raise that by two and half on some estimates.

And if you apply the same factors to the Battle of Waterloo
Where there were 200,000 men [and several thousand horses]
You come up with 25 tons of ordure and 280 cubic meters of human urine
On the 18th of June 1815, in a close run thing.

And let's just pursue the stream to its Niagara
In the First World War 9 million died [along with 8 million horses],
And 22 million men were wounded
After 70 million had been mobilized all told.
So that if you take the last figure on 28th July 1914
You get 8,750 tons of Number 9 and
98,000 cubic metres of Werris Creek or Gypsy's Kiss
From a fine bunch of lads.

So next time you see neat lines of marching men
With stripes and lanyards, pips and even plumes
Remember the US Marines at Iwo Jima
A first rate body of men - semper fidelis -
Who had to keep their heads down and defecate
In their trousers because their foxholes were so cramped

And all the stats that show
That war is a shitty business.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

We Are Surrounded By Ghosts – Now We Have To Live With Them

Watching you, I felt chill winds of springtime blow
Among white cherry trees and purple sprays -
Saw the lost gardens amid the scents of long ago
Of the last lands whose lids are closed in final days.

Pressing flowers into the leaves and loneliness
Kneeling to the mud or delving for the sand
Quiet frames of countenance and loveliness
I longed to comfort you and take your hand

And catch your eyes and gaze at you my lost girl
In wonder at the years now left in beauty's stead
And you would laugh and say 'Kind Sir' and twirl -
Tossing bemusedly your wise angelic head.

Only time divides our souls – and time is on our side
And those who went before will leave the window wide.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

We Were Together ... That Is Enough, I Tell Myself

Join the living to those who have fallen
... te pito ora ki te pito mate

'What is it like to die? ' my young son asks?

'It is like living', I answer too quickly,

Part intuitively, partly flippantly -

Self-transparency in my response.

...

I will try harder.

I see myself as somehow the author

Of a story that is yet to find an ending:

Mysteriously entangled within the plot

As both its subject and its principal actor.

Be calm ... articulate, I tell myself.

I see myself descending a stairway

Carefully negotiating each down tread

Fearful of any dreadful tumble ahead

That might take this still living stance away.

Don't slip ... don't fall, I tell myself.

I see myself surfing probabilities

As successive treatments build and recede:

Still fortunate to be wave-riding steadily

The momentum of medical interventions.

Stand firm ... don't flinch, I tell myself.

I see myself at the helm of a crewless vessel

Trying to bring her to land, to port, to quay -

Captain of the closing of this little history

Desperate to make all good, all equal.

Be alert ... don't fail, I tell myself.

I see myself as a sad white-visaged clown

Left bobbing, waving my life's steering wheel -

Missing the bus, once the talk of the town -

My gash of a grin sometimes unnerving, unreal.

Keep smiling ... its an act, I tell myself

I see myself as a nuisance to be resolved

Commonplace evidence of half-existence:

The residue from a cup that overflowed

The ashes of some flames that fortune kissed.

Bear up ... there is love enough still.

I see myself knowing nothing of that finality -

Fearful of pain, the edging, encroaching none-self -

Not wanting to make a spectacle or a fool of myself

Hoping to redeem at the last some dignity.

No matter ... there is no place for pride.

And if I answer too carelessly and too lightly

Take no harm from my answer. It is well meant -

For a transaction where the self itself is spent

But sparks of lovingness from this glow brightly.

We were together ... that is enough, I tell myself.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Wellington's Safe Harbour

Brought together at lunchtime in Unity
there is a kindly bonhomie of Kiwi poets
celebrating Wellington and the creative
life that it inspires with its Big Weather:
voices that have been moved to 'record
their responses to the steep streets and myriad people,
the food and political energy, the cable car and cenotaphs,
the wharves' - and the winds that can leave you hanging!

'I want to make people feel, cry out - for poetry
to be a dagger brought to bone', she says in tears
'for it to eviscerate the ordinary - for it to be real',
she who was brought to this city from civil war:
"I was eight years old when they built the port in Novi.
At that age most children know how to swim — I didn't know how yet.
While playing about the harbour I fell into the sea.
I sank.

The water buoyed me up.
I saw the children above me on the wall
— I extended my hands — tried to shout, — I couldn't!
I was swallowing sea water, — I was sinking — I was lost!
In that instant I flew through my entire life.
All the sins of my young life appeared again before me:
I was stealing sugar, I was beating my brother,
I was lying, I was climbing the fruit tree

— My last thought was: "I was descending into Hell! "
— and I lost consciousness.
They got me out — and for what? "
It is not as though this doesn't happen here -
last year a young man in his cups and overbold,
revelling late at night on the harbourside promenade,
climbed the iron lattice of our ancient floating crane the Hikitia
dropped down and failed to surface.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Wharariki Dawn

The Pavilion Terrace, the Peacock and the Butterfly

The peacock is as always magnificent
With his brightest of iridescent blues
And tufted top-knot of feather flowers.

He is scrounging the terrace
For crumbs from the campers.

Above the slowly subsiding flooded creek
Flax and cabbage trees
Fringe the driveway, and the cabins
Where the wary and provident have taken refuge -
As the mist and drizzle gust and billow
Mizzling out the old hills above.

A tiny and perfect six-year old Japanese girl
Kicks her heels against her wooden chair,
Lost for worlds in her screen game,
Her face framed by a cloche of blue hair with bubble-gum streaks
Painted by her loving mums in the modern fashion -
Her devices suddenly astart from the peacock's inquisition.

You have to smile.

I sit still longer on the communal couch
Cradling my precious morning coffee
Shaking off the earth's premature embrace -
Sodden tenting and rope stumbling
And a night-time of wails and keening.

The heavy, murky fog continues to roll in.

A brave butterfly flitters before me,
Perfuming its wings on the droplet-dewed pathway jasmine.

Li Bai and Basho, what are you two old rascals doing here?

Have you nothing better do to do

Than hang around the Wharariki Camping Ground on a wet dawn?

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

What The World Needs Now

What the world needs now is oxytocin
It's the main thing that there's just too little of
What the world needs now is bubby love

No not just for some but for everyone

Lord we don't need another mountain.
There are landscapes and hillsides
We can strip mine.

There are oceans and tides,
Though the fish stocks slide,
That'll last our time

What the world needs now is snuffle love
What we need now is snuggly inhalation
Not just for us but for every nation.

It's the only thing that there's just too little of.

Lord we don't need another meadow
Or corn fields and oil palms
In irradiated afterglow.

We have sun beams and moon beams
Above the smog it seems -
Just listen Lord, if you want to know

What the world needs now is Agent O
It's the only thing that there's just too little of
And what the world needs so

No not just for some but for everyone

Lord we don't need more medication -
There are pharmaceuticals to spare
That blank immoderation.

But when the baby's bum is bare

Take a sniff and linger there
In loved-up meditation.

Oxytocin - nobody can get enough
It's the only thing that there's just too little of.
What the world needs now is nappy-happy love

Not just for some - but for everyone.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

What's To See Has Just Begun

Do you like goldfish
In a bubbling tank
And a tiny diver
With a treasure chest
That spilled and sank?

Do you like babyish
Picture books and puzzle tests
On the playpen bench -
And the battered toys -
Which one is best?

Do you like foolish
Adults in a tizz
Worrying too much
About the state you is -
They need a rest!

Do you like unselfish
Kindly docs and nurses'
Gentle looks and gentle touch -
Making better girls and boys
So `ickness reverses?

I think I like this waiting room
With its many little teases
There is lots of joy and fun
And what's to see has just begun

Even though I've got the sneezes!

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

When All That Flowers In Truth

Nightshade, bittersweet beyond concealing,
Knows waning beauty is better if not found,
And violets like to tears must face revealing
Heartsease is rare - false hopes abound.

Forget-me-not the sorrow of the gathering in:
No balm in Gilead - no laurels crowned -
No respite for the rose, no special pleading!

Move along - nothing to see - love-lies-bleeding!
The vacant land stands stark, the tares abound -
With what is left to straw and dust succeeding
When all that flowers in truth is cut to ground.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

When Last Did We Give The Earth Its Due Day?

When did we last give back without constraint?
Let foregone beauty slip beneath the surface -
Giving up readily without restraint -
Surrendering to time and place?

When last did we give the earth its due day
Recognising its grounded verity
Gifting the sun itself in Sunday pay
Celebrating its integrity?

Consider three thousand years have passed
At the spring where the holy torc was laid:
And now how we only take to the last
Honouring nothing but what is paid?

And how that gilded gift was everything:
Fearsome in its deftcraft intricacy
Signifying the summer sun's rising
And filling every hand with beauty -

Then willingly, joyfully released
Laid down without sanction or regret,
For unity and harmony increased,
Acknowledging no slight, or doubt or debt.

We are a lesser people long estranged
From heaven's heartfelt generosity
Seizing what can only be awarded
By gainsaying reciprocity.

We have lost the ability to gift
Unable to dedicate or conserve
Even though the earth cries out for uplift
And only selflessness will truly serve.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Why I Never Visited Nz From Oz In 1970

... AND WHY I LOVE IT NOW

I wasn't thrilled at the prospect of you:
"Too many sheep and neither here nor there";

I wasn't thrilled with the promise of you
As a Pom in the Sixties who hated square

I wasn't thrilled with the reports of you:
'A Little England' they said: 'No Where'.

But I've come right with the wonder of you
The shores and the greenstone crystal sprays

Yes, I've come right with the wonder of you
The quilted hills that fray into salty bays

I've come so right with the wonder of you
And the mountains that sing at the end of the days

I am bright with the wonder of you.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Why I Write

I can assure you that I have no wish to annoy you.
I write because I have no option - it is my only recourse.
If my writing irritates you, kindly ignore it - I am not
Seeking vengeance and my delusions of recognition
Are admitted cloud-capped towers of baseless fabric.

I write for myself because it is my better self that writes -
A self I need to hear interspersed with white page silences.
And I write for one who follows, one who is curious
About this man and of what and where he dreamed -
This being whose insubstantial pageant has melted into thin air.

Forty years past, I sat in a compound of mud houses
In the Nigerian town of Bauchi asking questions
About how people's lives could be improved by better
This and better that, and a most beautiful dusky child
Sidled up to listen to the interpreter, deep brown eyes in wonder.

Four or five years old, she smiled shyly and held my gaze.
Lost in the wonder, I said to her father, "she is so beautiful".
"If you like her, take her - she is better off with you", he said.
But I made my excuses, lacking a wife and home for her -
But perhaps now she is grown, she wants to read of me.

And five years earlier on the corniche in Zamalek, Cairo
A little girl of similar age twirled on the pavement,
Her dance betraying that she was naked beneath her shift -
But taken like a leaf by a casual eddy of wind
She skipped into the street only to fall limp and lifeless.

At this, the bus driver stopped and picked up the child
And I, in dreadful nightmare dreams that return,
Ran into an apartment block and hammered at a door
Seeking fruitlessly to call an ambulance in execrable Arabic.
Possibly she survived, and now she wants to read of this.

And then there was the little girl that I loved
My almost daughter, with whom a friend said
I was so very caring - who when her mother broke with me,

I used to go to see at lunch times at her school
Talking to her through the yard railings, bringing sweets.

Years later, I went to see her and she told me:
'I do remember you - and the time you broke my arm
When I fell off the swing in the park and you dropped me'.
But I replied 'That was not me, it was another of
Your mother's friends' - and I write for our severance.

And somewhere in the future, there may be others
Who are related or bonded in some manner -
A future grand-daughter or great niece perhaps -
Who sees something in my writing that catches them,
Lifts them up, and for a moment holds them.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Why This Age Is Even Worse

Forget stupor and dread, hope is dead.

Those unhealed wounds that we touched

Do not suppurate - 'you are mistaken:

You are wrong to believe that they ever existed'.

This is an age in which truth is erased -

The bully smacking your head against the wall

Of the schoolyard - 'it didn't happen

There is nobody to tell, they won't believe you'.

And death again chalks the doors with crosses,

As the ravens are gathering and wheeling,

But there will be nothing to be seen

Hope and truth have been back-slash deleted.

This is an age when all decency is ended.

The little boy assaulted and soiled but rewarded

With a broken toy soldier - 'best not to mention this:

It is too out of line - can it be substantiated? '

This is an age of contempt for the disadvantaged -
Like the little girl who is abused for her disability,
The butt of mimed mimicry - 'facts contended,
Cruelty easily become ambiguity - easily contained'.

This is an age without heroes, honour, and quests
Where a new race of sardonic rats prepare their feasts,
But there will be nothing to be seen
When the junk files of decency and compassion are cleaned.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Winnin' Streak

But Strewth, the winnin'! Ow they loves this 'frill
Scrabblin' with the kids at Bondi on the beach
When a 'wowsers' gets yous double-word
And Strine is spelt as well as heard:
Fer Auntie Lil is on the plonk and puzzlin' still
And Uncle Norm is lost for words until
He pulls a double-zed he's hidden out of reach
In his togs like a nipper with a purloined peach -
At which Dad squares up Norm for biffos
If he dirty-deals with budgie-smugglin' lingo
But Mum is equal to this shonky deal
And puts down 'prezzie' with a bonza squeal
At which Cutie Tiffany comes right
And ends it all without a fight
With another dinkum straya noun
By crossing prezzie with her cozzie down.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Winter Lighthouse Rainbow

They've done some very fancy planting
Outside the Marine Research Centre
And though it was cold in the shadows
That slanted down from the north -
In the sun it was glorious and there were flowers.

Midway through my walk, I stopped to talk
To a young American from Wisconsin
Who was learning Japanese from
Notes that kept blowing away - with him
Complaining justifiably about arcane complexity.

Later, a girl was riding along the beach shingle
On her pebbled-back half-stock horse
Half appaloosa pony, testing the shallows
Sitting back deep, straight and prim
On her English saddle, English-style.

And earlier, on my walk from the park
Westwards along the sandy pavement,
I had sat on a memorial wooden seat,
Dedicated to Martha Dunn who died aged 30 -
Me pondering poetically about ephemerality.

But don't let me forget the rainbow
On Baring Head that was my first impression
Of the bay, the harbour entrance and the Strait -
Taking it as a propitious portent or good omen
That despite everything, the covenant was still honoured.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Wisdom In Slices

Sophie I talked to your sister in Whanaurua Bay.

She has lost her teeth but her smile is beautiful.

She makes the most wonderful apple pie

Mounding and smothering it in cream from a squirty tube.

I asked her: 'Can I take a photograph? '

She was shy about her teeth but appreciative

Of my attention and half-agreed that she should

Treat herself to a set of dentures that she could enjoy.

I added kindly, like a Pakeha gentleman:

'I have reached the stage in life where

I appreciate women of character'.

There is no doubt there Sophie of the Mana that you both share -

It would have animated Jung archetypically

If either of you had served him a tan slice or a custard square.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Wonder Woman

Once a sweet little girl in a white toga
An innocent among the denizens
Your adolescence on Themyscira
Aroused bare-thigh but leathered Amazons

Whose patriarchy-upending mayhem,
Disturbed by a DV Fokker nose-dive,
Planted the seed of what you became
When you brought the pilot ashore alive -

Diana the kick-ass demi-goddess
Daughter of Hippolyta and Zeus
Laced in a boob-hugging bodice,
The War God's micro-skirted nemesis -

A Wonder Woman who stayed fate's hand
To save mankind - but stole a kiss in no-man's land.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Yearloss

In the deep days, death was a bountiful land
Of meadows and pastures and fat cattle
Of evergreen plains, brooks and willow stands
Of wildfowl, teeming fish, and game aplenty

Its waters were not below nor the land above
For both were of one substance in form and flow
With rain and mist and ebb and flood and tide
Inherent, translucent, awash and without surface

And the souls that journeyed there were adrift -
Always seeking out landings within and beneath,
Ever driven to coming at last to the water margins
To finding safety under open skies with fast footholds.

Then fearful of firm standing and curious of its nature
Its inconstant ruler stole a child from the over-world
With this boy being the tenth son of his adversary
Who ruled the heavens with severances of lightening

But growing in love and awe of the watery dominions
Though grieving for the bright sun and pitch-black night
The child became a young warrior torn in understanding
Between what was ever-shifting and what was ever-fixed

Troubled, he found his way to the edge of the underworld
Breaking back once more into the distinct firmament
In rainbow iridescence, casting wide his cape of green
That rising mists and falling rain might nourish nature.

At which time and place became both separate and apart
Surfacing - and the seasons were set in motion and sequence,
With the great world turning, wrapping itself in his cloak
In the winter and setting it aside in the warmth of summer

But come the half-year's end, the youth was set lose his life
To reconcile the obligations that each court demanded

Returning the ransom and paying homage to his sky-father
To be reunited with his guardian to enjoy death's plenty

And each year mankind marked the journey from the deep realm
Rejoicing in the glory of the summer solstice and its champion
But with the autumn darkness came unease as the sun wavered
And the twice-lost son was drawn again to what was concealed.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

Year's End 2019

Like us the year had life, was born and dies:
Its immediacy did not exist
Before we were born to sentience -
And all too soon will be dismissed.

Departure always asks us what was done -
And what's revealed - and what you cannot tell -
And now the year itself is passing on
Its muted questions mar farewell.

Looking forward, looking back - stand steady
On how time turns and takes back what it gives
But mark its profligacy make ready
A promised newness that revivifies.

As our past lives become the tales of old
For youth, a new day breaks whose dawns are gold.

Maori Proverb:

Maku te ra e to ana;
kei a koe te urunga ake o te ra.

Let mine be the setting sun
Yours is the dawning of a new day.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

You Can'T Kill Squitch

SWARD

Her father died when she was three years old
Beached and bloated in his sea captain's coat

Her mother made a poor job of widowhood
Taking to dark colours and languishing.

Lacking attention and prone to tempers
She grew, ache hurt wounded and wilful.

As a child I was always under her feet
Too much seen but scarcely heard

A boy of few words who slipped away to read
Or took the dog over the fields for long walks

And dreaded coming back to tirades
Lashing the farmhouse beams with fury.

But I used to love to hear her laugh
Telling or savouring a naughty tale

And waited so eagerly for letters
In her bold strong hand on Basildon Bond

Telling of wet harvests and point to points
Hatching, matching and dispatching.

We never got on well though I tried hard
She always looked for openings to weakness

I was too soft and never stood up to her
Easily persuaded I was wrong and she supreme

Afraid to have it out once and for all
In case she burst into ragged, raging tears.

I wanted to go beyond and share her fear
But she was too sly and proud to come clean

And I was left never having known the girl
Who played and swam from the riverside

In distant summers late evenings
Baked as brown as a hawthorn berry.

These are the clumps that grow wherever my land
Hard to uproot and quick to break and bind

If you want me again look deep and delve
Take the stem and trace the broken ends

Though the rough grass still strikes and tangles
As she would say: 'You can't kill squitch'.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

You Must Believe In Life

Beneath the summer skies
The rose its secrets keeps
But its perfume still betrays
The essence springtime steep.

And in the mid-year's glow,
When skies are fierce and dry,
Fresh blooms wilt bye-and-bye -
And winter longings know.

Each season changes state,
And as the Winter ends,
The chill of Autumn waits
For snows the next year sends.

The mountain streams will thin
As drought and ice take hold
The one from shrinking in
The next from love grown cold.

You must accept life goes
Through ever constant change
And that each dying rose
Will scent a time-pressed page.

Spring is everlasting
And so is Autumn too -
And in their kindness bring
The truths the moments choose
As life itself renews.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson

???????? - ???????? ?????????????? [a Translation Of Natalia Evstigneeva's Poem]

LET US

Let us be careful with each other:
Avoid harsh words
Or 'petit point' needling
And cut out invoicing for good behaviour.

Let us do without slights and snubs
And slapping sore spots
Like meddling clowns
Who flatter, jostle and deceive.

Let us be honest with each other
And stop bamboozling with confetti -
Putting the brake on being
A nose ahead, one-up and on-top.

Let us care for each other's time
And not leave things hanging -
Respecting others' rights to have their say
Without being judged in advance.

Let us be careful in endorsing opinions
There is no need to label everything
Remember it is so easy to hurt -
There are gossips enough already.

Let us avoid the suffering and misery
We create by holding back
And muttering 'Hi' through clenched teeth
To lace welcome with bad intentions.

Let us always try to be a little kinder,
A little easier, more straightforward and careful
And the world will become more beautiful and brighter
So that it is born again with love.

????????? ? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????????? [[Piglets and Bears can't be friends?]

The Russian bear so huge and wild
Will so devour a piglet mild
The porky child is scarce aware
It's been chewed on by the bear.

The bear loves berries, fat and honey
Rolling itself in oil and money -
And prone to ripping fences down
To raid the farms that border town.

Chasing wild pigs through the trees
Is sore paw work like robbing bees -
Better ransack farmyard trash and grease
And hope the peasants opt for peace -

If not trapped and staked and chained
Defanged, declawed - its ambit waned.
So it fears the hunters and the net
Yet dreams of powers it can't forget.

Pity then a stuffed bear toy named Pooh
Is happier by far than you
And Piglet is his greatest friend
Among the firs where rainbows end

There the forest creatures live in peace
In quiet joys that never cease.
Cares and tears cannot taint the years

That bears and piglets claim as peers.

Keith Shorrocks Johnson