

Poetry Series

Michael Shepherd
- poems -

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Michael has been a member of the School of Economic Science/School of Practical Philosophy in London for 50 years, and moderates (2008) the Poetry Forum attached to its website.

He is currently Text Editor for the 'Hindupedia' encyclopaedia of Hinduism. His latest book on Waterperry is noted below.

! 'Great Write...' - Great Reader!

Every poem is an invitation
for the readers to use their imagination

a vehicle licensed
to carry passengers

who sometimes have a greater imagination
than the poet

even perhaps get more from the poem
than the poet knowingly put in

which you must admit
if with a slight embarrassment

as you read the words of praise
is a divine joke

and from the divine viewpoint
very practical since

every reader is an invitation
for the poets to match their imagination

Michael Shepherd

! L O N E L Y

l o n e l y

on the paper, on the screen
all by itself

l o n e l y

is it,
does it think it is,
is it happy to be like that
is it happy to be,
does it hope for company
does it enjoy its own company?
does it look at itself
and say oh look
I'm one
guarded by two ells
that's alright then

Shakespeare, yes, was
the first to use it,
made it up
all by himself
felt he/we needed it
to say something that
hadn't been said before
in quite the same way with
quite the same sound
the sound of lonely

he invented more words
than any other person
ever
why was that

next time
you read it

l o n e l y

you might think of him
being lonely
or exactly the opposite
smiling as he invented it
knowing it could be useful

smiling at you
saying yes I know
but I'm here for you

Michael Shepherd

! S I N

Language is a blessing and a curse –
sometimes uniting, sometimes dividing,
sometimes an arrow, sometimes blown blossoms,
misplaced seeds..

How can we of the Western world
imagine what it's like to speak a tongue,
as Persians, Hebrews, Aramaics, Arabs
are so blessed that they possess –

where words remember that they come from One
whose word is law, whose word is love;
so words are true at every level of understanding:

say 'name' or 'kingdom'; 'bread'; or 'dust':
a golden ladder from the heaven to earth,
from earth to heaven; we as dust beneath
the chariot wheel, as it drives over
this old potter's yard; cracking discarded potsherds
back to dust, to mud, to clay, to future pots –

drive carefully, though, around that standpipe
where the grace of water waits to join that fuller's earth,
or rich red clay, in some new pot, which fire will join in turn
to give it measured life...

so, if we take a word which floats uncertainly
between the mind and heart, seeking to put
its feet on earth, yet raise its eyes to heaven –
like 'sin'... now there's a word
to stir the mind, to bleed the heart,
to chill the gut...

language, so the pundits say
(naming that which eludes all division)
should be true at the literal, the allegoric,
the moral, the anagogic –
and, let's add, the universal and divine:

so where does 'sin' put down its feet on earth?
Many pulpits have proclaimed, in the easy tones
of clerics who don't expect too much
of their suburban congregation,
'missing the mark' – assuming Britain
still at Agincourt, the target undisputed...

The Aramaic has its clue: 'sin' translates
as 'unripe deeds'...

So to the metaphoric mind
(which Western poets, orators,
must endeavour to make serve
our lacking languages...)

This glorious view of 'sin':
the Sower, with his years of wisdom
knowing the fair autumn day,
the blessed dawn of Spring,

rises early, takes the leather shoulder bag
of harvested seed corn, dry stored
to hold against its time –
breathes the fresh morning air
so full of promise, magically natural –

strides steady to that field prepared
as banquet for the merciful and just;
flings, in a gesture time-honoured,
almost ritual, the seed spraying out
in airy curve out from his cupped palm,
cupped as one would care for baby
or for wild creature's deserted offspring...

that way, the bed of thorns; this way,
a ground too stony in the Palestinian hills;
over there, thin soil which weeds are happy with...
sin is but deeds sown in the wrong place
- even well-intentioned deeds, misplaced,
as tyrants and dictators seek to do –
or sown at the wrong season's time...

even, if you must, a seedling apple, picked
out of some garden once called paradise..

together, cause, the action, and result:
in the moment cast seed touches open earth,
in law and love its fate is cast and sealed.

Truth must be simple, in its subtlety:
'sin' is subtle, simple; earthly, heavenly truth:

just - unripe deeds..so throw aside the guilt,
the burden, criticism, weariness;

just choose a wiser place
to sow the seeds of deeds next time?

Michael Shepherd

! 11.11.: To The Fallen

Embattled in that mud - and blood-red poppies;
flooded trenches holding 'them' at bay;
life or death a coin's flippant toss-up;
deafening shellfire near by night and day -

for us, these horrors now are others' lives,
impossible to truly comprehend;
yet in my own mind's state, I recognise
these battles are still raging without end:

the mud, the clung-to life, the enemy
imagined - these, we strive still to invent.

Their thoughts, at death's door, lost to memory:
'I love you...' - gone, a family's content.

We owe to them to live a life of love
as if we were transfused from their own blood.

Michael Shepherd

! A Grief Ago

'There is no grief
which time does not lessen
or soften' -
so said Cicero, a man so often right;
a Stoic, those for whom
all life presents a lesson
to be learned from,
and then, to move on from..

But I wonder about all this:
is grief ever lessened or softened?
Is it not, perhaps, overlaid
in our so various ways?

For some, grief framed and falsified
to ease that grief;

For some, like hyacinths and crocus bulbs,
left in a dark cupboard in the autumn of our grief
to respond to time, and
become at last
themselves?

gently, gently, the covers pulled
over the loving bed,
the true, the pure, the lovely painful grief,
the memory deep cherished,
gently, gently, folded
into the cupboards of the heart

there to be known, without the door disturbed
until the time - 'a grief ago' as Dylan wrote -
the cupboard opened only for love's sake
without grief...:
those carefully folded memories
brought out and loved
and lived a while...

not grief, not grief...but
the pure memory of grief

and behold,
life.

Michael Shepherd

! A Novel Situation

She looked not unlike the anti-heroine
of her own novels
or was it the other way around?
mousey but together,
neatly dressed
in an understated way
like her Paris dressmaker mother
who'd fled Vienna

Though in fact she was a brilliant bluestocking lecturer
and trenchant critic
who'd embarked, on the side,
on novel writing

However the British
don't like people who do two things well
and the critics - mostly men -
panned her rotten
while the women reserved judgment.

She had a standard plot -
mousey, together spinster
meets possible, quiet Him
who might be The One
but who turns out too morally wet
for Her.

But her increasing subtlety with variations to this
and increasing literary skills
won her praise from feminist critics
and even a minor prize.

I had expressed envious admiration for her trenchant criticism
to a colleague; one day
the unsolicited word came:
she had expressed interest in meeting me...

A shared life of letters -
the Sunday papers read in bed -

with her reviews in them -
the flow of sparkling wit -

a shared life of letters -
the plot of all her books the same..
the failed romance,
the material to hand...
the literary world's knowing gossip..

I flunked it

Subsequently,
on Friday afternoons,
I sat opposite her on the bus
from Piccadilly
to her small but dress-maker- neat flat
just off King's Road, Chelsea
bought with the prize-money, I guess
and the increased royalties
(the men still scoffing at her standard plot,
the women admiring her subtlety in describing
the bruised but knowing human heart...)

I knew her face, from in the press;
she didn't know mine.
I sat opposite her on the bus
- neatly dressed, together -
contemplating
in bittersweet incongruity
the novel I never lived
and she never wrote
differently

Michael Shepherd

! A Platonic Reminiscence Of A Great Lady

Someone mentioned your name yesterday
and I was silent

You loved goodness, you were goodness,
and I think goodness must have
loved you; and we,
we loved you for your goodness

You loved truth, spoke truth,
and surely the truth
loved you for loving it; and how
we loved to hear you
speaking truth

You loved beauty in
so many ways that beauty
blessed you: in movement,
in actions, in thought, in words and yes
the beauty of goodness and
the beauty of truth shone from you –
how could we not love you
beyond you?

How often in this poem to you
the word love appears
as it did
in you

Michael Shepherd

! A Poem For Samuel

Who is that man who calls you 'a nobody'?
Oh, he's nobody.

Who is that man who says 'You're really somebody'?
Watch him carefully.

Who is that man who calls you 'everybody'?
He is a poet. Listen to him.

Michael Shepherd

! A Poet

He — or was it she?
was a child who said little
but walked, endlessly, just looking

or stood still for minutes, hours,
and became what they looked at

was from a large family
but still people said, you're an only child aren't you

was it seems very happy in themself
but no-one asked, so never said

kept themself to themself, which annoyed
other children, who bullied them

and then were even more annoyed
when they didn't play the victim

failed examinations and yet
was always wrapt up in a book

occasionally did things like cutting themselves
and was told off but never questioned usefully

wrote poems secretly but was unconcerned
whether people read them or not

was good to be with as long as you
didn't expect anything of them

was secretly loved by some
who never liked to say so

because what they loved somehow
didn't have a name

years later, some of them read the poems
and knew what they had loved

Michael Shepherd

! A Spiral Scratched Into An Ancient Irish Gravestone

A centre and an expansion
a life centred expanding
the force of the centre whirls
a life without limit but it says
a centred life what gods the centre
does not tell but a centre
and from there a spiral
which has a beginning but no end
the life shaping the death the death
shaping the life it seems this life
that life could not be told
need not be told
every life drawn here
drawn because it could not be spoken
even in a lilting Irish voice
speaking a spiral sentence for
Irish sentences are like spirals
the centre expands without limit

the life was lived in the circle of the year
that comes round again sowing harvest
yet never back to the same place
as the mind the vision the experience expands whirls out
like a wild dance celebrating birth marriage death
yet passes the familiar place each season
and love love for the world
expands into a holy love
spiralling without limit yet never forgetting the centre
like a child on a gate swinging
knowing it's safe because of the hinge
it knows but does not know
for others made the hinge

and now we read the spiral on a gravestone
tracing back from infinity to the source
everything that has an outward
everything that has an inward
and so there is no need for words
the spiral like a poem about life

read it forwards read it backwards
read it with thanks see it as grace
the thick green grass curls over it
the lichen yellow orange green
placed like a lizard
blesses this the most eloquent
gravestone in all the world
in a green field the clouds white
the sky blue this is the centre
of the spiral here now and
there is no ending to the spiral
the gravestone says
but a starting yes

Michael Shepherd

! A Wish

I'd like to write - like grown-up poets do:
with similes that span the universe,
that sparkle, crackle, dazzle, woo the mind;
and touch the heart with tender, swoony verse...

I'd like to write - like grown-up poets do:
in literature that's all the better for
those soaring, parabolic parables
and paradigms, and rhymes, and metaphor...

I'd like to write - like no-one else has done:
forget the rules and precedents; let fly
to heights undreamt of yet, new mindscape won..

And yet, perhaps, the world's served better by

small lamps of words amidst the cold night winds
of chance and change; cupped in a poet's hands.

Michael Shepherd

! A Zimbabwean Asks A Question

O Great Spirit,
You who in Your form of the Chapungu,
the great eagle with sharper eye than any aeroplane,
watches over us and knows all things;
who even descends from your great circles of flight
over our beautiful land of stone and earth and tree
to show a child lost in the bush
the way back to the village and to home,
please show us, too, the way back home, to You.

You know I talk to you each day in my heart,
but today a man has asked me to speak some words
that many people may hear.

So I speak for Zimbabwe, and for the Africa
of which we are so proud:
for we in Africa are proud; and proud for You:
that in a mad and busy world, we have not forgotten
that every blade of grass and flower,
lizard, singing bird, lion, elephant,
are You in all your great disguises
and that all that we see around us
is You in the spirits of our ancestors
who listen to us and guide us;
and so we know that we must listen
to every creature to hear news of You...

and in the evening of each day
(which, we cannot now forget, may be our last)
as the men come home from work
and the women and children back from the fields,
and the smoke from the evening fires
rises above the huts,
and the smells of cooking fill the air,
we tell all our children round the fire
the truth about You
in all the tales our fathers and grandfathers have told us -
told to these children who have so recently come from You;
by those grandparents who will so soon come back to You;

they have so much to share and listen to,
about You!

And would you not agree, O Great Spirit,
that the smile of an African child
is the biggest thing you ever saw - or made?
It reminds every mother and father of Your smile,
and tells every grandparent what is in store for them...

So we rejoice to think, O Great Spirit,
that we are still your children,
and that You know what is best for us -

And so I ask you, especially today, O Great Spirit,
for all who may read this:

Are the spirits angry with us?
If they are, please tell me why?
And so, what can we do to stay close to You?

Many men have many answers to these questions
in the reasoning of men;
but nothing from men quite seems to 'do the trick';
so now, I'm simply asking You
to speak in Your own way;

since nothing from men quite seems to 'do the trick';

and, O Great Spirit,
Chapungu,
it is Your world, which we look after, and not ours...

Michael Shepherd

! An Angry Poem About Peace

This is an angry poem.
About those weasel phrases
which blow like paper in the street
going nowhere,
hiding truth,
helping us to
deceive ourselves.

'The pee-yus pro-sayus' -
say it in the Irish voice
of obscurantist politicians
often enough
and we'll accept it as a term,
and believe that it needs hard work
and forward planning
and careful progress
and compromise
and agreements
and initiatives
and 'generous' concessions
and declarations of intention
and cautious examination
of opponents' motives
in the 'battle' for peace
and coming together
to establish differences...

Peace
is what is eternally there
when war and strife is absent.
Eternally.

I can't remember Christ
(was he Catholic or Protestant? I just can't remember...)
saying
'Peace process be unto you'...
uh, when would that be? ...
or commanding the waves of the Sea of Galilee
'Engage in the peace process - be still'...

somehow it just doesn't seem to carry weight
as a blessing or a do-it-now...

'Go in process towards peace, my child...'

I wonder why that is.

Michael Shepherd

! An Offering Of Bliss To You

Your bliss is not my bliss
and yet perhaps
if I tell you my bliss
there may be a place
where we can meet
beyond words

My father
used to meet that small him
who was me
every afternoon from school
in the green park across from School
he had no job then,
it got him out of the house

One day
which lives in bliss
he had this tiny
black and white bundle
straining on a new brown leather leash
overjoyed to see me
though we'd never met

Michael Shepherd

! And Angels

The air from earth to Moon
honey-gold with souls and angels;

our every breath, rich with their spirit;
invisibility is their modesty.
To be unheeded, that's OK too,
it's the humility of love.

Angels; and those we call
spirits of another kind.

A harsh duty on those 'daimons',
to bring us woes that test us
for our later good. Our curses
mean to them, but duty done.

They too as all the rest
gazing only to their Source;
yet sometimes, sent as messengers;

their message clear, their journey
perhaps joyful with it;
their gaze is now on human kind.

What do they think of us?
Or are they past all thought?
Or, rich in the understanding
of our mortal souls?

Do they, announcing to that Mary
a miracle,
smile as they deliver?
How much do they reveal of Him?
Or do they in that instant
become her own humility?

The air, honey-gold with wonder;
we, breathing angels,
angels breathing us.

Michael Shepherd

! Baby Love, Maybe Love

so there you are in
your pram or kiddikarria
nicely tucked up,
being talked to in that
singysongylingo
that grown-ups grow down to

when that tingylingy, like
that stoopid thingy
dangling on your cot that
doesn't do anything else
goes hisssidahdidah
and she switches her attention instantly
from who's mommy's little treasure then,
sticks this silver thing to block her ear
and starts talking to thin air

it must be either the fairies
who don't seem to be very helpful -
'oh darling don't say you forgot I
asked you specially...'
or she's going doolally and
the adult world's not
what it's cracked up to be
I'll give her two minutes no more
or else

Michael Shepherd

! C O N T E N T M E N T

There was a hearth;
a fire there;
chairs;
and, I remember, love;

all else was there,
and did not need to name itself.

Michael Shepherd

! Call That ****ing Poetry?

As one of the wrinkly-crumblies
-W.A.S.P. without the sting -
it puzzles me: in poetry,
does one good **** really deserve another?
fifty years ago - fifty, for ****'s sake -
when I was an army cadet
some squaddies used it every other word
-and since we were in Signals,
it ****ing delayed ****ing battle-orders ****ing long enough
to ****ing mow down a ****ing platoon...

and longer in ****ing Morse... - - -...
and as for ****ing semaphore...makes your ****ing arms flag...

my liberal friends
who never admit to shock
say 'it shows a.... lack of imagination';
now that's ****ing serious in ****ing poets.

outside the ****ing English-spitting world
it must seem ****ing strange
that the most-loved ****ing bodily action
is used as a ****ing swear-word -
what have you ****ers got against ****ing?
or is it a term of ****ing praise maybe?

and why still a shock-word
amongst you young lot
who get a lot more ****ing ****ing than we ever did? Dammit.

Philologically,
is it still heard
as ****ing onomatopoeic?
which makes it pretty near to ****ing S&M I'd say?

could you****ers (whom I love for your interest in poetry
I have to say)
give me, as a reasonable ****er,
a ****ing explanation?

it would be ****ing useful
poetically

And who the **** is this
'American realist' poet Charles F***offski
whom you admire so much, anyway?

Michael Shepherd

! Daughter

and some other father at the club
says, has she flown the nest yet?
and it sounds so crude
you don't want to answer.

You're sitting on the sofa,
she's behind you at the table,
she's silent, you can feel her
growing up inside. You know
you mustn't turn and look at her –
she'll hate you for looking her dream
in the face.

Two years ago, she'd have come to sit
beside you on the sofa,
say nothing, put her head
on your shoulder.

Now, she's in that between place, that place between.
In the between, she lives all the opposites. Simultaneously.
The world's never been so exciting, all-possible,
or so scary, void; and these together;
she's never felt so strong, or so vulnerable; both;
she knows she will be somebody; feels like nobody;
she'd like to have every boy, throw them away
to prove her power; yet wait to find if
there's just the one; she wants both of these
(she, girl to goddess, Princess now a Queen,
she owns all men, yet gives herself to one) .

She's living simultaneously in dreams
and chill realities.
You know all this,
and cannot, must not interfere.

This morning, you felt like the ideal family,
held in a golden glow of understanding.
Tonight, she'll dress up for the boy and the dance, gloriously,
and you'll be torn between fatherly pride

and the feeling that you've never, ever known her;
share that terrible place between
where there are only opposites.

Michael Shepherd

! E N T H U S I A S M

I love the old Greek view –
within each of us
the god lies sleeping;
a sweet sleep, full of refreshment,
as snug as a bug in a rug
or Arthur, all his knights around,
under the green hills of Avalon;

we, each of us full of all Olympus;
gods, sleeping as a mother does,
always an ear for the slightest sound
of those they love;
the gods love us,
how could they not

and of those slightest sounds
it's fire – the fire of speech –
that wakes their might;
they love a stirring speech

and in an instant,
throw all their mighty powers
at the service of the things we truly love –

so, as they work their mighty work,
may go without sleep for days,
drink only the sweet water of our love,
move heaven and earth
to please what pleases them and pleases us;
the good; the true; the beautiful;
how their eyes shine.

sleeping too,
between the pages of the dictionary
and our routined life
is the name by which we call them from their sleep;
the name which they themselves
then roar out a thousand stirring times as loud;
the name by which we know ourselves,

know us as they, and they as us

and as they stir in us
we know ourselves as gods

there is not one of you, of us, who does not know
and recognise its name; our name;

enthusiasm.
the god within

Michael Shepherd

! E P I P H A N Y

January 6 is coming up –
end of the 'twelve days of Christmas':
scrape up the Christmas cards –careful
to note addresses where they've changed, and
the people who sent to you this year, when
you didn't send to them..
out with the tree before
it sheds any more needles,
box the decorations into the loft;

yet not an end, but a beginning,
as Eliot might have put it; a cold coming they're having of it;
they're still some days away,
the way harsh; the land, strange;
the camels finding harder tread than sand..

for devotees and followers in their footsteps
we're curiously incurious about that myth
we love to love – is it because
we fear to look too close?

Twelve days they took, measured by the star;
men of wisdom seeking for the birth of some greater love;
what then was needful? Did it need
twelve days, perhaps, for that babe to adjust
to earth – as if from some divine 'entry burns'?
Or twelve days for his mother to adjust
to heaven in person present?

And what meanwhile, did the shepherds do?
Even if they were nomads, they could not have been
many Palestinian hills away? Or were they asking round
the inns and stables for some strange event
which they would only understand
when they chanced upon it?

Twelve days for the stabled animals
and a family which evidently did not rise
on the local council's temporary housing list,

to get to know each other (and we are to assume
they must have popped out at some stage, to enrol...) :

Epiphany: the 'showing-forth';
today we'd call it
a media opportunity.

No photoflash, recording gear, among the hay and straw;
just stillness, silence, a baby's smile; homage unrehearsed;
was there more movement than the old masters portray in paint?
what words were said – for surely there were words?

What light, though, shines, like infra-red,
what songs are sung, like ultrasound,
what magnet draws the iron aged hearts of all:
wisdom, a stable, cattle, a new-born, love.

Michael Shepherd

! From The Chinese Perhaps

This winter day
the wind is making ripples
even between the stones at the water's edge
and the mist almost hides the tops
of the mountains

only I am listening to the heron's cry

I brought my brush and pen and paper and ink block
but there is no poem here;
Nature is hiding her secrets today
like a silent woman in her winter coat.

I could write how last summer
we stood here laughing together
at the reflection of the moon
trembling in our bowls of rice wine
while the candles drifted down the river
in their paper boats

like this memory

but I shall walk back now
through the winter woods
where the thin trees
are secretly, secretly
preparing for Spring.

Michael Shepherd

! Hello Ok Goodbye

She was so proud to have 'bagged' him -
he'd toured the world on Dad's business;
he'd 'squired'
(that's the word we use -
who wants to hang around the hotel's staff door all and every night?)
every It girl, every starlet, every girl of the moment;
and the Valentine cards with foreign stamps
just added to her catch;
the press cameras loved him,
with that extra button on his open neck shirt
undone, under his suit,
even when he was with Her.
But he'd chosen her.
For ever.
In sickness or in obscurity,
in notoriety or in overweight.

He for his part was so proud to have 'bagged' her.
Her string of exes was impeccable -
her loyal girlfriends saw to that,
sharing their lists, and quietly informing
the PRs of suitable Hollywood superstars
weekending in London for their premieres
that mutual publicity might be 'leaked'
- like a hole punched in a bucket.

Their wedding was a private one
since they loved each other just so much
more than themselves.
Stella, and Fleshtape, did the bridesmaids
proud, and pert; amazing food;
a happening designer; an edgy band.
One ex is a sad sight at such a bash;
ten-plus exes for each of the pair - that's sparky.

To tell the world their love,
they each sold the story of their romance of a lifetime
and by setting the mags against each other
got a doubled fee -

his was in one, hers in the other.
In fact, such was their love
they even discussed having one PR instead of two.

Their payments for their stories were a few months late,
(their accountants insisted they went down as 'expenses') :
but by the time they put them through
their separate bank accounts
we had noted that their well-paid break-up stories
didn't quite match.

or so we wish?

Michael Shepherd

! Homage To A Not Unknown Poet

Straightway - it's the tone.

Even; quiet but clear; is it writing, or is it talking?

As if to family: you're being filled in

on what happened yesterday or last week;

it's a continuation of what you last spoke of;

so no 'tone' about the tone;

you have a background of a lifetime's love

not to need to talk about;

you're friends even before you are family

if you know what I mean;

no family relationships hovering like ghosts

like your mother never quite stopped

sibling squabbling with your aunt;

it's harmless really - a silly evocation of childhood

and no-one else's concern;

so, good.

The no-tone tone: you're family,

so the voice expects you to be interested

enough to read

even if it's something to tell another family member later

whom it would concern more.

So no elaborations,

no false sentiment,

but a little dry comment

like a dry white wine perhaps,

they'll have the background for

because you're family.

That even tone - dull? No, not dull -

a quirky, individual voice

that tells a story deadpan

that makes you howl with laughter;

no, never dull..

The details: those events,

those small happinesses, small sweetnesses

(it sounds better in French -

petits bonheurs, petites douceurs) ,
the spoken words from open heart to open heart
which are the greatness of our
real, real life;
what's in the tidy drawers of the heart
when the house-clearers finally arrive.

And all around this family message to you who read,
called a poem,

quietly,

love.

Michael Shepherd

' How Can God Allow This...? '

The cry goes up...
making atheists out of believers,
believers out of atheists...

The answer offered from the wise
or wiser, is
God granted Man freewill...
without qualification...

so couldn't He have arranged
that we could commit suicide,
but not murder? Wouldn't that
be fairer...?

Seems not – He has to keep
by His own rules; those same inexorable rules
that allow a single tyrant
to bring down a whole nation -
do we dare say: with its own consent?

And man seeks to rule his fellows' lives
by some shadow of that divinely ordained law:
granting to us, in some countries, though not all,
the right to carry arms... that gun
we carry 'for our own defence';
we who cannot all defend ourselves
against our own impulses;
we who defend the right
to portray murder without limit on our screens...
as if to see it acted out, still preserves, maintains,
even asserts, our innocence...
we, too, dispense freewill..
and call it 'rights'...

the solemn bells ring deep and slow;
pause; say nothing; remember; learn.

Michael Shepherd

! In Memoriam: Anna Akhmatova, Poet

Last Spring I stood
in front of the bronze statue
they've put up in your honour
on the banks of the Neva
not far from the prison's red wall
just as, half in jest, you requested it,
never expecting this...

the thaw had just started
and a white snow crystal, already half transparent,
melted in the corner of your bronze eye
as if it were a tear

I watched it slide down Spring's warming bronze,
down past your name on the base,
across the trodden snow of the pavement,
into the Neva whose memory is time itself,
and as it joined the river's flow of breaking, creaking ice and snow
the sunlight caught it, briefly.

The next day
I walked to your dacha in the woods
as the first light rain of Spring
gently washed the birch saplings
and the brown leaves of last autumn now revealed
made a silent carpet for my feet;
and the pale sunlight
caught a raindrop, briefly.

In some future Spring
a poet's tears fall as gentle rain.

Michael Shepherd

! Like The Lake A Chinese Poet Sits Beside In A Painting

Who cares about
the weight of a lake?
Who would care to weigh it?

Who cares about
the colour of a lake
without the light of the sky
to reflect in it?

Who notices its modesty,
reflecting all, but silent of itself?

Who observes that the lake
remains unaffected,
not pained by loss,
not pleased by gain?

Who notices its wisdom,
obeying every law?

Who names its generosity,
among the fish, the birds,
the animals who drink?

Who knows whether the tree
leaning over it, sees its own reflection?

Who notices its love?
It bonds with earth,
It flows when needed,
as love does.

Who asks where the lake came from,
seeing it there?

Who wonders how old that lake is?
It is without age today.

Who wonders whether the lake
knows itself water,
or if water knows itself lake?

Who does not go to seek it,
for its stillness, for its silence,
as if it understands the mind's needs,
the heart's nourishment?

He is like that.

Michael Shepherd

! Lines From The Pub

You,
slim but well-nourished,
not unhandsome, dark, perhaps of Middle East descent,
who's just come in the door at the speed of
a second-ring bellhop
carrying a neat cone of not many flowers
from the florist's down the road

but unsmiling, focussed, almost fiercely anxious
as if you were a well-trained rifleman
yet fearing that you might have missed one vital point in training -

what are you bringing from an anxious past
on this, perhaps, lifetime's vital day
for the girl already waiting there whom
alas I cannot see to burden with my assumptions -

what are you bringing from your past
besides those flowers, to take
into your anxiously-hoped-for future together?

No, you may not indeed, right now, be worthy of 'her hand';
- nor may she, indeed, of yours;
that's, perhaps,

the miracle of marriage.

Michael Shepherd

! Love And Friendship

Loneliness, anxiety, and despair,
isolation, sorrow, bitterness -
these the cruel concerns, observers note,
that press upon our current consciousness.

To name mind's enemies is good for mind:
for straightway, two arch-fiends themselves reveal:
separation, and false sense of loss.
These enemies now named, what salve may heal?

Think one - the other follows; thus, one fiend,
whose only weapon is that thought of loss.
But we own that which we can never lose;
yet know not - 'til we give it - ever ours:

give what you think you have not: that which mends
these cruel concerns in others: love of friends.

Michael Shepherd

! Love And Poetry; Poetry And Love

and right now, I'm spending most of my time
on the two matters of which I seem to know the least –
love; and poetry.

maybe it's good I feel like this; after all,
they're two pretty big things in their way;
and if it's frustrating that
I don't seem to get anywhere,
or understand any more,
maybe that's good too since
it keeps me at it
and out of harm's way
as they say

let's take poetry first – that's
relatively straightforward:
one day I love the freedom
of the current situation – there's no rules
except, the lines are short –
but even that, you can break
with 'prose poems' (and leave it
to others to say when 'prose poems'
become 'poetic prose' etc...) :
tell the unvarnished truth,
tell it like it is; offer all your heart
ungiftwrapped;

then next day I miss the music
of a poem that – with some difficulty –
rhymes and dances in its rhythms,
catches you in its woven spell,
reads as if it wrote itself,
sings its own fair song,
even though of course
the rhyme then makes you deviate
from the theme – but that can take you to
more interesting places in the mind –

so - point of this - I'm none the wiser

about what poetry is; though of course
maybe there's some benefit I just don't spot
by kinda mixing thisnthat..

so, when I'm not writing this stuff
that I call poetry, if I call it anything,
I'm addressing the question
of love; in the hope
that thinking about it might just be
of some use; influence action; and
make me more loving; or help me
write poetry about it, ha..
well don't ask me, not just yet..

though, we all know what love is...
when it's on our side?

one day, I feel good that I've spent the day
reading inspiring words, like,
the whole Creation is one single act
of love; that it brought the whole universe
into manifestation; sustains it; merges all things into love;
that love is knowledge; holds all forms
through law, by law; that law and love
are always together; that love's
the natural state of ourself; that
every creature has pure love within its nature;
that thus, it's our very nature
to love one another; love
our neighbour as ourself...
even, love ourselves...

then the next day, I can't bear
to read any more of what's written
about love; just spend the day in love
with everything and everyone;
being still a little, listening to music a little,
reading inspiring poetry a little,
going out or not going out,
being just myself a lot; seeing things around
inside the house and out
so vividly, it's like being high

without the before and after, and
I wonder why it isn't
always just like this..

then the next day again, I'm just too busy
to give thought to thinking about love,
or being loving to those bloody neighbours

then the doorbell rings – and
I greet whoever it is before
I even look at them, as if
they're the one person out of all the world
I most wanted to see again right now – and

it's someone to read the meter –'hallo!
what, again so soon? I've only just paid
the last bill, and anyway, it always comes
as 'estimated', and too high..'

too late – I've loved them totally
in that first moment; I'm like
someone else; I find myself
treating them like an honoured guest;
see them out with a friendly comment; feel good;
a sorta indifferent, unthought, unshaped happiness..

maybe there's something to be discovered
in all this love thing,
whatever it is.. maybe
I'll go try to write a poem about it,
see where it goes

[This poem is dedicated to the memory of Bukowski, the poet
who taught us to write it like it is - even if his later work...]

Michael Shepherd

! Love Said.. A Paraphrase Of A Study Group On Love

Love said,
I made you

Your body was conceived in love.
Your mind was conceived in love.
Your spirit was conceived in love.

I made your body to stand,
to walk, to dance, to make love
in love.

I made your senses
to touch love, to taste love,
to see love, to find space in love,
to hear love, everywhere

for I made everywhere

I made your mind
to know love's substance
which no alteration finds,
to know the flow of love,
the fire of love, love in the air,
to hear what love speaks;

to know love in your reason,
to reason love;
to know why love is everywhere;
to know how to find love in hate;
to know why justice, mercy, grace, are love;
to know love in surrender;
to know how love turns faith to love;
to know love's play in love's creation;
to know that love is always now;
to know love's neighbour is yourself;
and when least visible,
to know love frees and balances;
to know why all seek love.

I made your spirit and your heart,
I made your very self
as every self
to be Myself; to show Myself;

Love said

I made you.

Michael Shepherd

! Love's Pledge - From Mechthild Of Magdeburg

Two lovers in an inner room withdrawn,
and speaking much of love, as one to one;
and yet their speech so ardent in its truth,
not sound but rather silence seems to reign.

These silent lovers are the soul and God;
their silence, prayer, which brought them, joins them, here;
they talk of all that lovers ever speak,
and plight their troth as lovers ever swear:

'Yet nought I have to give you, but myself;
and that I give, and beg of you to take;
and nought I ask of you, but that yourself
you give to me in truth for my soul's sake...'

No lovers' pledge more common, nor more true;
no love more constant; nor more holy vow.

Michael Shepherd

! Love's Young...

They were young lovers, and seated at the table in the window;
where in Paris they'd be watching
the passers-by watching them...

but no.

He was silent, unyielding; but uncomfortable;
she with her head buried in his shoulder,
and pale as a damsel
in some stress.

I thought at first, they've had a long night
and she tired first...

but no.

They looked at me as I took the table across from them
as if I were a threat to their lovers' bubble
of unhappiness
not quite fully demonstrated...

Their order came.

He'd ordered a huge steak platter each;
and with his male priorities,
tucked in with vigour
eating with his elbows
which made it difficult for her
to maintain her body code
so leant her head behind his shoulder blade
uncomfortably
and left her meal untouched;
he undaunted;
one sensed a sympathy held sternly
by a sense of moral support;
it was not unbecoming
to another male...
but she was getting nowhere
and his was a large and satisfying steak.

Finally, she pushed her plate away.
I must say, she played the lovers' code
just right; not overdone,
not underdone, just medium please.

Minutes later

he went off to the Gents.
And then she gave the game away.
Sat up, mind clear, looked out the window
and very, very nearly
did all those feminine things
done at such a time.

O lady, lady, in thy orisons
be all thy sins remembered.

But they left together;
as if with a common purpose.

Michael Shepherd

! M O N K (2)

3 a.m. in the dark morning of a dark night;

a kneeling figure;
a single candle flickering on a gleam of gold.

I cannot see how great or small the dark space here, of
chapel, church, echoing cathedral; or
are there trees around; or a stable; or a prison cell..? ..

I cannot see how great or small his mind;
I cannot see how great or small his heart;
his soul...

monk...
your image, your imagined life-style
fascinates me, repels me,
overwhelms me, leaves me indifferent,
humiliates me, inspires me...

we all look for love; imagine
giving all the love you have,
all the love you hope for,
all the love you may never know,

in the faith, the hope, the loving-kindness,
that, all this surrendered, that emptied mind and heart
be filled with a trickle or a torrent
of a finer love...

your mother was disappointed, so you told me:
better to be born in a large Irish family
religious enough to believe that nature
manages contraception as well as she manages love...
your brothers and sisters will provide her grandchildren enough..
and she knows that she too, will surrender
a colleen's fine bold looks, for a finer radiance,
of love for family...

would it be better if you had had that vigorous love-life

which you had willingly, reluctantly, given up
for the love of love itself?

or should it be, that what you've never had, that you don't miss...

and now, in the sweet and smiling peace of your presence,
your undemanding presence that urges me to tease you,
challenge you, annoy you...

now, I seem to have no questions that are relevant,
for those I had, seem dry and theoretical,
rebounding back on me when aimed at you..

yes, monk –
you tease me, challenge me, annoy me,
in your turn; hearing in my inner ear
the crashing waters of the great sea of faith,
the lure of sheer totality: give it all up, all of it,
the what you know and what you don't,
the what you've lived and what you've not...
the what and whom you've loved,
and what the greater love might be;

3 a.m. in the dark morning of a dark night and
they're all filing silently into their pews; but
it's summer, and already there's a hint
through the eastern window over there, of a gentle dawn
that seems to have to it, all the time in the world,
telling the candle-lit and holy heart
of some space-time that is love.

Michael Shepherd

! Makeover Day

The sun's shining here,
hope it is with you;
the sort of day
I just might put on that new tie
except I don't wear ties while writing poems;
how about a new poetic style,
though of course, said Eeyore,
no-one would notice...

The choice offers itself
like those two optimistic primulas in slightly corny colours out there
sunning themselves after a winter bravely endured:
how about a confidently laid-back,
assured as of paradise gained,
with appropriate underplayed humility,
Bay Area style?
Little left to desire,
just a cool sense of life well lived
and a touch of cosmic consciousness
though without a brand-name?
Cool in the sunshine,
the net curtain gently blowing
in the life of now?

No, today
seems more a Manhattan day for me -
cool, again, but sharp as befits
the centre of the world of happening: just
a mere stroll from loft to Mike's Place
for that special coffee, whilst jotting a slightly tangential diary
of friendly intimacy with the essential references
left out; a sprinkling
of metro stations mentioned to give it location;
a sense of village local life yet lived
at civilisation's edge:
the Puerto Rican girl in the floral dress
pausing on the sidewalk, smiling
although she didn't have a pass to the gallery opening;
the drunk you always exchange quotes from Bukowski with

outside Julie's; the fun of meeting old friends
with familiar traded insults
and today's new band-box fresh opinion,
the morning wit barbered, shaved, steamed, alcohol-rubbed,
coffeed, cocktailed, manicured, sandwich-barred
in the electric sunshine zing of nowness
that is a new day in Manhattan
as the sunlight creeps cautiously down the high walls;
where every store window's newly dressed
and poverty is invisible...

yes, I think I'll wear this Manhattan tie today;
it's retro but with an edge, wouldn't you say?

Michael Shepherd

! Metaphor

A pretty girl
is like a simile
and vice-a-versa
so I'd say
for like the sunlight it
delights our so prosaic day

and life is better for
a metaphor
when apposite
to what you write

the first I used
that made some sense
came out of childish
innocence

before I read
the word in prose
I thought that what
just goes and goes

was 'dire rear' -
not too bad
as an idea
for a nappy-happy lad?

Michael Shepherd

! Mind Games

Swaami Vivekaananda describes
the restless, vain, vindictive human mind
as monkey: agile, watchful, quick to move,
yet never quite at rest. And worse, we find -

intoxicated: selfish, full of pride,
that agile mind sent spinning into pain,
the boundless universe turned tiny box,
Man's measure never known. And worse again -

this cunning, drunken monkey's angry; stung
by his own scorpion bite: and so invents
his bitter enemies, their role assigned;
the human race divided by...our mind.

And thus the mindful Swaami with fine grace
reminds us - we're that godly human race...

Michael Shepherd

! Mind My Heart

Oh it's so difficult
to love the frugal

the heart
locked in the mind.

Oh it's so difficult
to praise the modest

the heart
locked in the mind

Oh it's so difficult
to love those who hate themselves

Oh it's so difficult
to bring joy to the suicidal

but worth a try

Michael Shepherd

! Old Woman

We see you every day
on the newsreels
a face like the worn map of tragedy
lined with a life of service
that should have ended in an honoured peace
among those you bore and love
your hands reaching out
to the TV camera
begging for water, food
or beseeching
in some unrecognisable, ineffective
local language, or
cursing an enemy not visible
who made a ruin of your home
or being carried unceremoniously
between urgent hands in some material
from a bed that is no longer there
or sitting bemused by life
awaiting some unnamed help beyond request
though never accompanied by your son
who has found a greater cause
than home, or age, and somewhere else...

or, in the occasional poem -
tended, your paper skin and jutting hipbones
not unlike some starved chicken's carcass
described with painful love
as if you only lived a living life
in the past tense,
beyond the verses, between the metaphors

and yet, if we could only find words
to describe what's still living,
where pride hides, a pride
too precious now in grief to speak,
how you love those who are not here..

and yet, you're there, alive or dead
patient, proud, silent, and unnamed,

in every poem
that has ever been written

and I salute you

Michael Shepherd

! On Not Quite Knowing Kathleen Raine

And now she's died, too...
and mankind's selfish howl rings out -
She should have died hereafter...
why didn't you tell us you were going to die...?

She left us with a poem to her lover;
their parting once almost as chewed-over
as the Ted and Sylvia show...
was it her fault, was it his,
did she ruin his talent?
Did he ruin hers?
Did she ruin her own? ..
and on and on

and then the obituaries the next day -
half a page of glorious, immortal things one never knew
about that small, dignified, humble lady
to whom I was introduced
with the wrong reference,
so that we shook hands weakly
over a void of silent incomprehension...

she who had entered the room
with my my my book in her hand...
and made me too feel immortal...
until we were introduced...

and now I wish there were some love-bank of futility
where we could say
put this uncounted love to her account - no, no name please

because we would have loved you more, we think,
if we had known
what we know now

it's pathetic isn't it

Michael Shepherd

! Planet Dearth

'No other life form on the planet
knows negativity, but human 'kind'..

No other life form on the planet
violates and poisons the Earth
that sustains it, but the human 'race'..''

oh look, how unhappy that flower is!
how can we cheer it up?
and that oak tree – how stressed it looks!
how shall we help it to unwind?

out there, look, that dolphin
looks really depressed, I wonder
what we can do to raise its spirits?

and that frog – it seems to have
a problem with its self-esteem..
and no princesses handy...

pussy just can't relax, doctor,
could you prescribe a pill, or
perhaps refer us to a pussychiatrist?

and how that tweetie-pie birdie
carries visible hatred and resentment
like a cage upon its back...
(was it watching Tom and Jerry yesterday..?)

the only animals that show anything of
these signs of neurotic behaviour
are, yes, those who live
close to human kind...

which animal do you take
for your teacher in the art
of living only in the present moment?

*

[with acknowledgements to the Blessed Eckhart Tolle]

Michael Shepherd

! Pooh Bear And Cr Discuss Truth

Wol's nephew had found a piece of torn paper in the Wood, which said 'Truth is...' and took it back, rather wet and smudgy, to Wol.

Word got around that Wol's nephew, who was learning to read, had asked Wol what came next... However, most of the Animals were not very interested, as they went about their busy lives.

But Pooh Bear, who'd heard CR use the word about A Certain Incident, was walking paw in hand with CR through the wood one crispy day, and because there weren't any other Big Thoughts floating around saying 'Look at me!', said 'CR, what is truth?'

Christopher Robin looked down lovingly at Beloved Bear, like you do when you admire someone for asking a Big Question, but aren't sure quite what to say next...

'Well, Pooh,' he said at last, 'there's truth with a small t – like when somehow a plate has jumped out of your hands onto the floor and broken itself, and grown-ups don't quite believe this, and say, tell me the truth...'

Pooh recognised this. Hunny jars did the same thing sometimes, when you reach for them on the shelf and wonder why they wanted to fall like that...

'And there's Truth with a capital T, that grown-ups put on their best clothes and sit around, with a cup or glass of something, and talk about... but without dropping their cup or glass or anything...'

Pooh had never sat around when this happened. That was the time for being with CR upstairs.

'It's difficult to follow what they say, so I watch their faces, Pooh..

'There's Nodding Their Heads Truth. There's Smiling But Only a Bit and Not for Long Truth. There's Eyes Open Wide Truth. There's Being Very Still For a Time Truth. And there's Nodding And Smiling With the Eyes Too And Remembering, Truth...There seem to be diff'rent kinds of Truth, Pooh...'

Pooh suddenly felt very five-to-fourish after so much about grown-ups and their complicated lives, so he and CR turned and walked back in silence.

Later after a Little Something, Pooh stood in front of the big mirror in CR's nursery, and tried on all these Faces of Truth.. feeling, well maybe, and yes possibly, and wait until tomorrow, by turns.. and then, he felt really quite tired..

Christopher Robin picked him up; saying fondly, 'Silly old Bear...'

Michael Shepherd

! Pooh Bear And Hindu Philosophy

It was a fine early Spring morning, and in the Forest the Animals were busy Being Themselves, and doing all the things that Being Oneself involves.

Pooh had had a Being Myself morning, sorting out the hunny jars and wondering if two half-full jars were really quite the same as one full jar, or really quite different; and why a half-full jar looked quite different from a half-empty jar..

But now this afternoon the Boy and his Bear are walking down the path towards the Poohsticks bridge, and the path is feeling Springy too, with its dry leaves and twigs and beech mast like the bouncy mattress in CR's nursery, as if they were saying 'yes, we are here too! '

'CR..' said Pooh, holding CR's hand rather tight as he did when a Big Thought was hovering like a bee who hasn't quite make its mind up whether to land here or move on somewhere else, 'what's Ah-Dwy-Ter? '

'Well Pooh..' said CR slowly, wanting to answer but not wanting to confuse a Bear of Very Little Brain who was also Beloved Bear...

'There's Dwy-ter and Ah-dwy-ter... Dwy-ter means sort of Two to Indians, and Ah-dwy-ter means Not Two...'

There was a long pause, while Spring went on springing, and the bee in Pooh's brain did another circle because it sensed that there was more hunny somewhere in this flowerbed than had yet called attention to itself.

'So it's like, when it's a stormy day and we shan't see each other, and I feel saddish and Not One... and then at lunchtime the clouds clear and you come along and I'm happy to see you...and I feel that you and I are really Not Two when we're together...? '

'Something like that, Pooh' said CR. 'Because, if someone were coming up this path towards us right now, they might say 'Oh look, there's the two of them...' But we should know it's not really like that...'

And a warm happy feeling spread from Pooh's feet walking on the bouncy Spring path, up to the tip of his nose and the edges of his ears that CR liked to stroke when he ran out of words.

Now Pooh knew another Very Important Word which wasn't as big close up as it was in the distance, and knew exactly the difference between One and Not Two and how, to those who really understand these things, one and one can make a Not Two sort of One...

Pooh squeezed CR's hand like people do who are Not Two, and CR looked down affectionately at Beloved Bear as they walked down the Springy path in the sunshine, and the sky seemed glad to have rained, but happy not to be raining now:

'Silly old Pooh...'

Michael Shepherd

! Pooh Bear And The Alarming Rumour

In the Hundred Acre Wood, agitation spread like one of those cold March winds that seem to be blowing in every direction at once. All the Animals were murmuring to each other, then to someone else, and rumour spread like blown dry leaves in an autumn gale..

Wol's nephew, who was too clever for his own good, Wol said, had found a torn piece of dirty newspaper wrapped round some compost behind a tree, which came, it said, 'From Ourwood Correspondent' and which said something about '...Robin...girl'...

What could it mean? Had CR found a girlfriend? Pooh was half happy for him, but the other half knew that girls meant boys having less time for walks in the wood with bears, however Much Loved...

Others feared that CR would be going away to school, as he had told them he would one day, and his sister – who they'd never met – would come instead and do girly things like tidy up, and brush Eeyore's hair away from his eyes, and sit the Animals in a row and play School ... Piglet turned very pink around the ears at the thought.

Rabbit's friends and relations were unconcerned – they had bunny girls of their own to play with. But Roo got the story wrong as usual, and thought CR would change into a girl, like hens sometimes change into cocks, and got all excited and jumped up and down shouting 'Christine Robinia...' which embarrassed everyone. While Tigger just bounced around, hoping that this would be a New Adventure after all..

Only Tortus, who was so old that he had once seen Snow White walking through the Hundred Acre Wood, feared the worst...saying that girls from that wood with the holly in it had rosebud mouths, tidy hair, long eyelashes, sang silly songs, and were yucksomely sentimental...

Could it be true? The Animals all crowded in front of Wol's tree to ask his advice. Wol took a long time to find his spectacles, and came out looking serious.

'The wood with the holly in it is a long way from our wood' said Wol, 'and doesn't see us as we see ourselves...so you must prepare yourselves for the worst...'

The Animals walked slowly and sadly away. It seemed as if the end of the world

were nigh. No more Christopher Robin, and a girl with rosebud lips and tidy hair and long eyelashes instead? They would just have to wait and see. Some girls, after all, are fond of all animals...some are even tomboys and kick leaves and walk through puddles and climb trees...

Eeyore hadn't joined the crowd. He stayed in the corner of his field, eating a dewy breakfast. 'No one asked me...' he said mournfully. 'I'm always the last to be consulted...'

And so the Animals waited for the next chapter in their lives.

[There was a rumour a year ago in the Hollywood Reporter or some such, that Disney were trying to insinuate a girl lead into the stories...]

Michael Shepherd

! Pooh Bear Learns About Enjambment

Pooh liked Autumn. Autumn means walking with a scarf round your neck and sometimes seeing your breath in the air like a silent conversation, and wet leaves underfoot and twigs going crackle or sometimes crack! which can be scary if you aren't holding CR's hand.

So here they are, walking together paw-in-hand down the path in Hundred-Acre Wood, and Pooh is humming a happy hum with words looking for it, rather like inquisitive flies that don't quite land on you, wondering if they should stay or not, and how the other flies feel if two of them land together...

'CR..' said Pooh, 'What's en-jamb-ment? ' It sounded like what happens when a wasp gets stuck in a honey jar, or perhaps a marmalade jar.

'That's a long word, Pooh...' said CR, wondering how to explain to a Bear Of Little Brain Yet Poetically Gifted, in the easiest way, when you're not too sure yourself...

'Well...' said CR at last, 'you don't really need it, Pooh, because your Hums all finish each line with a rhyme - so everyone knows just where they are....but suppose you get to the end of a line, and the line looks around like Eeyore does after a big mouthful of juicy autumn grass, and it can't see another line that wants to pair with it in a friendly rhyme.... then if you let it just go on being by itself - like Eeyore - and it's happy to be that way, if occasionally grumbly about it - that's called 'free verse'.

'So then you can just go on and on without thinking about when to stop... but then if you write it down so that other people can read it without getting out of breath, what 'free verse poets' do is like turning over the page of a book and wondering what's coming - like, is there a scary illustration on the next page, or a Surprise, or only a few lines and THE END - what these poets do, is to treat the lines the same way as pages, so that at the end of each line, you wonder a little bit more than usual, what's coming in the next line... instead of yawning and wondering if it's time for A Little Something...'

'I see..' said Pooh, in the way you do when you're a Very Polite Bear but don't really see, not yet anyway...

Then he remembered that poem by Rupert Somebody that CR had told him was an Extended Metaphor, which had that memorable line which the Poetic Bear

could have written himself: '...and is there hunny still for tea? ...' though of course Pooh was always careful, himself, to have a line of hunnypots up there where you could see that the future was golden and hunny-coloured...

'CR...' said Pooh in that happy feeling when the brain seems to be sorting things out for you, '...so if you wrote carefully in a book, '... and is there hunny still for tea? ...' you could write it with the first line

...and is there...

and people would wonder what you were going to ask them... or

...and is there hunny...

and they'd wonder, what you were asking about hunny; or

... and is there hunny still...

and they might be suddenly worried that the hunny had run out; or just

...and is there hunny still for tea?

which tells them exactly what you're thinking without making them think too much? '

'Exactly! ' said CR (though it sounded more 'exactly' because he was happy and excited) ' You really are a Poetic Bear, Pooh! '

And he squeezed Pooh's paw in a Specially Friendly fashion, and a hunny-coloured glow filled Pooh, as one more Useful Thing about Poetry was put into place...

And as they returned home for a Little Something, Pooh was humming a hum with words flying curiously around it, which would be his first Free Verse Hum With Enjambment which grown-up poets would read with that little extra interest, as they came to the end of each line, and know that it was written by d Bear Esquire, Poet...

Michael Shepherd

! Saint Nicholas Of Cusa On The Face Of God

In thy dear image and thy likeness, Lord,
are we as human made, your servant tells;
how then to know ourselves, in this new sight,
and where to look, to see our godly selves?

For I believe all nature is thy face -
thy natural, thy Absolute, true light;
and art, too, is thy face - by thy art seen;
and knowing - of all that which may be known;

and thus the man who sees thee face to face
may see all things, and know all things; have - All:
but - how to see thee? How to pray, to ask?
And ask for what, since thou art All in All?

How to pray thou giv'st thyself to me?
'Be thine own self, and I will be in thee...'

Michael Shepherd

! Something For The Weekend? (2)

Friday mornings:

As I follow Eric the barber to the pay counter,
feeling scraped and trimmed and scented and almost younger,
we slip into a familiar ritual,
a little touch of theatre
which takes us briefly out of ourselves
or perhaps even into ourselves a little,
come to think of it:

'Something for the weekend, sir? '

He doesn't say this sotto voce like the other barbers,
but rather louder than normal
in his ex-actor's voice
to draw the whole shop into this moment of performance
and assure any new customers
that no offence is intended.
The joke is of course my advanced age.
You might call it post-everything irony.
But there's just a touch of respect there too.

His young assistant Rob
who's giving expert attention to the young guy in the other chair,
with that intimate proficiency which the young
now bestow on the grooming of their peers,
but who doesn't miss a beat,
rolls his eyes heavenward at this sally
though this stale camp mannerism
can't quite hide his affection for his employer.
He gives me a quick glance of acknowledgement
across the chasm of age.

These little routines and rituals and performances
give shape to the week.

But hanging unvoiced in the air
is the knowledge
that one more rent rise and it's curtains for this establishment.

That is the stage direction
that is not spoken in the script.

Michael Shepherd

' Sorry, But What You Write Isn'T Poetry...'

A deep breath; a sigh.. as if
you didn't accuse yourself of this
every time you write a poem and
hoping to pretend it's ' stretching
the boundaries of poetry' etc.
- and whether it's subsequently
well received or not..

and you reply, with a slightly shaky patience,
'Well, you define poetry, and
I'll give you then an answer...'

* *

It begins with some small explosion
(no casualties) in consciousness
(the Indians call it 'sfota')
or perhaps, it seems more like
some movement of the heart;
perhaps in delayed reaction to some event,
or perhaps out of that blessed 'blue'...

and you swear undying faith and trust
in this wee mite, to guard it with your life;
it's the thrill of a lifetime, but,
can you raise it as you should?

I won't attempt to describe to those
who know this all so well,
the inner world through which you follow it –
sometimes it's like some vast building
full of dusty libraries, committee rooms
some a hubbub of argument,
some somnolent; then
you open a door and find yourself
in court, and in the dock - and also witness box...

how ludicrous this must sound
to those who've never written 'poetry'...

our whole life, hanging onto every word...

Michael Shepherd

! Sports Day Lament. For Cj.

tenth in the sprint
ninth in the four hundred
eighth in the cross-country
seventh in the potato race
sixth in the egg-and-spoon
fifth in the high jump
fourth in the long jump
third in the hurdles
second in the basketball shoot

that's Sports Day over for this year.

But Mom and Dad will tell me (again) that

'I'm still the best at being me'...

and they'll sing all the way home oh god...

'they can't take that away from me

no....

they can't take that away from meeee...'

Michael Shepherd

! The Beloved Stranger

It was about seven years
after her breakdown
which she could not remember, and
which I could not forget
that one day
as I was creaming and powdering her
more intimately than I ever expected to as a man to his mother,
she turned to me and said -
inching her way
with supreme heroic human effort
out of the black and midnight subsoil maze
of dementia - said
carefully, enquiringly
as if to establish a relevant fact,

'Are we related? '

And I knew not how to answer...

Then after some few days
I found a way to ease that pain:
as I creamed and powdered
the soreness under her still fine womanly breasts
at a hundred and two years of age
I said quietly
to her uncomprehending memory,
'beloved stranger...'

it wasn't a joke that she could share, but
it helped a little.

Michael Shepherd

! The Eye Of Beauty

Krishna passed that mountain many times;
and yet his followers observed that day
that all his mind was filled with fresh delight
as if he'd never walked, nor seen, that way;

the beauty of the mountain ever new,
the moment of its sight, the world reborn;
the mind surprised by what it always knew:
the beauty past all beauty's name and form.

This is true beauty, in ourself revealed:
a sight that's ever fresh, yet ever known;
which eye sees pure, yet mind too oft conceals:
God's unity, in beauty seen; all, One;

The moment's grace of beauty, ours all day;
from outward eye the sight of inward Way.

Michael Shepherd

! The First Poem By The First Poet

i'm intrigued by the ur-poem
by allan j saywell
entitled grunt
which is
the first poem
by the first poet:
grunt

how do we know he was a poet
saywell he say so
but think about how
it happened

one day Grunt
for that was his name
listened
to himself saying grunt
and thought
that's quite a nice sound
if I say it carefully
it's got a sorta music to it

so he spent the rest of the day
giving it a swing
and a ring
and a dingadinding

his First Lady
(Laura)
liked it and smiled
and said
Grunty dear
although as a man
you're gorilla-dust and
although you still walk like a bush
that's music to my big ears
poets sure know
how to please a girl
and she gave him a big wet lippy kiss

the rest is pre-history

Michael Shepherd

! The Hallmark Of Poetry

Every day, the sun sets
you noticed?
in a great, glorious performance
of wraparound scenic splendour
as if it were the last day of the world
(we'd sue)

and all around the world
poets who've been chewing on their pencils all day
or gazing steamy-eyed at an empty screen
without as we poets say, the Muse whispering
an ode we're owed
as poets
wonder if it could be one last chance
to write the ultimate sunset poem
to get something down today
and justify our existence beyond existing

noting that at sunset
the red flowers in the garden glow so intensely
that you can feel it on your eyeballs
and the sunlight just when the sun disappears
lights up the whole landscape like a floodlight
on the stage set of our lives
that sort of stuff

then next morning the sun
rises on our ultimate sunset poem

and later sets

Michael Shepherd

! The Lake, The Fountain

by the lake so still so calm
sky-blue cloud-white
more sky than water this autumn day
the air so still above

there a tree leans over the water
as if in thanks
and here a gathering of stones
awaits the offhand lapping of the wavelets
bringing out the many colours of the stones
that remember mountains edging the horizon
with light and shadow through the day

over there a fountain splashes over worn carved stone
fed by a mountain waterfall wild fountain tamed
throwing up a million new-mined diamonds
droplets sparkling like a chandelier
the sun catches turning air and water
into unceasing dance of somehow joy

the still lake the dancing fountain
telling with water two stories
stillness in joy
joy in stillness

as two white-robed nuns who whisper laughing
laughing whisper
in the cool of the evening
beside the fountain
before prayer
and holy silence

Michael Shepherd

! The Ultimate Teenage Love Poem

How dare you dump me just like that...?
before I'd even considered dumping you...
if I'd know you were the dumping kind
i'd've dumped you first.

BUT **** IT HURTS

Michael Shepherd

! This Poem..

This poem
was about to speak to you
assuming that there is a you right there and now
but
hesitated, a little unsure of itself

this poem
though all ready to be
a bouncy, Tiggerish, extravert sort of poem
is going instead to take a quiet moment for
introspection

this poem
remembers that computers are essentially
binary – built up of millions of yes-no choices
so

this poem
is above all,
yes;
hoping
in still a Tiggerish way, to hear you also, say
yes

this poem
finds that it has
certain hidden desires
which it rightly or wrongly
was going to lay on you
like

this poem
would like to tell you
something new which
you might or might not believe
until some time later
when you'd say
yes!

this poem
would like to touch your heart
(impertinently assuming
you might need aortic massage)
so that when you finished reading it,
you'd say
yes!

this poem
presumptuously
would like to enable you to
see the whole world with fresh eyes,
as if never before,
be the first day
of Creation for the
rest of your life
so that you'd say
yes yes yes

this poem
would love to
be Irish, throw magical, spellbinding words round you
like two hands throwing wild flowers
over you in a summer meadow,
looking into your eyes, laughing, kissing,
dancing over the green hills to blue skies hand in hand
enchanted with a life you'd passing forgotten,
always known, while time
is eternity and
you and I and all things are
yes, yes, yes and
yes

this poem
at this point
introspectively with a touch of humility
thinks
maybe it's sufficient, purer,
just to want to
pass you in the street,
smile right into your eyes
maybe shake hands, even

kiss both cheeks how ever many times
and know that without necessarily
saying anything
the answer's
yes

this poem
hopes it's made its point
without mentioning
love or other well-known,
complicated things like that and
moreover it's gone on long enough
because

this poem loves
what happens in silence
what happens in stillness
and just wanted to say

yes?

Michael Shepherd

! This Rose. After The Sufi.

This rose - red, scented, rich, without price -
is it speaking to me?
I cannot hear what it says. And yet...

is it watching me?
it does not blink. And yet...

is it urging me to action?
it gives no sign. And yet...

this rose - so gloriously - is...

so does it know all this?
is it beyond all this?

for while I watch it
and wait for an answer
I know myself more.

perhaps the rose
is not the answer
but the question
and I the answer
and the answerer

Michael Shepherd

! To A Great Lady

I yearn to show you, praise you, to the world -
-and straightway hear you: 'Inappropriate...';
said with firm authority, and yet
said kindly, smiling, thoughtful; as if part
of some continued talk about the truth;

and as I, listening, look at you, I catch
in that sharp-seeing eye, the spark of joy;
and at the corners of your mouth, the twitch
of heavenly laughter at the comedy -
the serious humour - of our earthly wealth;
Shakespeare knew your sort: a golden girl
who brings to men and women their true self.

The more we loved the beauty of your mind,
the more that presence ever now we find

Michael Shepherd

! 'Tude Lyric

I'm the man to be,
cos I'm me, me, me;
but you're just you
and who cares who

I'm the greatest,
I could be the hatest,
you're down on your luck
but I don't care a ****,

life is tough,
an' life is rough,
but that's enuff
who cares a stuff

I don' need to write
cos ed-u-cation's shite;
I jus' like to spray
my mark somewhere each day

I score the chix,
I score a fix,
me an' you don't mix
cos I know the trix

I'm the koolest gangsta,
you, you're just a wanksta,
my posse an' me
hand out cruel-tyy

I got a shooter
you ain't worth a hoota;
I got a knife,
you ain't got a life

I gotta switch, man -
ain't your life a bitch?
I gotta blade, man -
got it all made

ain't no lovin'
like my ho an' me..

(what's that, Mom? ...It's time for tea? ...)

Michael Shepherd

! Two-Dimensional Dream

If you called me 'two-dimensional', I guess
I'd go away and think about it - is he
insulting me and if so, how?

Though in a sense, all of us here in cyberspace
are two dimensional, to each other?

There's one time, though, when two dimensions
would be a blessing: like today,
when the cutely photographed brochure
for IKEA, the flat-pack furniture giant,
thudded through the letterbox
with its cosy nordic world as fresh and clean and scented
as a newly-built sauna just fired up;

then the two-dimensional me
could simply slip like a well-trained bookmark
between page 24 - 'a welcoming family room'
and page 25 - 'a bathroom to relax in'
with a pine-scented sigh of relief
that I wouldn't have to drive ten miles,
queue out of sight of the parking-lot just to get in,
then after checking what was out of stock,
go home and try to put the bloody thing together
despite the missing bolt.

You'll find me there on page 25,
under the artfully arranged bubbles, relaxing
in my carefree, blond and nordic way,
smiling the smug smile
of the sterile two-dimensional.

Michael Shepherd

! Ultimate Teenage Love Poem

**** YOU!

you've wrecked my supposed self-esteem

maybe when I'm older i'll know what self-esteem is
and how it can never be wrecked...

and i'll even be grateful for the lesson you pushed on me

but not ****ing yet, OK?

Michael Shepherd

! Wanksta!

wanksta

a one-line poem in itself;
a sociological truffle
to be sniffed, snorted and snaffled
by academic hogstas;

a British schoolboy taunt
for a sad loser
with more than a hint of
adolescent sexual guilt
and strengthened by the shouts
of football terraces

now fierce with
the combative
minority-to-majority
two fingers to Culture
black ethos of the deprived
asserting its claim,
rappin' on the door, yea, rappin' on the door
of that same Kulcha

yet mediated by the assertive
individual competition
of those same cultural fighters
taunting each other,
schoolboys with loaded guns

wanksta

wanksta, wanksta,
yo ain't no gangsta

a word that's all front
and no back

but as a poet
I enjoy it

this youngsta
kidstar
on the block
of living language

Michael Shepherd

! What The ****? !

All was quiet in the Garden of Eden
and not a fig-leaf stirred...

but after the Fall of Man
(usually forwards and enthusiastically, we note)
literature
required some word for what happens
when evening falls, the curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
lovers begin to nuzzle, friends
remember a prior engagement, journalists
try to bribe the night porter, and
some novelists, blushing, draw the curtain, while others
brighten and begin to enjoy their work; and filmmakers
need to decide between a darkling screen,
a symbolic firework display, or
box-office returns.

Egyptian hieroglyphics afford little clue (there's
a chance missed) : but jump-cutting now to Anglo-Saxon usage,
Chaucer, Father of the English Language so we're told,
used 'swyve', in a masculine sort of way:
'he swyved her bolt upright' leaves little to the imagination.

Then courtly French may have given us 'make love' -
an oxymoron if ever there was one -
being still, however the romantic hope of many, and the dread of
Casanovas the world around, as they have it off (sic) .

Shakespeare, being a poet, immortalised it as
'making the beast with two backs' - graphic, but
it didn't catch on with the tabloids, who prefer
only four-letter words which fit the headlines better.

The Italian Renaissance, noticing in its Mediterranean way
the resemblance of the male danglies to a fig fruit
(backtrack to Eden here for speculations)
may well have given us (the Florentine g being pronounced gutturally)
that English word with added onomatopoeia
though let's not go into that,

which now that blasphemy's out, is all too common,
rendering a much-enjoyed activity all too often as a term of abuse
which I leave to psychologists to work out. I refer to
f**k.

Then as this term, which it doesn't take a lip-reader
to note frequently on the lips (and spare-time pursuits) of footballers,
became a sort of holy word of abuse,
and lawyers lurked around the gossip columns,
words mingling the comic, the non-accusatory
and the slightly admiring, were sought:
and so the tennis world gave us Bonking Becker...
while sportsmen like, naturally enough, to 'score'...

A psycho-sociological study might here extend,
priapically, to distinguish between male terms such as
'Cor, I'd like to give 'er one...' which makes the assumption
that females are eternally grateful for such male generosity,
and any distinguishing solely female terms
though I'm told girls' nights out are descriptive in their appreciation.

But for girls pulling boys, either the terms are non-gender-specific,
or in short supply, or have passed me by. Personally,
I like the biblical 'and she took him in unto her'
which has a certain feminine sense of choice about it
but too long for the tabloid headlines.

You'll note I've avoided that crude expression of a consumer society,
'have sex' - it has nothing to commend it, and indeed
is ungrammatical, and fundamentally, f***king animalistic
though of course.

Michael Shepherd

! Words Of Consolation On A Wet Day In The Lake District

I dreamt I flew as ibis fly
o'er sand and palm and sunny Nile
when all at once, there caught my eye
a host of grinning crocodile

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Rich Interior Life With Style

I would live in that sort of space
if would were could.

Instead, I take off my shoes at the door,
feel my bare toes on the polished woodwork,

settle into the chair, take out
the big square book entitled 'Japanese Style',
and with the contented sigh of one
who knows that solitude is
a status symbol in Japan,

give the body a rest, while the mind,
with its clever skills, no sweat,
as into a loose cotton robe,
feeling the air against the skin,
slips easily into two dimensions
contemplating three-dimensional space;
lives in these mindful geometries,
and feels a million yen;

goes to bed refreshed,
wondering whether waking up
a Japanese would be acceptable.

Maybe I'll write a poem,

'This quiet Spring evening
I sit in solitude
and love the unseen passers-by'

and take it to the calligrapher's shop,
hang it outside the front door
for no-one to read
but all to see -

for in solitude, all is possible.

!! DEMENTIA

Chopped root, in the dark subsoil of the mind;
protected only by its own forgetfulness;
seeking occasionally, with weak desperation
for the light it once (perhaps?) remembers;

stabbing their own nearest, dearest kin
with the cold steel of unrecognition
as if of some betrayal: one day, a glance,
a careful question: 'Are we... related? '

And you – you have been singled out
for this unexplained great test
which gods within, without, us have devised:
call upon all you've ever learned, lived, won, been gifted:
love these beloved strangers
beyond all bonds, all bounds.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Is

Greek
and other ancient languages
are happy with verbs
existing without a subject.

Renders.
Philosophers, silent;
poets, dumb;
contemplatives, still..

Is.
Becomes?
Continues?
Ends?

Cogitates:
Is?

Is:
cogitates.

Meditates.
Rests.
Clarifies.
Wonders.
Praises.
Expands.
Embraces.
Loves.

Is.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Just There

Between two who are talking;
above two who are silent;

in the listening
after wisdom spoken;

the moment as the pen's put down;
the moment after the book is lowered;

between two thoughts;
just before speech;

as cup's put back on saucer;
knife and fork sing plate;

just before the inward breath,
and just after the outward breath,

between the warm memory
and the fond association;

just before the smile is smiled;
when the last tear has dropped;

just as silence forgets sound;
just as stillness forgets movement;

as all thought surpasses thought
as if no thought had ever been;

the moment before music starts;
the moment after music ceases;

the moment before words come;
just before the poem speaks;

between the listening
and the hearing;

all these gathered in your heart
just before you give it name.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Liberation

I said, yes I'd like to be my real self
and yes I'd like to realise that I, er, am.. I think..

but when I see the word self-realisation
I reach for the ego in my holster..
right between the eyes. One shot. No mess.

he said, will you settle for liberation?
I said yes, that's fine

he said well if that's what you're looking for,
there's some bad news and some good news

the bad news is that the person that you think you are
will never find Liberation

the good news is that who you really are
has never known anything but freedom...

*

Michael Shepherd

!! NAMASTE

To greet you
as you greet me

to bow down, look up, to the Lord in you

what more perfect, easy, pure,
than to fill a ritual
that needs no thought to plan

with all the heart may present offer; .

to join my hands and bow my eyes
that see now only Him,

raise them to see Him in you;
only perfect then remains

namaste

Michael Shepherd

!! Parents (Like, Who Needs Them?)

In the staff room after Parents' Day
we used to shake our prematurely
gray heads and contemplate
the Zen-ness of our well-worn truism:
'Parents are the least suitable
people to have children'...

EMForster said, we begin by
loving our parents; later
we judge them; rarely
if ever, do we forgive them..

The other day, some pseudo-quiz
for exposure-hungry celebs
asked, what is the most disliked
thing about parents?

and the pollsters did their thing
and found it was, their taste in music..
I guess that tells you something
about the depth of culture

though I suspect many teenagers
really think, it's the gross, unspeakable way
that they go on having sex after we're born...

however, this alleged poem is getting
way off track from its solemn message
which might, just might, be India's
greatest if unproveable gift to the West
and all who whinge about their parents and
what they did and didn't do for us...:

karma: that the way you lived your previous life
fixed it via the absolute computer that
you were born in the most propitious
time and place and parentage
to continue the journey of your soul
on its way to the bliss of freedom

from all worldly attachments
such as, e.g. parents; older siblings; and
the rest you'll have to fill in for yourself

remembering of course in your compassion that
it was karma for your long-suffering parents too;
you were their justice; and they, yours..

Michael Shepherd

!! SIMILE

'A golden evening; and we watched
the sun sink slowly below the horizon
like a golden dime
into a flaming jukebox'..

well, yes and no... similes –
one thing likened to another –
are sacred food: gifts
that we give to one another's mind
to lift it with a sudden joy;
expand it so that all the world
is made afresh, anew, and
full of wonder and of praise..
a world whose unity becomes
in a moment, here and now, forever...

give a simile in words as if – like -
the most careful choice of gift of love
to the one you love the most:
to say, this is to show how much
I love the world in you; in You.

My eyes shine like your heart.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Stature Of Truth

Watch them closely.
Your greater life depends on this.
See their bodies, watch their faces,
listen to their sound, which is
now the sound that we all own.

Now see your self, seeing them;
watch your self, watching them;
listen to your self, listening
to yourself. This is the moment
grace graces us. Our grace.

This shelf-stacker with
a battered face; this
village lady with a homely build;
this child, who, simply, sings
as if that could not be more natural:
see them; watch them; listen to the sound.

See them in profile: nobility
now shapes their face;
this is what heroes are,
heroes who await our call.

They have surrendered to their self;
was it we who called them?
Are there times when truth itself
is impatient of release; cannot wait
for us to earn that?

Perhaps just a few bars, as the song
begins to take them over,
sings, them; perhaps the climax of the song,
when all we can do is wildly clap,
applaud ourselves for what they've told us
that we always knew: we too, heroes,
heroines, waiting for the call
to be ourselves:

for a few bars, their stature
is beyond measure; remind yourself,
you saw it, watched them, listened:
listened to the sound which says
this, my sound, is the sound
that can do anything. anything:
now I make the world anew.

For a few bars, they tell us
this, this is who we are,
every one of us; this is
what talent's given for; this,
what we were made for;
this is how great we are.

This is the sound of truth
singing the truth of truth itself;
this is what grace can do.
This is who we are.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Who? From 'Ellam Ondre'

To know the unity of all
is good for you and good for others.
Is there any better way to obtain the good?
Who can share the mental peace,
the mental freshness, of one who knows unity?
Thus, you become the good itself;
you become the God made visible.

Who are you? You are turiya:
beyond sleeping, dreaming, waking;
what is there more for you than that?
It is pure knowledge, that with which
you see the world in truth: this is
the greatest good you can gain from the world;
the greatest good you can give back to it.

Who is God? He has no name
but that we give to Him;
he has no form but that we give to Him;
but what's the harm in that?
Unknown; yet He is known to us:
to believe that He exists
will bring you to that being, consciousness, and bliss
that cannot be separated in your nature,
in His nature; and by your efforts,
your master and your way will come to you;
then you will see nothing that is not God.

Then you will wake to peace;
you will have earned the right to act;
then you cannot help but serve the world;
the good for anyone will flow from you.
Guard the delicate flower of the mind;
its fragrance, freshness, colour:
your mind, more delicate even than a blossom;
peace will bless your mind;
with it, worship the God that is yourself;
be peace.

And in that peace, know every action to be God's:
then you will shine forth as God yourself;
through you God's purpose for His creation
will be fulfilled. The creation is as it should be;
all things are in order. Who can change this?
As the thief suffers as he steals,
you gain the fruits of knowledge as you act;
the law is, all is one.

Know all evils in the world as from ego;
But, oh ego! Your enemy is greater:
you are perishable; He is not -
and in truth, He is your greatest friend:
he knows, ego, how to make you
worthy of true greatness and all blessings;
he asks nothing of you but - surrender;
and at the moment of surrender – joy.
'I am Brahman' – were these simply words to you?
Know this, all enemies become your friend;
magnanimous, you will arise;
all names, all forms, all good, all love;
they then are none but you.'

*

[These six verses are a crude summary of the six chapters of
'Ellam Ondre' by Vijai Subramaniyam (19th century Tamil)
which Ramana Maharshi recommended, as guide above all, to his
closest disciples. at]

Michael Shepherd

!! ... ZENTIPED E...

a centipede
must needs proceed
by synchromeshed advance

I wonder if
its Buddhist riff
is ' Show me, Master,
a Way that's faster,
and then I'll do
a one-foot dance..'

Michael Shepherd

! ! '...Means What It Does...'

'...means what it does'.

I read: 'God cannot be named; cannot be and cannot have,
a 'proper noun'; God can only be approached
through verbs and adjectives.'

The eight petunias which arrived so neatly in
their cardboard box as if pretending to be a book,
are already upright, thriving, growing;
that magic petal radiance of the deepest purple-blue
so delicate, so unique, seems to fill
the space around them with a message:

this is what God sings;
this is how God grows;
this is what God does;
this is what 'God' means.

*

And what of the 'soul'? Can this be named?
as God in us, how can we know it
but by verbs and adjectives;
it 'means' just what it does..

A meditation, deep in inner mysteries
as mind delved in itself
for hidden things yet beyond words,
beyond all self yet known to be,
interrupted by the delivery man –

I drag myself reluctantly from chair to door:
he's met with such a glorious sunshine burst
of goodwill, gratitude...

this is what soul sings;
this is how soul grows;
this is what soul does;
this is what 'soul' means.

Michael Shepherd

!! 4 Am,11 November 1918

A still night; crescent moon; the faintest breeze.
Some wit might say, 'Peaceful, innit, Tommy? '
Two hours before the usual time for attack.
I wonder what they've got up their sleeve for today.
A bit too quiet right now, I'd say

Careful how you breathe or talk
this chilly night, out there in the open trench;
frozen breath will draw the sniper's rifle sight

The sharp nose of some human terrier
passing over the familiar smells -
cordite, rifle oil, linseed for the wooden butt, the stench of death,
yesterday's corpses half submerged -
may detect, just over there, the unmistakeable smell
of fierce French 'Caporal' cigarettes;
there in front, strong German 'Zeppelins';
round here, cheap Woodbines linger in the air

hardly a human difference
worth fighting over.

[revisited]

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Blank Page For The Self

'About the Self, dear seeker,
nothing can be said..'

say the bright-eyed sages with
a chuckle and a wink;
a chuckle and a wink..

granting, later, that if you
can spare the timeless time,
you could start listing (for your self-same self)
that which Self is not..

well I'm not satisfied with that..

I'm going to start a list
for you yourself to add to,
of those times when... so, so nearly...
you almost, almost, saw yourself -
(when of course, not looking for yourself..)

as you passed that mirror in the cloakroom,
the shopwindow that's been newly washed;
looked into the rockpool,
in your childhood's waking dream..

when you hear – not the first note,
but the second, of some Mozart piece:
and something tells you that the mind
that knew what chord must follow from the first
has heard, has known, its self;

the moment that the playful wind
makes plastic bag into a jellyfish;

just as you see a kite tail-twisting over the rooftops;
before you wonder whether there's a string;

just as a taste you never met before
meets several places in your mouth at once;

the moment that the scent of summer field
is sweeter to the nose than any flower;

these, like messages to say,
you'll never catch me; but you'll know

that I'm around..

And now I'll leave the remainder of this page
for you to add to; or to rest blank,
as the remainder that is perfect evermore;

or for you to gaze some moments at...
contented; asking nothing
when there's nothing left to ask;

knowing that you know your present self..
and need to know no more right now;

yet know that there, beyond,
is where all stillness smiles.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Brief Tribute To George Seferis, Poet

When the gods allot
a time, a place, to those so mortal
mortals whom they love to test,

is it a greater gift they give to poets,
to live in a land of honeybees
and sun and sea and heroes sung, a land
assured, content, of gods and marble,
temples, amphitheatres, history,

or in that land in times of tragedy,
starvation, misery, division,
internal war and conquered servitude?

Ultimate, the irony – how can the gods
think up such things? – to be
ambassador, to represent a land
from which to have been exiled half a life;
exiled from within and exiled from without.

The love the gods bestow (the Chorus cries)
is terrifying; strange; to be hard learned.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Business Trip. Sonnet For Epiphany.

Their wives were not too keen about it all:
beyond the call of duty, so it seemed;
for if they read the heavens' portents so well,
what need of proof; of presence at the scene?

And then, to go without due retinue
through unforgiving deserts, foreign towns,
and forests hiding thieves - and wild beasts too?
And carrying rich gifts? And worse - their crowns!

And so, to risk three kingdoms, not just one?
And this, for sake of some religious creed
not even theirs? ... 'Nay, love - it must be done:
we crown our lives, and kingdoms, with this deed;

these crowns are symbols of our rule on earth
to yield the King of Heaven at His Birth..'

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Cartesian Life Co-Ordinated

The year is 1607; the place, the lodgings
of the Jesuit College Royal Henri-le-Grand
at La Fleche; it's evening;

around a flickering candle
three boys of eleven years,
bright young faces against black robes,
bright eyes, lit in each pupil by the candle flame;

too young yet to be tired
by their day of such demanding study,
they laugh over a game
designed to improve their knowledge
of the Latin terms that they must learn:

the one whose father is a High Court judge
of course knows most; yet is most bored;
such is a father's ambition for his son...

the game, easily constructed without expense:
pieces of paper in a Jesuit cap
on each of which, a simple Latin word
most likely to be required for formal argument
in pulpit, in the courts of law:

the game, to be the first to draw
words which can make a sentence
that can pass for logical...

Bright, bored René draws first:
'Ergo' – 'therefore': they all groan; the very word
speaks study, formal argument..

the others draw their words;
in the second round, our René draws
'Sum' – I exist, I am''

the third round: excitement intensifies:
can three words make a sentence fit

for speaking in this holy, hallowed place?

gods hold their breath; angels
hover on the wing; Fate shakes the dice;
nature, nurture, weighty past,
all conspire to set the seal
upon four centuries of future thought...

flushed young face and slow-moved hand
stretch out suspense in childish fun...
'Cogito...' reads René's paper scrap...

how was the eleven-year-old to know
that his next words—so lightly spoke,
so soon discarded to the vaults of memory –
would shape a life, a nation's self-drawn image,
more volumes in more languages
than any could imagine then?

alas! as every being in the heavens
awaited human statement of the greater truth
which would awaken mortal man
to his divine inheritance...
'Sum, ergo, cogito'... they whisper to the Fates...
'I am, I exist; therefore, I think...'

alas! Man's hubris won the day...
'Cogito, ergo sum!' shouts our triumphant René -
'J'ai gagné! J'ai gagné! '
and even God was heard to sigh...

The boys laugh; the game is won, discarded;
instant forgetfulness washes Lethe-like
over young minds; it will be thirty years
before our René dredges from his mind,
significance; human hubris; method; discourse...
sets the thinking world by egoistic ears...

and so four centuries of self-assertive Frenchmen
will gaze and talk with philosophic love
into the eyes of mesmerised
nubile young girls across the coffee-cups

of tables on the sidewalks of the boulevards;

proud to be born French; the nation
knowing that they, above all, they hold the secret
of philosophy, of life: we are, I am, born to think..
je suis né pour penser...

and what of being itself,
and what of consciousness,
that enfolds 'I am'...?

mon pauvre, mon semblable, mon frere... mon assassin...
hélas! hélas! ...

Michael Shepherd

!! A Chinese Takeaway - For David With Thanks

The ancient sage, beset with too many thoughts
for one human lifetime,
chooses carefully the place to sit
beside the lake,
under the even more ancient twisted pine
with the view of distant cliffs
where the stork's cry echoes;

gathers his thoughts.

Out of mercy,
the breeze gently ruffles the surface
of the lake;

the sage, reminded by the ripples
of the stillness of the lake,
smiles from a mind that's now the lake
reflecting the blueness of the sky;
reflects, beyond the blue,
the space in which immortals live.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Comment On Contemporary Poetry

Not a true poem, to former minds;
but a poem that remembers truth;

not a good poem, to former minds;
but a poem that remembers goodness;

not a beautiful poem, to former minds;
but a poem that remembers beauty;

myself, as blissful
as a stretching cat.

Michael Shepherd

!! A Commonplace Day (After Thomas Hardy's Poem Of That Name)

All day from dawn to dusk, the drizzling rain;
everything today is painted grey;
and as for me - I shut my heart, alas;
and took that paint and washed my mind with grey...

Outside the window, just a pane away:
the eager soil, the leaves of plant and tree
bathe and sing and grow and shine with praise;
yet why do I not hear that song, in me?

more feeble I than plant or soil or tree;
I cannot even sing their humble praise;
why build a house against the water's grace,
and leave my wizened heart dry, graceless, mean?

Better today would it have useful been
to be a raincloud; humble; generous;
free of grey thought that idly renders me
less than the least of servants of my God;

so make me grey as generous raincloud; clod
of saturated, grateful earth; write, rain;
shout, whisper, words of flowing gratitude;
on greying days, paint grey as purest joy;
and be again, that drenched and laughing boy..

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Compliment Reflected

To praise the 'generosity of soul'
in someone other – and that, to their face –
must be, to know that quality oneself;
and more, to be familiar in its use;

what splendour there of human character –
to link together these two noble words:
to recognise in others, one's own soul;
and then, to see one's generosity,

reflected in another's qualities;
and then, to link the two as action seen,
joins mind, heart, soul, in generosity
in one that names and one that's named, akin!

To show, and see, and praise, makes parity
in earth as is in heav'n: true charity.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Conversation; Or, Dialectic

They walk down the passage,
enter the room,
as if called to some formal gathering
of honour to be bestowed;

humility and dignity together
make them beautiful; watchers
see this, feel this too.

Seated, they glance into each other's eyes;
they barely know each other, yet
glance with the level, cool respect
of equality; and of precise love:
a love of what they treasure in themselves
offered to another who is not other.

And they begin to talk about some mighty topic:
listen intently to the other; then
at the finish of each offering,
a pause as if the angels listen:
you can hear humility, dignity
in that sacred pause; and then
the other offers speech;

their eyes shine; the honour of this event
warms their blood almost to tears of truth.
The air around them turns to ether;
as if their very talk has purified the space;
the space where, as they talk,
it seems as though there's one who listens..

They are explorers in an unknown land,
a new world where they listen to
their own speech as a new thing explained,
yet spoken as if always known;

nor is the air around them, private:
they could be that couple over there
in the tea-shop's gentle buzz,

so elevated, that at other tables,
teacup poised, politely covert glance
brings all the teashop's visitors
into that place where love and knowledge meet.

The conversation reaches its appointed end,
which both recognise; some sublime honour
has been bestowed; and from within themselves;

rapt and yet surrendering,
they walk away through crowded streets, the air
around them, should you notice, breathes
humility and dignity. As if, accosted by any stranger,
they would continue that same conversation
on mountain, woodland, beach, or busy street;
in that place where love and knowledge meet.

Michael Shepherd

!! A Cummingsy Poemish In Praise Of A Poetry Seminar

many ways
on Sattwadays
in which to praise

e.g. a rose –
in careful prose;
awe for better
or full worse
in poetry, unjust
in verse..

be it even
heartfelt curse
on mind,
to find

that when, all roses
come and gone,
a tension rested,
paused upon,

and though Observer
comes and goes,
a roseful's still
a noseful rose;

yet, all we met
together where
our somehow knew
a hereful 'there'..

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Fine Morning On The Ivory Coast

This fine morning - sun through swaying palm trees,
the lap of waves heard distantly,
sunlight glinting on their sparkling lap-tops..

in cool rooms, breeze moving the curtains
like a seductive dancer,
a thousand hands of hope,
fingers of illusion,
tap out letters of beseechment
to the greater world

politely, generously, asking for support
to release for a substantial share
the huge but tied-up inheritance
of the late father who so sadly...

and hope springs eternal
as the gullible gulp and gasp
this fine sunny morning,
this funny-money morning
on the Ivory Coast

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Great Scientist

He was full of questions.
For others, he provided answers
that stunned their knowledge and their world;
for him, his answers were but springboards
for his further questions.

He was the humblest of agnostics,
the humblest too, of atheists:
in the absence of sure faith in answers,
he lived with faith in questions;

and lived in wonder – full of wonder at the laws
that unfolded to his curiosity;
an eternity of questions;
an eternity of wonder at the world;

and perhaps, the God he did not believe in,
smiled, and loved him as a true believer;
sharing the goodness, truth and beauty of the universe
as angels may; believing in the love of law,
as the God of questions and creation must.

Michael Shepherd

!! A Humble Poet, Or A Proud?

Three thousand haikai!
Teishitsu's second thoughts
left only thirty..

Michael Shepherd

!! A Kyoto Garden In Spring

How wise
the cherry trees
to ignore the cameras!

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Little Donne, A Little Yeats

A heresome, theresome, gipsy mind;
a to-ward, froward heart;
her limbs thrown wild to air and wind,
she sings her skyclad art.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Measured Beauty: The Japanese Mind

Between the high grey residential block
and the busy, noisy Japanese street
there's a small park: three tall trees
in a broad bed of grey slate chips;

this autumn afternoon, the trees
have shed their golden-yellow leaves
over the grey ground; the gardener
has carefully brushed them with his wooden broom
off the chips, and into tidy golden rings
around the bases of the trees;

as if the leaves were gathered in some joyful ceremony
of gratitude, respect, and friendship; not farewell,
but time dissolved into a circled beauty;

the passers-by note this timeless act of worship;
share this with the others as they pass,
politely glancing towards strangers;
meeting, respectfully, not their eyes,
but, as leaves to trees, their heart.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Metaphysical Prayer

O You Who Are..

O You who, so they say, say
that You are me myself,
that I myself am You -

or Who does not, in truth, say that;
since You created me as You yourself,
brooking no division and no doubt...

then teach me, who am You yourself
to know myself; to know
that I indeed know this in deed; and to rejoice
in knowing that I know...

teach me to know, in stillness, that
which I already know
for You have known this in myself;

You who stand when I stand;
sit when I sit; even
think when I think – even
when my thinking is not Yours –

You who are where praise and prayer meet;
where prayer and praise are silence
and that silence, full of You..

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Pencil Sketch Of Mozart

It's a snapshot, except
before the age of the camera
yet more of a decisive moment
than any posed painting;

as any photographer,
lighting director, would see,
he's next to you, could be
round about the fifth row back
of the stalls;

looking so straight ahead
that it doesn't seem to be
the stage box; and it must surely be
a grand theatre, the lighting's strong

on his white neck-stock,
his powdered hair, even catching
the lower white of his focussed eye;
he all there, he's all here, and
attentive as a critic; the opera,
as it surely is, is playing and engages
all his faculties; and yet

there's an appreciation
holding his lips far from the
childish joke, the poverty, the family deaths,
or even from the unimaginable creation
of music that speaks of something
deep in human hearts, speaks
of something beyond the human heart.

He's listening to the music
as if he'd never heard it before yet
you can see it's all inside him, too -
whatever 'inside' means
to genius;

it's Mozart, there beside you

as you sketch him; as the
music you're not watching
as you watch him and your pencil -

the music is telling you
what life's about; and more.
Back to the sketch, with all the care you muster -
this will be the record for a thousand years
of watching Mozart listening
to the music of his self.

*

(revised)

Michael Shepherd

!! A Poem For Coleman Barks, Daniel Ladinsky And Robert Bly

Rumi, Haziz and Kabir
paused from drinking wine together

and saying how lucky they were
to meet each other at last

and said to me in a dream,
'Those clever people who say

that our poems in translation
are nothing like the original

should shut their mouths and write
the same poem in the two languages

which they think they know so well...
we'll wait here for them...

here where poetry and wine
and fragrant roses and love

are One.'

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Poem's Prehistory

When the poem has at last
been brought to birth,
I rest, or stand, as both proud parents do,
blessed by the loving bed;

but I love too, the memory
of what brought being to this poem:
the seeming insignificant events of the day,
that neighbored with some memory;
that chimed with books half read;
which joined half-thoughts together like new-stringed white pearls,

and then spoke in some wordless tongue
and mental paintings without form
somewhere in mind;

and behind it all
the briefest flashes of the workings of the world...
and wonder; awe.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Poetic Grammar In Three Persons

Yesterday, I heard someone else dare to say your name...
but give you now with love, the heart that heard it.
Does God love every name so much?

Michael Shepherd

!! A Postmodern Explanation Of Poetry: For Mike Who Asked

The brain and spinal cord
contain a hundred billion neuron cells
backed up by many more glial cells..

each neuron surrounded by its dendrons
like a tree's inquisitive, hungry roots
or a seacreature's gently waving fronds

making synapses, new connections
between what one cell holds, and another,
as a tree's roots seek its heavenly nourishment in earth;

so that, each time two words of poetry,
put together for the first time by a poet
in just that way, strike your mind or heart,

one of those neurons cries silently 'Aha! '
as poetry's roots and fingers touch its core;
two neurons now joined in holy bedrock..

and since our mind, some say, is but our store
of memories previously received,
then poetry enjoyed, remembered, builds our greater mind;

and all this, like the champions of the Olympics,
so appropriately named after that godly height,
might well be described by corny commentators as,
sheer poetry in motion...

Michael Shepherd

!!ARK

Such a fine morning sight –
all the species, not lining up
for extinction as they later were
but this time for preservation – a long line
patiently stretching into the distance
as far as mind could see

sometimes shifting quietly
from one leg to the other
or from four legs to three
or stretching a wing
hungry to fly – but where?

and one man blessed
radiant in his duty, awed
as that great ship expanded
a boundless mind of growing wood

and the naming...to what
did he listen, as the moo-moos
and the baa-baas and
the kraak-kraaks, bow-wows, miau-miaus
paused in front of him
for him to hear and name true nature;

the coo-coos already on the masthead;
the nightingale and song-thrush
quite unable to guess yet
at how Noah Knowall spoke their song..

and beyond the trampled mud around the gang-plank
the waters lapping audibly with
their own sacred name;
love that draws and binds and
love that flows;
here, love's laws.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Sad Tale Of Consumerism

I was born poor uneducated trailer trash;
worked myself up by my own efforts;
now I'm rich; but still inside, feel poor...

so last week, I celebrated wealth -
bought my first \$20,000 Cartier watch...

now everyone who sees it, laughs...
I wonder why?

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Shared Secret

My smiling mind winks
at my heart,
reading the first line of your haiku

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Short One For Mary

Ah, those were golden days...

Don't look back, they say;
but if the memory brings a surge
of energy, and gratefulness,
and consciousness and joy,
and love that's limitless –
what's wrong with memory
that brings these present gifts?

Today's now golden; limitless.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Smile For Meena

It's like those Russian dolls:
inside the teenager
is the rebel;

inside the rebel
is the revolutionary;

inside the revolutionary
is the reformer.

Make us all proud.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Sonnet In Soul's Eyes

If the soul had eyes unshadowed by
that restless fog that shorts my mortal stature;
eyes so bright with dazzling holy light
reflected pure from every living creature -

and if the soul were minded by itself
thus hearing every being that moves and lives
sing of its perfect greatness and its wealth,
give of itself as God forever gives -

and if the soul might always choose the best
unhindered by the tempting, ceaseless play
of magic new creation far from rest -
what then would be my Truth, my Life, my Way?

So may I dream - dream in God's soul and mind;
so dream myself awake - this true to find..

*

[With boundless thanks to David Taylor for this thought first expressed in his poem]

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Stroke Of Insight

The therapist, accompanying her
on that first safari to the Laundromat,
as she gazed at coins that were meaningless,
said 'what's one and one? '

'What's a one? ' she replied;
and somewhere, at the back
of life's circling cycle, wisdom met
with innocence, and cried and laughed...

Early in her recovery,
her brain's left hemisphere yet to heal,
she could not speak her messages
and yet – both hemispheres collaborating - still
could sing them..
as perhaps, the angels know.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Teaspoonful Of Honey Makes...(A Viveku)

A bee, it's said, in its whole working life
brings to the hive a vast
treasure of obedience:
a teaspoon-full of honey.

The scholar, spooning honey from the jar
into his tea-cup,

pauses.

*

[A viveku ('we-way-koo') is an Indian-Japanese informal verse which carries an awakening thought]

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Thanks For Visiting

When stillness
walked into the room
there was no need
to greet you

and when you left
and stillness stayed
there was no need
to say goodbye.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Thief In One's Own House

'To steal', the sage declares, 'is to take things not given consciously with pleasure'.

Several times my eye has skimmed over this, with thoughtless affirmation; then today it hit me like a burst of consciousness.. for

yesterday the hairdresser made her regular visit for which I'm enormously grateful; yet, I resent her presence in the house:

sharply scorning all my attempts at friendly small talk (what a payback for those sessions of 'Doing anything special this weekend, Sir? ' 'Going away this year? ' which I in turn, used to resent..)

Last year she was happy to talk about her teenage son, ice-hockey wizard; now she slaps any such questions back in my face... " 'ee's at school now innee? "

But now my resentment has been named: hoping to treat every visitor as an honoured guest, I feel instead a thief in my own house..

How different from the weekly visit of Mr. Organic Fruit and Veg – product of three different races, so he tells me - whose smile lights up a week of days in memory..

Just suppose that we could choose to avoid all those who do no more than exchange their 'goods and services' without a smile.. who do not see their job as 'giving consciously with pleasure'..

Gone the days of cheeky, chirpy, cheerful, cocky Cockney ticket collectors who turned a busload of passengers

into a performance art.. giving
their service consciously with pleasure
and returned by all..

In my first philosophy class,
seeking to position myself as the class joker,
(in the days when 'waking up' was our first task)
I smugged this observation about being so 'asleep'
that in the morning at the tube station,
I said thank you to the ticket machine..
Maybe I was onto something there.

So, a resolution; never now merely to 'hand over', but
to give consciously with pleasure..

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Thought After Yeats

When youth was life and life was youth
and life was love and love was life,
I thought love came and went;
its coming, overwhelming; and its going,
death of spirit; then, as if
the wild white swans had flown away
and left the waters of the heart's lake cold.

But now I know it's not like that:
love that, guarded, never flies from here in heart
to where it will, may grow dark, cold and miserly;
ungiven every livelong day
it turns to rags and dry old bones,
confiscated in the heart.

Better now, be with those wild white swans
which on a dark cold icy winter's day
gather at the water's edge to stretch
for yesterday's warm loaf still fresh;
then turn, swim, lift strong wings and fly
one knows not where, and may not ask;

watch them then, into the distance;
hear the flap of wings grow into silent air;
pause still a little while;
then turn, one's living breath
white in that winter air;
then back to warmth of home and love and peat fire
glowing in the hearth of heart renewed.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Tribute To Philip Levine. For Hanque

Tenderness. It was forty-seven years ago
and Bernie Strempek and I were in this bar
in downtown Detroit watching this
beautiful second-rate jazz singer
and Bernie started to talk
about tenderness.

His father had abandoned this family of four
and so his mother worked nights
at Ford Rouge and she knew
Bernie wanted to become a poet
and she totally supported that.
Bernie was a guy of amazing smarts
who seemed almost too gentle
and delicate for this world
in which he did not long remain.
I didn't know the word tenderness
but when Bernie talked of it
I thought wow, I could use some of that.

*

[From his conversations]

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Tribute To The Bbc 'Young Musician Of 2008'

This is what love
sounds like. This
is how you know
the heart is only ever one.

This boy, he's twelve years old,
he's standing on the platform
in the huge hall. He's simply
waiting to play himself to you.

The trombone is now a few inches
shorter than he is. When he started,
it was bigger than he was.

He begins to play, Can this sweetness
have come from this contraption?
If Pythagoras was lecturing tonight
on music, measure, the harmony of spheres,
he'd have brought his tape measure
in case we needed proof.

If giraffes could sing,
they would sing to this trombone,
knowing themselves beautiful like it,
knowing that they both know
where music comes from.
How far it goes.

The sound says,
purity sounds like this. Listen.

The sound says,
did you know that innocence
can contain the whole of wisdom?
Listen.

The sound says,
did you know that experience
can know itself in music?

Listen.

The sound says,
I am music. This
Is what music is. I am
all music in this moment.

If tears were joys, they
would sound like this.
If joys were tears, they
would both sound like this.

The sound says,
I was made for this.
Listen.

Michael Shepherd

! ! A Writer's Last Block

This india-rubber
may outlast my warm pencil;
but, this autumn - friends!

Michael Shepherd

! ! Act One Scene One: A Wood Near Athens

Spring sunlight filters through new leaves
in this wood near Athens;
the ozone of the sea not far away
liven's the nostrils of the hopeful student
pausing in front of the marble columns.

The pause is a departure and an arrival:
there's dust on his sandals;
he's come from far away;
who knows how far?

How many times has his spirit
been washed by Lethe's oblivion?
That forgetting which by grace
may lead to a remembering?

The student and the columns of the portico
shining white in their new marble in the sunlight,
both for a moment still; yet
in another world, the spirit of the student
and the spirit of the Academy itself
fly to meet each other;
the goddess, bare arms open,
greet's her worshipper of truth.

We the Chorus, witnessing the beauty of this scene
indescribable; immortal; full of truth,
speak of the gods who watch eternally;
recall in measured words
Odysseus, returning to his homeland;
his mind, like his faithful dog,
waking to its long awaited master.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Afghanistan

He said, that Allah had cursed thrice Afghanistan;
cursed it with those curses, which all evil men
see as their life's blessings:

first, He gave them the opium poppy:
so that if they chose, an easy wealth
would kill their fellow men all round the world
with its addiction; which they themselves could claim
was not at all their fault..

and easy wealth would give them time
for Allah's second curse: the manly thrill
of fighting and of killing; to pursue which,
one must invent an enemy; then,
an enemy invented, enemy he must become;
and so, the whole world now an enemy..

the third and the most dreadful curse
cannot be named or be described..
secret; awful; deadly; all-consuming:
hidden in the hearts of holy hypocrites.

Michael Shepherd

! ! After Poetry-Reading (With Apologies To Robert Frost)

My library door's still open
with its invitations and its promises

and empty shelves waiting to be filled
and on the table two or three new books

yet unread; but I'm done with poetry-reading now.
I'm sleepy; I'm full of poetry;

smell of poetry; taste of poetry;
close to, you can hear me buzz..

I can't get the sound of other poets
out of my head.

Sometimes it's envy; sometimes
just annoyance, like the sound

of the man next door with his buzz-saw;
and I can't help hearing, too,

the sound of postboy bringing yet more books
by other poets; the presses rumbling

with yet more poetry books to come..
some, I fear, they'll ask me to 'review'..

yes, I've had too much of what
I helped to start – that great harvest

of 'American Poetry' ten thousand thousand
graduates of college courses;

chapbooks, self-print, little mags, by the barrel-load
and so many bad apples to each barrel;

fruiting like sour crabs

on the dead wood of faculty appointments;

how much wood can this woodchuck chuck,
amidst the woods and two paths' luck?

jeez, I'm sleepy; feel a long sleep coming on;
the book I'm holding slides from my hands,

its pages turn without my turning them;
like you, my fingers, mind... frost-bitten.

Michael Shepherd

! ! All Things Bright And Evolutionful

Even as we speak,
two mice who by chance
have stronger teeth than their siblings

are mating; and one day
their noble line will survive beyond all others
by eating through the thickest plastic
that you thought was safe from them:

such is the glory of evolution
which the righteous kneel before

as the wisdom of God,
Who built into His glorious Creation,
Chance; for it to survive, develop, flourish;
and also, threats appropriate
to provide a challenge.

To the godly mind, all things are God.

So check your larder;
or share that divine joke
with a wink at your nightly mouse.

Michael Shepherd

! ! All-American Found Poem

"People say
I'll find a better guy,
but I'm starting to think that
everyone's pretty much a mess.

We go through break-ups
in order to give us
time to breathe and
recover enough to deal with
another person's bucket of shit."

*

[unashamedly stolen from a blog..]

Michael Shepherd

!! An Aside On The Vedanta Paribhasha Of Dharmaraja Adhvarindra

A child with shining eyes,
eyes as alert as any wild creature
guarding its life; free as a human child
who's loved and watched for,

walks along the beach. In the morning sun
shells, newly washed by the receding tide,
sparkle in the morning sun.

A distant sparkle, noted among many,
continues to sparkle. Bend down and pick it up,
sandy, a dropp of water held in perfect curve;

is it a shell, nacreous in many shades
as it's lifted to the light, beautiful as if
the Creator had made it only at the dawn today?

or is it a silver dish from that liner that went down,
shaped as a shell, stamped SS Perpetua?
And is it silver-plated from the lower deck,
or solid silver from the first-class deck?

What does the child care? Seeing with
a child's pure eye, that shell's more beautiful –
-tells more about the world – than any silversmith
could make?

Carrying whatever it is, the child returns to home;
shining eyes remind the parents of that time
when all the world spoke truth made visible
that knowledge, consciousness, and bliss
are what truth tells, and lives, and is.

*

[With smiling respect to Dr Kuntimaddi Sadananda,
who is conducting a learned disquisition on this text

on the internet..]

Michael Shepherd

! ! An Earthly Miracle

Sometimes, an earthly miracle
needs human mediation;
it's what creates our saints;
and what our saints create.

This story's told of Abba Alonius,
known always to speak the truth:

One day a man, provoked beyond restraint
by ceaseless taunts and treachery,
murdered a man, within the Abba's sight;

fled to the Abba's cell, begging him,
'Forgive me, Abba, in the sight of God,
before they hang me in the sight of men...'

Abba Alonius said,
that was not in his power..

The police came, asked that holy man,
'Did this man murder in your sight? '

The Abba said, all he could say
was that the man sought blessing in his cell..

the murderer looked astonished at that holy man,
who had for his sake, broken holy vow of truth;
and for one man's soul.. That soul
cried out to God, to redeem the holy Abba's lie...
and in the instant, knew itself redeemed.

After the trial with no witness to the deed,
he sought the Abba, to know the holy truth:

And Abba said: 'Better for me to express a lie,
and so, deliver your soul over to God unbound;
for God knows all.. Do what you can,
and leave the rest to God..'

! ! An Invited Visit To An Uninvited Play

Their apartment was ballroom-huge,
just off Park Avenue; they were
generous with their invitations;

we, happy to partake of their lavish lifestyle,
their buffet food, their wine, their décor...

for which, we paid in a grubby coinage:
from cocktails to liqueurs,
the captive audience for their literate, spotlight centered abuse
of one another.. the complicity of it all
made my fresh underwear feel dirty..

outside, after, in the street,
the rain came down;
how sweet the rain felt.

Michael Shepherd

! ! An Islamic Poem For The 'Art In Action' Festival

All the marvels of creation
are gathered round laughing,

placing bets on
which one you'll notice first.

Michael Shepherd

!! An Unprintable Reflection On The Current Diet Of Spam

God as Intelligent Designer
made the banana
of a suitable length and girth
for ladies to consume without mirth.

Must we now consider
mouth-enhancement,
or other measures?

Michael Shepherd

! ! And For No Reason

and for no reason
I start to sing;

for no reason
I flick the duster
as if I'm in some song-and-dance act;

for no reason
I stop; sit down; fall silent;

for no reason
get up again; do something else
with a light heart;

for what has reason
to do with all this?
it always arrives just a moment too late
to enjoy such events.

*

[leaning on Hafiz' poem of this title]

Michael Shepherd

! ! And We, Three Kings..

Before they set out, met
to start their long hard journey from that East,
they knew their tasks, their gifts
to those whose very language, metaphor:

three gifts to speak of soul's eternal life
about to be refreshed in human life:
gold for the soul's first task,
resplendent in reflection of All that's divine;

frankincense, for the soul's gift to survey
All above and all below as One;
myrrh, that preserves the state and memory
of the passing body, servant of the soul;

these are on their way to Him; horsehooves
now ringing sharp on flint; now sighing into sand;
stars in a velvet winter night
telling of three dominions and cosmographies;

a fortnight's journey yet to mark the lifetime,
waytime, truthtime, held
in tomorrow's birth in scent of hay;

divine moment; that in human life must yet hold
an empty cave as tomb; a pile of clothes still warm;
dawnlight on the garden, reflected as from gold;
lingering, the scent of myrrh and frankincense.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Annunciation

Humility this day is
that she has passed all thought
in stillness; beyond waiting
rests her being.

Then like a lightning flash
without light, without sound;
micromoment of all presence that ever is,

in which she knows all that there is to know
beyond all thinking it; humility
and glory then the same.

Now no need for questioning:
she nor others; disbelievers; enemies;
herself, all that concerns her, now known fully;
she, now full of truth.

Later words may come;
as though there might be two in her humility;
she, now full of unity;

she lives the perfect prayer:
perfect come from perfect;
and when her time and time itself is ripe,
perfect shall be taken from that perfect;
and perfect will remain with her;

she, now full of god, of good;
who dares or dares not call her blest
save she herself; hands folded into lap,
head a little bowed, eyes down;
she now full of god, of good?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Another For Hanque

A poem is joined to everything,
hangs by a thought;

a poet is joined to everything,
hangs by a word;

wisdom's joined to everything;
hang lightly, golden heart.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Antihaiiku

This bright, silent moon
shines on me and also
Serbia; Iraq..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Are You Offended By The Word 'Offensive'? If So..

'Cell-phone and sell' is the new money-maker;
'taking offence' vicariously is the new morality...

switch on your mobile if you're near
any 'celebrity' – best of all, backstage
or nervous from the make-up room;
you may catch some phrase that's not meant
for your ears; or a private word that causes offence
between two people, but privately;

then put it up on YouTube; sell it to the Sundays;
the world can share it; and shiver with righteous delight
in 'taking offence'; maybe a reporter will catch you
in the street so you can add your shock-horror quota
to the public outrage at a private word..

oh for the days when the gusty breeze of humour
blew these words away; who remembers now,
when the nation revelled in 'Love Thy Neighbour' on the telly
and 'nig-nog' and 'whitey' were thrown about;
(When will they dare to broadcast a repeat?)

or even the days when 'Paki-bashing' drew attention
to our vicious prejudices; and we could feel genuine shame;
or the time when 'niggardly' was practically banned
because it sounded like an insult?

If we go on like this, being called a 'Northerner'
will imply some insult; as would 'Southerner'...

As the cannibal chief said when he popped
a tasty missionary into the curried (oops, sorry..) stew:
'It's all a matter of social context, Rev...it's
nothing personal...'

And whatever you're called when you're grown-up –
remember: it never hurts like those playground names...
or worse, nick-names that stuck for years...
from those of your own age, who

yesterday or tomorrow, might again be chums..?

Somewhere in Australia at this very moment
someone called Murdoch is calling someone just like me or you
a 'whinging Pom'...remind me to take offence, would you?
Then I'll sound off to the Sun...

Michael Shepherd

! ! As Parents To Our Parents

They never teach you this at school;
they'll try to teach you reading, writing, 'rithmetic
in their own instructed ways;

but now, if anyone suggested it, there'd be howls
about the impertinence, the interference,
the rights, the dangers of this and that -

but all the same, they never teach you:
how to get on with your parents.

Oh there are books and books and books
telling your parents how to look after you, but hey!
there are two parties here! Mom and Dad
can ask their own parents (sometimes - because they
were in the same situation as you are now and so,
reckon they can do a better job...) but
who can you, ask?

Philip Larkin told us memorably that
'they f*** you up, your Mum and Dad',
which may not be the case for all of us;
Hindus have their own stern answer to this question:
you chose them, in effect, as the result
of your behaviour in your previous life...so there,
work with that, kiddo, could be
the making of you...stop blaming it all on them!

So there you are, in this heated cauldron of love and hate, or
like sharp stones shaken in this bag called family
until the rough edges wear (each other) away and
those smooth round pebbles roll out to the world...

but perhaps a little help wouldn't hurt?
I was exactly four and a half when I told the truth about something,
since I didn't know any other way; and as my parents' voices
rose in argument about 'knowing what was best for me',
(I remember the moment now, so clear) I turned my back
on this so painful sound, faced the 'wireless' on the chest of drawers,

and decided there and then
that grown-ups made such a fuss when you told the truth
that it would be better not to - at least, until
they grew up a bit... and there, went half a lifetime
of prevarication, dodging the question, fantasy: never tell the truth
until you're sure they really, really want to hear it...

Then when I was eleven or thereabouts
(and again, I remember exactly where I was standing
at the time - the bottom of the stairs)
the solemn thought 'entered my head':
that in some way I knew but couldn't quite explain,
I was in the position, had some duty,
to take care, in some thoughtful way, of the minds of those
my parents...

But they didn't teach that at my school.

love, I knew all about; but
parents? Aren't they strange? They try so hard, too...
and no, I don 't need 'counselling', thanks -
I'd rather keep it in the family. All I'm asking
is, a few lessons, maybe? I'd even do
the homework.

XXX love you both XXX

Michael Shepherd

! ! Aunt Jess

Our 'Aunt' Jess died just days ago; her partner phoned last night;
the funeral was private, perhaps for reasons which
we now might guess; a village can be peaceful,
but that's no guarantee they'll be accepted -
those too full of life to be discreet.

So, rest in peace, we say and mean;
most of us, thank God, not knowing un-peace in
its most extreme;
and now we'll never know the story which she only partly told
and which I could not bear to probe,
that night when she and I, then younger, talked about
that topic which some tiptoe gingerly around,
some leave unsaid. And why, I asked,
did someone tell me that she'd changed her name
eight times when still a child?

Some live lives so livid red
that perhaps they're best not told; or if they are,
then carefully. In '44, towards the end of 'Hitler's war',
great bands of Jews from Eastern Europe,
from the camps, or outhouses of village farms,
cellars, sewers, God knows where, set out together from the East
ahead of those advancing Russian tanks,
and through the very heart - if that's the word -
of Germany; by night; and gathering on route
just like some ragged snowball, groups of the unidentified
and paperless; but soon too many souls there
not to draw a sentry's eye. Of that exhausted day
in Christian church when only she survived - and why -
you'd not believe, and I'll not tell.
So she, long orphaned, finally arrived,
and though few knew it, became a live memorial
to the eight families who, over the years,
had shielded her 'our child'. Destined, it seems, to live;
as lively aunt to child as anyone could wish.

And when I'd heard from others close,
and gently guessed, more from her silences,

just what she'd suffered 'at the hands of men' -
so choice a phrase - or how survived,
I could not be surprised she chose to live
at ease with lover of her kind.. Aunt Jess,
should I be sorry that I didn't ask you more?
I did not like to pry; and you
so needed to get on with life.

So yes, Aunt Jess:
please rest in peace.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Autumnal Thought

Were I a maple,
people would flock to see me
radiant in old age.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Barely Rhymed Sonnet: Love And Law

The universe, a single act of love,
it's said; and ever so, then, must remain;
is never other; has no place for hate,
save in the minds and hearts of less than men..

the universe, a single, lawful law;
from which all laws emerge, as reason does;
emerge as justice, in those laws observed;
and known and lived, a promise of true bliss;

may we, then, share a single, wholesome view
in which the love of law, and law of love
rest warm in heart and bright in eye and mind,
and meet to know this mercy from above?

Thus live as the Creator's mind – a prayer
I barely dare; yet hope That heart to share..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Be Clay

Don't be half-hearted about this –
be clay.

You know all about clay –
be clay.

Humble, submissive, reverent –
awaiting the Potter's hands.

Enjoy that humility, that surrender –
feel already so near God.

Now the wheel begins to turn –
the Potter is here!

Feel His hands – the more you feel them,
the more you know the love in them.

Now you're being shaped:
turned on the wheel like a dervish turns,

you're becoming like that tall column of stillness,
rising from the centre of the whirling skirt;

still; in the memory of the Potter's hands;
you recognise yourself who waited for you.

*

[leaning on the poems of Hafiz]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Be, Here, Now

'The camera does not lie';
yet the truth rests in yourself..

Here's this photo of one, said
by those who know, to be a saint;

(no one to say smile now please;
no one to say just say cheese..)

here is one who knows that all and everything
is God; so looks into the camera and beyond

and at all of us, and at all of all of us
as God; in goodwill; Godwill;

looking Lordward to the Lord in you and me.
Who can value such a photoed shakti..

shower of grace in just one smile
from one who gives all of himself,

to the camera as the God in us; 'developed', multiplied
towards infinity, and rolled around a printing press,

flashed in binary upon computer screen.
We as we look at it become all truth

and like the camera, cannot lie
about ourself: we are perfection.

Before the camera was,
I AM. click.

*

[[www.](#) > [Great Sages](#) > [Saints of Recent Times](#) > [Neem Karoli Baba](#)]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Being The Monna Lisa. Exclusive.

If you think it would be fun to be famous,
sit in for me for a day. And be cured.

Fame...builds you up
then drains you.

'Celebrity' – the very word
has built-in obsolescence..

then you have to appear in
cheap TV shows to keep it up..

At least back in Milan
we knew what mattered and what didn't.

So I sit here all day, have my eyes damaged
by cell-phone flash;

but worst of all - the faces;
gawping gormless.

At least when you're a film star
you know what they want from you:

your fame, your handsomeness, your beauty,
your wealth, your power over men or women;

with me, they don't know what they want:
who wants a mysterious smile for themselves?

I'm just a package with the Eiffel Tower;
the Taj Mahal of France.

Faces, idiot faces. All day long.
I'm drained by evening, long for pasta.

If Len were still around, I'd ask
to have him paint dark glasses on.

And BTW, I didn't look like this
when he first painted me..

all the first mothers in Milan
knew exactly what was on my mind

all those hours in the studio; yes,
the rest was nice during pregnancy;

you think of how it's going to be;
your hopes for him.. or her..; how it will turn out;

how stable the Italian state will be;
who'll be ruling Milan then..

every pregnant girl knows
exactly what my smile meant;

but after all these years of being stared at, it's gone
sad; withdrawn; but half-forgiving –

it means – I've had enough...
steal me, someone! Len, love –

for holy Botox' sake -
give me a nip-and-tuck..

the price of fame was ever
far too high; and you may quote me.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Being, Here, Now

First, I gave up asking, Why?
for I was never told the truth;
now I live in whylessness;

then I gave up asking, How?
for they said, best find out for yourself;
now I live in howlessness;

then I gave up asking, When?
for they said, who can be sure?
now I live in whenlessness;

then I gave up asking, Where?
for they said, where is it not?
now I live in wherelessness;

then I gave up asking, Who?
for they said, first know yourself;
now I live in wholesness;

and now I live without these questions,
the answers run toward me;

now I am more here and now, and
elsewhereness near gone;
for elsewhere's here and now, I find;
and Other's really One.

*

[leaning on Rumi]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Belovéd Victims Of Themself

There are those who, for
the deepest reasons even they forget,

offer themselves upon the altar
of the three afflictions:

body, mind and heart: suffer
everything that they can find;

and strangely, yet we love them;
do what we can; fail; sigh;

and start afresh – as they,
bruised, self-tortured, in that cause

which we can only hope one day
that they themselves – if they survive –

may realise in a burst of glory:
long-awaited, pent-up glory:

dissolve, surrender with a relief
as great as friendship, as the human race,

into the love we always had for them
which is as nothing, to the love

which they at last discover that they have
for their immortal self. Yes, how much we love them

beyond all reason; seeing ourselves in them;
loving love; as ever love calls us to do.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Bier Is Rest

Friends, in the name of God,
dig my grave just behind the pub
next to the sewer pipe;

so I might hear in the morning
the casks delivered in the yard
and in the evening
the waters of contentment.

*

(Paraphrased from an Arab poem of the 8th century)

Michael Shepherd

! ! Birthright, Giftright

Look at it this way for a moment,
if it please you:

those horoscopes (Dad
called them 'horror-scopes')
which we may read with mingled
emotions, hopes, resentments;

seeing fatalism imposed on us,
rather than a challenge –
suppose them, not as limitations
laid on this unwilling innocent...

but rather, that at very moment
inside, outside, passing time,
and in that very place,
the balance of the cosmos – that, so exquisite,
that we may never know the microscopic detail
of its – Love's – magnitude;

that balance needed such as, exactly,
and uniquely, you – yes, you –
you, beyond any self-imposed
limits such as guilt, regret,
duties assumed, reproach or failure,
roles adopted, status sought; or those
demands of others to which to comply –

to play that role the cosmos needs of you –
and as the ancients say, not Fate but glorious Necessity..
to dance, to sing, to glide, to sail, to fly
through life; life asking nothing more of you –
oh bliss beyond belief –
than that you let your light
so shine before all men...and... just be...
just be, and gloriously, yourself..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Business And Busyness

'I'm very busy at the moment; but
I'll look forward to reading your message
when I have more time...'

yeah yeah...

oh you 'busy' ones –
I'm on to you...

tell me that it's not because
you're 'busily' maintaining
a self-important picture of yourself–
(a picture based on fear?):

tell me that it's not because
it's your deceitful way to 'prioritise'
what you want to give yourself to,
and that which you don't...

'Occupied'; 'constantly active' –
that sounds a little better,
a little more impersonal -
there's hope for you...

But don't we all love –
love them, even before we meet –
those (you know them?)
who seem, miraculously, to 'have time'
for everyone – by appointment; or in emergency;

how do they manage it? Can it be,
they know the measures of the human heart
that make of time and space this lovely art?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Candlelight

So many bees, who know so much
that only bees can tell,
gave their life's devotion
to this single source of light;
silent whisper for your attention
to what it has to tell your sight,

before its substance burns, returns
into the upper air...

gently burns on altar, or scented in the bathroom's grace;
or here in front of you, gentle hypnotist
for the wandering mind;
to which it has so much to tell..

tells of humility; gently burning
in a stable, before a birth;

tells of loving-kindness; gives itself,
yet asks for nothing but to be itself;

tells of worship: worship, first, of what the bees are;
and here in this honey-coloured form
is their own worship;
waxing silent in murmured devotion;

warming miraculously, into liquid wax;
only love can be so liquid;
only love can reach so far;

liquid, warmed into this present light:
the candle's flame you know so well
yet cannot shape or hold;

already, candle hints to you
that there is that beyond all sense:

for round its light, air's gently warmed:
drawing the flame itself into the invisible above

like the soul that's yearning for its homeland;

and beyond, within, that air you cannot see
unless it moves some other thing,
it lights the space – space which is not
bathroom, altar; but all space;

candle tells you of all that;
draws the mind with steady, silent truth
to all creation in a single flame;

flame that asks for naught of you
but your attention; which it will reward
by telling you in stillness,
what you worship in yourself;

the light of self, that shines before all men
and glorifies its maker
like a gentle flame that cannot be put out.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Carol For Advent

'As the sun that shines through glass,
so Jesus in his mother was; '

as a babe in cot be laid,
so was He in Mary made;

as ripe fruit in basket laden,
so He ripened in a maiden;

as the scriptures long foretold,
so He came at midnight cold;

as the world wakes to warm dawn,
for the world, was Jesus born;

as God's message comes to earth,
so He came in human birth;

as the truth has its own sound,
so His Word is spread around;

as wise men are first to know,
so tell all men, it is so:

as the smile upon God's face,
so He brings us heaven's grace;

as our hearts are warmed by love,
as our minds are stilled by peace,
so we know the heavens above;
so we know our own soul's bliss;

as the sun that lights our days,
cradled in each heart He lays.

Michael Shepherd

! ! C-Day Minus X

In the days (and who
dare count them?) before
The First Day of Creation (Official)

God spent some time (though
of course, to Him, timeless..)
allowing for eventualities:

and devised a plan whereby
the Unbounded should be presented
in Creation as The Absolute Maximum
which He planned to be identical to
The Absolute Minimum...

chuckling to Himself (Who else?) ,
'That'll keep those atheist scientists
occupied... though of course
the philosophers and priests may have
their work cut out... but then,
that could be beneficial...'

All that now remained (I'm told)
for God (who's infinitely generous,
yet loves the economical)
to package this in the most practical form...

not – as I'm sure you'll realise –
an easy task, given His boundless nature...

so – allowing for the inevitable compromise –
stuffed it all into a Revelation suitcase
called the cosmos... sighed; anticipated problems;
but saw that it was – given the circumstances –
good;

waited for His image, Man, to call it
The Cosmos; and watches with benevolent smile
as men explain it all to one another..

[With acknowledgements to Saint Nicholas of Cusa,
who spotted some of this..]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Celebrating Philip Larkin

He looks out at you from the photograph
or rather, doesn't: eyes wide but blank,
thick lenses would place your image
in a plane you don't inhabit;

like a fish that in an aquarium
suddenly swims direct toward you
stopping at the glass to stare a moment:
was there a meeting? What
are you to the fish?

So, nothing. Then next day,
he's propping his bike against the wall,
bending down to take off his cycle clips;
caught so close, you exchange
English noises: the weather,
a joke or was it, delivered deadpan:
but the sound of him stays with you:
melancholy and yet celebrating
the confidence in being ordinary.

Then next day, the poetry:
starts matter-of-fact, regretful,
doesn't miss a thing around him,
sharp eyes hiding behind pebble lenses: then,
dives with us into the sea of greatness:
calls us, reels us in, enslaves the heart
with voice that speaks beyond all melancholy;
haunted by the completeness of eternity.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Celebrating Spring

The tiny white violets from the field
limp and sad in the cut-glass vase -
good luck or bad luck?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Climate Change

I wrote a poem on the wind
with raindrops in my hand
and heard a forest sigh in pain
in Amazon's deep land.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Clothes Moth

This tiny moth
eating the jacket I no longer wear
is my teacher in the Tao

Michael Shepherd

! ! Cloud Of Unknowing

How strange it is – and yet, why should it be? –
that all things seem to live most unaware
of that which gives them life itself to live;
so see the All as always everywhere?

yet from the jungle, or a city's heart,
the sound of praise does not unceasing rise;
and we may tread a springtime's flowered field
and hear no coloured choir of grateful cries..

why has our Lord Creator set it thus,
and hid His love from His created things?
What might He ask from us, in this great game,
that once again may hear the song He sings?

His are all powers; and yet, He chooses these
above so many other powers to wield:
that with one hand, His bounty He conceals;
yet with the other, all His All reveals...

Children, laughing, play at hide-and-peek;
act out the semblance of this mighty game
which some may never play; for some, life's work;

what then, our part? To seek His playful aim?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Commentator Steams Through To Gold In Banality Final

If he really wants to win this title
he's got to really work at it in this race:
is he hungry enough?

this is what all those years of training
have been all about:
keep to your race plan,
but remember, on the day,
anything can happen..

they're off.. he had a good start;
now he's pumping those legs,
pushing down with the right leg,
then the left leg hard into the ground,
then the right leg again...

He'll know that if he doesn't get the gold medal
it'll only be a silver..

he's hurting all over now,
pumping the oxygen through his lungs,
going all out;

he's coming through the field;
has he gone too early?
he's got questions to answer,
this race is asking big questions of him;

he's ahead now. He'll be pleased with that;
if he loses now, he won't be pleased with that;

tell the folks out there,
how pleased are you to have won?

'fantastic - amazing - incredible - over the moon'

tell me, how sorry would you have been

if you hadn't won?

Not a record time, but
he'll be pleased with that;
tell me, what are your plans for twenty twelve?

now back to the studio for news of
other events like failure and stuff.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Consumed By Love

Thanks to the hundreds of you who daily
are so eager to enhance my life
and that of my partner
with pills and extensions
giving night-long passion -

now, do you have a cure
for arriving at the office in the morning
exhausted?

It's a tale of two sacks -
hit the sack, or get the sack...

Michael Shepherd

! ! Coo Coo Coo

The lazy cuckoo
dies after eight thousand calls -
the gods are counting.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Daphne

She has... had... (which
is the more appropriate word
for those who live on so lively
in one's human memory? ...)

that grace of spirit which you'll know
from reading, seeing acted out,
let's say, Jane Austen:
at once as serious about life
as any thinker; yet as light-hearted
as she danced life's play, that
to meet her, was to dance along
with her pure spirit..

a golden girl; I remember her
reading aloud Jane Austen's letters,
Fanny Burney's diaries, as if
she and we were living them together;
Shakespeare surely met her like..

she pretended to the belief
(eyes laughing, daring you to disagree..)
that 'humour' derives from 'guna'...
and, she lived it; her soul, deeply serious;
her spirit, dancing to a merry tune;
acting out the play of life; speaking to the heart...

such are the lives that touch our own,
bless them, light them, lighten them;
may I share this memory of her? *

MS

*[guna: in Hinduism, the three 'qualities' of
all true goodness; activity; and rest;
continually swaying and swinging
the play of Creation with their imbalance
from first to last]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Darshana

Who looks to whom?
And who looked first?

Everything that has direction
has its contraflow.

The ikon whose golden frame you gently touch
painted its painter so that it might look within you.

That white-bearded man whose photo
you just glanced at, was photographed
by the Ganges' snowy swirling waters
to be there to bless your eyes, to smile your mind.

For you who arrived, hot, dusty, saddle-sore,
the saint has waited patiently to see you become him.

For you, the whole world awaits
with answers to your questions yet to ask.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Delphi, C.430 Bce

She saw them coming, that rainy day;
popped her head out of the cave,
saw them trudging sandalled up the hillside;

being an oracle, she knew all the answers;
but had to guess the questions, or wait
to see what stupidity or conceit
framed their speech;

upmarket bunch, this lot; not the usual
money market slickers whom
it was a pleasure to turn away..

Chaerophon addressed her:
was there any man who was wiser
than Socrates? She sighed inwardly;
always their leading questions
gave them away..

tell them what they want to hear..
she did the smoke thing, but
the rain spoiled the trick;

a theatrical pause always gives
better value, a certain weight..
no, she said at length, no man
is wiser than Socrates..

swiftly satisfied, they turned away;
did not hear her add,
'but his wife is wiser...'

typical men... but she chuckled to herself
ironically, remembering what
her father said when she told him
she wanted to be an oracle when she grew up:

'Men think they know... but women
think they know better...' Dad

spoke truer than he knew -
in her case.

She gathered her robe
around her; checked the time;
caves are OK, have a certain drama;
but temples, she thought, are friendlier..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Dem Postal Non-Delivery Blue-Hoos..

Parcel lost in post!
fortunate to be alive
and live without it..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Dementia Remembered

Before dementia, with its cruel mercy

freed her from those golden bonds

of obligations and relationships

(the chilling question, and so carefully expressed

during the morning wash and powdering,

`are we... related...?')

she'd carefully destroyed

all the photos of her family;

while leaving all her husband's...

what did that mean, to that so loving daughter...?

What shames can those who love, so cherish

as some further goad?

But she forgot, now that she slept downstairs

the photo of the grandfather whom I never met

(he died too early, of dread `cotton lung`):

flat, at the bottom of her dressing-table drawer..

he in full Freemason's aproned proud regalia

of Hope Lodge nearby Hope Street; nearby hope...

So now, he, on the wardrobe top

and I flat on the bed

gaze at each other in unshaped relationship

with our two views of her; so totally at odds;

except, except, for love;

she, immortal like that holy Maid herself,

girl-mother in our shared sweet thoughts;

out of mind but never out of mind.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Demonstration Haiku For Mike Who Asked

Dusk on autumn brown -
where does this sadness come from?
Freed leaves, dancing home..

*

[some of the (too many) self-appointed authorities believe that a haiku should contain a 'surprise' element, or as the Germans say, 'the Aha! experience', plus the usual 5-7-5 syllables and season and time of day identified..]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Diamond

OK, be cynical – say,
why, it's only a piece of dead wood
that found itself trapped when
the earth's crust heaved a sigh...

be cynical - say,
it didn't ask for you to
dig it up - buried there
recovering from the shock...

be cynical - say,
anyway, it looked like a pebble then
until a man so cleverly polished it..

be cynical – say,
it's nothing of itself – all it does
is to reflect the light that's always all around..

be cynical – say,
we'd only value it as a piece of glass,
if smart guys didn't fix it for them to seem rare,
and silly girls say, look, it proves he loves me...

now just look at this diamond..
what use is your mind
when your eye and your heart
get on so well without it?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Dick Fozard's Wartime Navy Knife

I'm not one for mementoes – Grandma
in sepia, pie-crust necked and pleated blouse,
expressionless amidst her dressed-up, mixed-up brood; chic aunt
with that hundred-watt smile which clicked
off, the instant the shutter clicked...but now

I'm holding this kitchen knife.
It's got a triangular blade to allow
for that quick chop-chop of the trained cook
or kitchen-hand; black, dulled ebonite handle;
and although it's made in Sheffield,
by ,1943, it's not stainless steel
but stained iron; sharp, but not too dangerous
when used in the cook's galley of a hungry ship of the unslept
that's simultaneously zigzagging to avoid torpedoes
and kamikaze dive-bombers, while buffeting through
the South China Seas. The 'broad arrow'
stamped on it – as once used to pattern convicts' clothes –
here means, that it was wartime issue.

Dick trained as artist and lithographer's apprentice
just in time not to hone his talents when called up
to fight the Japs in that nasty, ruthless end-campaign
when Europe had declared peace, but not Japan.
He wouldn't talk of it; and when a few years back
someone saw and remembered him from then, he
shook hands warmly, said little, left it to the other jacktar
to tell the story when he'd gone. And went back to find himself again,
walking the Yorkshire hills and dales with rucksack, pipe, a crust,
an onion, cheese, cut I guess with this same knife, and
missing nothing with his artist's vision;
beyond solitude; content; complete.

He never really used his part-developed skills again
except to teach, with few words but with superb craftsman's care,
leaving a trail of devoted pupils: 'He taught me all I know'.

Only those, perhaps, who know war,
can know peace in this way, asking nothing; to know him

(but careful not to question) was to know a little of that peace
deep within the sea of himself, the sea
which holds so many souls.

When he moved on, as he often did,
he left his knife. I use it every day,
remembering this man who was just one
who knew, lived, war, quietly guarding his memories
of pain with love, of love with pain.

I sharpen it, like a memory
I do not have. Like one who prays
devoutly, to that unknown god
of war; who may, in ways we cannot understand,
guard such souls.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Donald Rumsfeld Meets William Wordsworth

There's what we remember we remember
and there's what we forget;
then there's what we remember
that we've forgotten;
and there's what we've forgotten
that we used to remember;
and there's what we've forgotten
that we've forgotten.

There's a poem there somewhere
now I've got that far.

Dammit, I'll go for a walk
now the daffodils are out.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Dreaming Reality

In a dream that shone last night
washed with a clear sweet tenderness
I walked a paradise I knew
and I remembered happiness:

in a presence without end
and in a space where all stays free
I walked complete as my true self
and happiness remembered me.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Duet For Heaven And Earth

Cicada at dusk -
do you know how sweetly sing
the stars, with your voice?

Michael Shepherd

! ! East Meets West Where Wisdom Rests

Reason tells us that the One Above
veils His Creation but from tender love;

His magic all around plays hide-and-seek;
so shall we praise? or let our silence speak?

our heart is His; the One in Many, He:
be still, and know all bliss; all constancy.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Easter Saturday

Today is the day after;
after blackness, what?

yesterday, black present filled the mind;
today, not even light on blackness..

a day not on the calendar;
an empty diary entry;

faith smaller than a mustard seed;
hope an untilled field.

This is what a present with
no future feels like;

the mercy only
that there is a present;

among the closest, the rumour
of a promise so ethereal

it has no shape or form
to build into new faith, no hope;

not even waiting, when
there may be nothing for to wait;

a day out of time; wrap around you
the thin silk of love;

be still; surrender everything
and find a peace beyond all promises;

today, there is no tomorrow;
if you have hope, then hope;

if you have prayer, then pray and pray;
perhaps tomorrow's born today.

! ! Eh? !

Going deaf
is such a curse.
Yet my listening's better -
'cos my hearing is worse.

Will it improve
my writing verse
if my listening's better
though my hearing is worse?

But, on the bright side - I'm
truth's creditor, not debtor:
my hearing's worse
but my listening is better...

Michael Shepherd

! ! Emily Dickinson Takes A Poetry Course

Dear Ms Dickinson: I've just received
your amusing little trifle,
'Faith is a fine invention'
as your first week's homework on this course..

and hope that as your designated docent
(you may of course request a change..)
we may establish a relationship
that's full of 'mellow fruitfulness' – as
John Keats (1795-1821) would put it..

First, may I say that it's more interesting
for the reader, not to use the first line
of your poem –especially one so short –
as the title...something more intriguing perhaps?
such as – in this case, 'Natural Science'?

I have a feeling that you have within you
much more to say on this theme
(already well covered by the poets, did you know?)
than this whimsical – if pertinent – short verse...

Thus it's best for the poet as beginner
not to attempt the succinct 'aperçu'
(I hope you understand a little French?)
of such as our more resonant senior 'gentlemen'.....

I do question the use of 'invention'
in the first line; however,
I think I detect a hint of emulating
William Blake's poetic stance here?

Now, in these days of sexual equality
it would be best, I think,
not to use 'Gentlemen'... are there not
lady biologists and preachers? ...
and we don't now use those capital letters
so beloved of our German poets...

Your setting-off of science against religion is alas, so easily overdone; especially in the context of so short a verse.. and 'Microscopes are prudent' is, I have to say, not the most evocative of phrases; even though poetic compaction is a worthy aim...

Nor is it clear what 'Emergency' it is, to which you might refer – microscopes are, I feel, an image of less urgent study?

However, Miss Dickinson, I suspect that you have a confident personal voice which we shall hope to bring out?

I shall not discuss the other verse which you include: its punctuation of unseemly dashes reads so breathless that one may hardly bestow the designation 'poesy' upon it..

However I look forward to your next week's homework, Miss Dickinson – may I suggest something a little longer for your next poetic venture? There are many themes out there, even for the single lady? Yrs, E. Doolittle BA (Hons)

Michael Shepherd

! ! Emily Dickinson Transcends

this - yet, seeing this -
the knowing, 'not this' - yet -
this knowing seeing -
That!

Michael Shepherd

! ! English Teacher

bumped into my grandson's English teacher yesterday
at the football, and in between shouting like teenagers
I moaned about the state of A's Eng. Lit. not to mention Eng. Lang. -
you know, you've heard it all before... in my day.....never regretted....
he agreed, but said go easy on the lad he's only thirteen
they all want to be fifteen and grown up at that age,
they can't be seen by their peer-group to be 'for' anything too much
so they ridicule everything, it's either pretentious crap if it's modern
or stupid ancient crap if it's more than a generation ago...
they even call Shakespeare a sad loser until
someone says he wrote the screenplay for that film
though they're fascinated by the idea that Marlowe
was a spy as well as a crap writer not that they've read him anyway

but you know what he said
put them up on stage in the annual Shakespeare and make them
speak his lines, and they'll never forget it,
they'll not say anything about it to me except in private but
they'll remember it to their dying day it's things like that
he said that keep me in this bloody job.

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

! ! Enthusiasm's Promise

You've heard it said;
it sounds just great –
as well it might..

so now there's just the matter
of our really-truly believing it; of
living up to it..

The divine world and
all its beings rest, reside, it's said,
in each individual, as in the universe;

not remote – unless they remain
locked beyond forbidding heavy door of ego;

not sternly aloof – but ready
to offer in abundance, lawfully
to the lawful, whatever might be necessary;
it's said they cannot lawfully resist;
are eager; smiling, running, to our voice...

what might they be thinking,
murmuring amongst themselves,
as they await the sound of rusty key
in rusty lock... to burst out and do
what the gods shall do; bring,
along with their vast divine forces,
that bonus, which is unimaginable
until it manifests; a glory
as of rising and of setting suns
and all that lies beyond..

It's said, that first
they test our courage
in daring to pursue their path;
test our conviction that
they're there to call upon;
test our intelligence
in how we go about it;

then – as Goethe told us
centuries ago: the gods, as Providence,
pour upon us means, events,
assistance past all dreams of human thought:

this, the Good within has vowed to us.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Everyone A Prince Growing Toward A King

To live is to be slowly born' –
what a simple and refreshing view
familiar to a born devout Hindu;
yet spoken by Saint-Exupery,
who saw his little prince become so great..

how wonderful are common words
shaking the common out of us;
growing nobly into our true self; so that
arguments about rebirth take second place..
where the future is all full of golden promise
as we become acquainted with ourself;
what matter, then, if it be iron age or gold?

Walk around now, in this cornfield of the soul:
see as a meadow sees: for all around
are seeds now human growings, watered into life with love,
growing into themselves, all golden-ripe;
Traherne's immortal golden wheat: remembered as a child
into the memory of a man; to immortality;
the heaven of ourselves, becoming clear within;

and maybe then, some few among that meadow crowd
may catch your eye; and in that youthful light
may grow a little in their own true sight.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Execution Before Judgment

The fly wringing its hands on the plate -
is it anticipation, or cleanliness, or shame?
Too late..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Film Clip

She sat alone in the bus shelter
playing with a rubber band
between the fingers of each hand

and singing quietly to herself
everything I do
I do because of you

Michael Shepherd

! ! For Those In Mind

Death

is too late for grief.

If we had celebrated their living

knowing that grief would surely come

then grief would have a place;

death

is too late for grief.

Michael Shepherd

! ! For Vasant Kothari

Every funeral, cremation, and its rites
may have its grief; yet too,
its celebration of a life well lived;
and call out, too, self-dedication's vow:

as the crowd of living witness
quietly leave and share their murmured words,
this vow ever calls to me: to celebrate the living:
celebrate them just as if it were
their – our - last day on earth:

celebrate and praise unstintingly;
encourage and enthuse and aid;
form their virtues in the mind and
speak them loud – as if
these whom we praise, were unaware
of their own virtues..

celebrate the living, and their life
shall celebrate the praisers in its life..

Vasant, your sweet, contained humility
hid from strangers, showed your friends,
what you were; and, who we are;

I hope your spirit (which, I'd like to think,
inspired me to the sounds beyond these words)
approves, accepts – in the eternal present tense –
these thoughts of you.

Michael Shepherd

! ! For... They'LI Know Who They Are

If only love were finally, enough –
then you'd have no more fears:
look here, and listen: we have love
enough for you; and more; and more;

but how to prove that love's indeed enough
beyond all doubts? Bring on the opposites;
try and test in fire and whirlwind, ice and storm,
that love alone remains;

for only when the chips are down
will love reveal, just what love really is:
containing every opposite that seems to rule the world:
fierce tenderness; and ruthless mercy; hate that only love creates;
love like we've never thought it; love, unendingly, enough.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Forgiveness

Running over the morning checklist -
magnanimity; forgiveness; simplicity of life;
compassion; contentment; truthfulness...

still, that reluctance, to forgive 'them'...
however, questions put from heart to self
call out self-answer:

since we cling to that 'otherness'
of others, we prohibit the oneness of ourself..

ego lies so close, so close to self,
as if it hides in self's own shadow;

it is ego that will never quite forgive itself!
since ego clings with desperation
to the life it steals from life; so -

for give: for otherness,
give unity.. oh why
is something just so simple,
just so difficult?

Yet with the message,
warm its smile..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Friends In Disguise - To Rilke

Not the sad face of sadness;
not its weariness, nor its lack of hope;
but why sadness visits, and what it intends:
what the secret blessings that it brings...

not the quick whims of hope or faith,
that last so briefly, then are gone:
but where they truly come from;
where they rest eternal in the heart:
explain themselves in their own worldly ways;

not even that love that comes and shines and passes;
no, none of these – and all of these:
masked, they come and knock upon the door;
friends, that come to tease, to test, to heal..
open the door to them;
now, before they knock..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Gertrude Stein Is Interviewed On American Poetry

and there was the knocking on the door
that we were expecting
and it was the man
that we were expecting
with the questions we were expecting
to which answers were expected
by those who expect answers
as if life were like that
which for writers it is not

yes, tea was drunk
and after tea the tape recorder set up
so that what I said
I would continue to say
somewhere else
even when I changed my mind
here and nowhere else

and he said Ms Stein
what do you think of American poetry
and we said well it's American
and it's poetry
that's as it should be
and really that's all there is to say
and the man looked disappointed
so we asked him did he read poetry
and he said poetry no I dont read poetry
but my editor does
so I said it's really about Americans
living their lives
that's what American poetry is really about
because Americans move around
and so their words move around and
words in English have lost their intensity
but American words are always on the move
and they are more intense
yes, Americans living among Americans
and talking to their neighbours
if it's not about that

it's not really American poetry at all is it
if it's not about that
then why bother writing poetry

and the man was asking about a rose
being a rose being a rose and we said
for a hundred years the rose
has not been red in poetry
but now for the first time in a hundred years
the rose is red again

and the man looked at his watch
and said thank you Ms Stein
and was switching off his tape recorder

and a month later that
was what we said
in a magazine much read
by Americans who mostly
are not poets no very few but we said it
we know that this is so
because we read it there
and we think that really
that was all there was to say
because that was all we think
is really important
about American Poetry
that the words move like Americans move
and that is exciting for a writer
and that is the important thing about
American Poetry

Michael Shepherd

! ! Gertrude Stein Met Marilyn Monroe In Tiffany's

a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose
and a dozen roses ring around a posy -
but a rose is not as rosy as a ring -
for diamonds are a man's best bet;

a rose is just a rose but the future could be rosy -
a diamond is a girl's best bait.
a rose is a rose but eventually goes off;
even love can have a nasty end;

but a man who's had his day can always be disposed of...
while diamonds are a lifetime friend...

Michael Shepherd

! ! Give Her One This Christmas

How could I not know
'what she wants for Christmas' –
when hundreds of emails
spam it to me every Advent day,
and right through unsilent night
in several languages...

a manliness increased in every measure;
a bulk purchase of blue pills for
the bedside drawer; and – since it can be
gift-wrapped more easily than me myself –
an imitation designer watch: to register
how late for work we're going to be
day after day; night after night;

and perhaps, for those still single friends,
(as these gifts might look inappropriate...)
a Russian bride? (see airbrushed photo attached..)

And what makes you think
they won't target children next with these...?
'Is your boy fit to become
an alpha male in your community...?
buy him our Junior SuperMale Set; complete
with full instructions on DVD...'

Happy Giftmas, one and all...

Michael Shepherd

! ! Godliness

Riffling through the dictionary
of the mind - or, as the Anglo-Saxons
named it, 'word-hoard' -
for a word that exactly matches
what needs to be said,

a word may call out from the page
like that kitten or that puppy
in the pet-shop, which devastatingly
looks you straight in the eye and mutely says
'Master, treasure me...'

so, the other day, 'godly' called to me: as
abbreviated in former times from 'godlike';

not a word to suit, say, those fine-minded Hindu pundits
who would want to classify its degrees
of nearness or of distance from the state
of god or gods..

rather, a gentle, misty, English-weather, modest-shining word
which – borrowing a trick from those same
Hindu grammarians – is neither limited, nor unlimited;
or alternatively: is both limited, and unlimited;
allows for small-g god, or big-G God;
allows for frequent changes in the weather;
and thus, will halt at all the stations on the line...

so, stopped in the street by
some presumptuous well-intentioned stranger
with that piercing eye that stoppeth one of three,
enquiring 'Have you been saved by Jesus yet? '
we may reply as if we were Dr Johnson
of quirky diction and of his own Dictionary fame,

replying, 'Sir, my mind has godly inclinations...'

Yes, I'm comfortable with 'godly': like
that kitten or that puppy, asking

no more of you than what
shared nature with a smile
feeds and loves..

Michael Shepherd

! ! God's Two-Ness

I prayed to understand
God's two-ness:
God within me said,

'I am in you; and you in Me;
yet when I hear
the glorious sounds of singing praise,
the open heart of gratitude,
the words of wonder and of love,
and see the shining eyes,

I am the world for you;
and cast My Two-ness
like the sweet Spring rain.'

Michael Shepherd

! ! Goodbye Routemaster

The iconic (damn, I swore I'd never use that word..)
red London bus
was designed by the lively minded
for the active lively – those who
take a few chances with life,
look for a little excitement,
test their limits, enjoy
– the French have a phrase for it –
the little happinesses, sweetnesses, or
good fortunes, it doesn't
translate quite so well –
let's say, exhilarating moments?

viz.:

the back platform, a step
nearer the ground, is open; rubber-floored;
a central vertical bar,
wound with a grip-fast plastic,
midway on the edge of the platform; then
on the vertical edge of the rear bus-back,
a substantial holding bar
which never lets you down;
another horizontal bar
the other side
to steady you either getting on or off

so

you've just missed the bus as
it begins to pull away?
Don't worry – you're young to middling,
the driver's still to change from low gear as
he pulls away from the kerb and queue;
you check the platform's clear;
a short run;
grab the upright bar with the right hand,
right foot on platform, then

left hand on vertical bar –and there -
a small but significant personal achievement,
a confirmation that life's for the winning;
the breathing deeper, healthier;
quicker than the gym or marathon

and correspondingly,

you're on the bus, you'd like to get off soon
but it's quite a few yards, or chains, or furlong
to the next bus stop - but eureka! – the bus slows
towards a red traffic light or a traffic jam:
stand on the open back of the platform (yes,
the designer thought of that too) , or holding on the central bar
(this one requires a quick calculation of which
you choose according to bus speed and agility)
and dropp off with some grace,
hit the ground running...
another little good fortune, exhilaration
to liven up your day; even your fellow passengers
watching, feel a shared lift of spirits
at this touch of athleticism

though

this bus, though it can cope
with a young mother with a quickly
folded push-chair, infant now in left arm,
wasn't designed for low-income single mothers
with twins who like to shop at Harrods,
or for self-drive wheelchairs...
so in these more socially inclusive times
where well-stuffed infant-carriers no longer fold to nothing...
and with labour-intensive costs in mind,
there's no benevolent conductor watching
all these minor athletic feats –
now, fast-shut doors, make the seated driver supervise all this,
no conductor standing, climbing stairs,
taking your ticket while the driver – drives; alas,
it's goodbye Routemaster...

but

maybe you'll understand why, as
symbol of our more agile years,
we miss it

(for PoHo, who asked)
+ PS: you can buy one cheap!

Michael Shepherd

! ! Haiku For A Globally Warmed Early Spring

Pale yellow primroses
hiding in the undergrowth
only seen by a few

Michael Shepherd

! ! Haiku For Myku

This first plum-blossom in the snow
delights the bumble-bee
which has no words for 'Spring' or 'happy'.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Haiku For The Over-Zealous - Possibly Himself

Don't seek to find yourself;
just be yourself;
here, there are no exams to pass..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Haiku-Ukiah

where tears meet laughter
how elusive is the source
whence a smile melts tears

whence a smile melts tears
how elusive is the source
where tears meet laughter

*

[haiku-ukiah is a 'mirror-poem' which offers two ways of attaching thought to image - a difficult verse-form to work with, but 'Japanese' in mood]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Haiku-Ukiah For Sunday Morning

in the world of peace
with the gift: no need to think
gratitude flows deep

gratitude flows deep
with the gift: no need to think
in the world of peace

Michael Shepherd

! ! Haiku-Ukiah: Night Rain In Kyoto

on the window screen

night whispers secret witness -

the earth loves the rain;

the earth loves the rain;

night whispers secret witness -

on the window screen

Michael Shepherd

! ! Haiku-Ukiah: On A Beach In Japan

on salt pebble shore
and many coloured sea stones
one pair of eyes here

one pair of eyes here
and many coloured sea stones
on salt pebble shore

Michael Shepherd

! ! Hardware Shop

There's nothing so becomes a man
as a local hardware shop - it expands
the horizons of his home improvement, and
brings harmony to his home life as
those little jobs get done;
and although these days a car-trip
would take you to an out-of-town
with wider variety and lower price,
there is greater delight in detailed chat
with that little man around the corner
who's been there since - oh, you knew his father.
He's got it; or will get it; you chat; come out feeling good;
there's order in the world. Things get done.

But they're a dying breed. We had two - didn't know
just how lucky we were until Mr and Mrs Tidy
(how many Tidy generations of hardware had there been?)
with their two shops run together - he in one, she in the other - and
he identified just what it was you wanted; she
knew just where they kept it - suddenly they went, still sprightly young, to
a well-deserved retirement, after a life of virtue.
They exuded some sort of spiritual strength
between them; as if your purchase had
a hint of allegory in some non-conformist book of life.

Which left the other hardware shop. I hoped
that their departure would encourage his own trade
but it was not to be. The stage set of his shop is perfect -
behind the obligatory front-of-shop basics, put out
each day - camping gas, the bags of dried manure,
plastic bins of every size -
the shop is filled in every nook and cranny, leading to
a further vista of boxed shelves, a hint of aisle on aisle
to joy the DIY-er's heart - and
that faintly oily, metallic, woody, dusty, smell - the precious essence
of a hundred years in that same shop, of visits by
a century of proud home owners, treasuring their addiction..

but this is a man upon whom no tidy destiny, no spiritual path
has fallen. Enter his crammed shop with hope, of the friendly chat
that from the furthest depths, produces just the size
of split boggle ring of finest brass that you were looking for,
and what do you get? Twenty minutes of sad-smiled, patient
explanation of why he hasn't got it; couldn't get it,
because they'd want an order of two dozen. It's only done
in industrial sizes anyway. And the supplier's changed hands
and you'll need to change the whole system to metric.

You should have known - for it was always so:
for this he exists, as if living out a punishment for past sins
against the gods of hardware. Or should you (itching to get away)
join in the sad elegaics for a world in ebb, the small shopkeeper
who existed only to serve his fellow villagers? To talk to him
makes you feel that somehow, somewhere, in the back room
of shared humanity, it just might be - your fault...

At last you get away, empty-handed; and wonder at
this world of little shops and shopkeepers:
the joyous absurdity, the hidden tragedy
of lives you daily knock against, yet never really know.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Harvest Festival

When on a glorious day – one such as this –
you're overcome with awe and wonder, praise,
and part-formed gratitude... which seeks some one
to thank for this, by laying at their feet
all that the world has brought us unannounced
as seedcorn turned to golden harvest wheat –

then who would hesitate, to draw in light
a greater One as whom to kneel before,
to make of our humility, a 'One'
as if we were some grateful 'other'; we,
less worthy, painting pure duality..

..don't hesitate: praise is beyond a 'two';
what now we praise, becomes our very self;
in praise, name radiates as kingdom, come;
and kingdom hallows all, as all its own;
so, glory in that sound of praise so fine;
for when you shine with praise – then all things shine.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Has Music Gone From Poetry?

Has music gone from poetry?
Words and music, still agree?
Dance and rhythm, song and laughter,
Do they echo, now, hereafter..?

Has singing gone from poetry?
Words that sing a listened tune?
Lullaby and melody,
Old rhymes that sleepy mothers croon?

Has rhythm gone from poetry?
Quick as a dance-step, slow as a glide?
Laughing now; now weeping; now shouting with glee –
Dancing round you, singing, can't catch me...

Has magic gone from poetry?
Spells that summon fairy Fates?
Incantations solemn spoken,
Heroes, giants, to danger woken?

Have light hearts gone from poetry?
Hearts that know the tears of life,
hearts that know the grief of strife,
yet sing and dance and laugh with glee?
Who loves, who loves not poetry?

*

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

! ! He Flew With Angels

At school, the look-up homework
one day was `mercy'...

and that proved itself
to be indeed itself

what the dictionary said
haunted; seemed inadequate;
haunted again

he smelled his life, as one
smells Spring in the air
of a freezing January day

every one of his thoughts
began and finished
with the word unsounded

then his actions too grew
out of it, returned to it

his friends, his wife, his family:
some heard it, some did not

years passed; in the darkness
of the quiet evening street,
the great and famous called on him

what he had to say was
too great for the public,
too young yet for the public

but the word, nourished,
slipped into the courtroom,
whispered in the palaces,

stood behind the priests
who did not say it yet
heard it murmuring in their ear

while for him, the word grew and grew,
flew with him higher ever higher

so they talked of how to martyr him
because the word was too big for them

he died before they decided on his fate
and was that too what it meant

leaving the word in the air like
a limitless embrace, like
the warm wish of a departing guest
said over the shoulder with a smile,
a wave, a memory

and a sowing and a growing,
a reaping, a vastness, a light,
a boundless love

Michael Shepherd

! ! Heartsong, Heart's Dance

In silence, every song that's sung
is as a wheatgrain in the hand;
known in wonder, love and awe;
its essence more than human sound;

in stillness, every joyful dance
is summed as if in perfect prayer;
though every muscle yearns to praise,
unmoving; more than mind in air;

silence sings and stillness dances
in the freedom of the heart;
self, content to be the watcher;
loving each and every part.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Heaven As Spectrum

Bold March sunlight bounces
off the yellow-grey-brown London claybricks
of the house across the gardens;

the next-door neighbour's cut the dead ivy
and the reflected light hits the artificial flowers
and their strong delicate colours, glowing
in their various cobalt vases; blooming joyful
where living flowers find that corner sad;

the flowers as if washed today with brighter water-colours;
as if grace itself, wishing to send a message
to this room today, had chosen the spectrum
of the flowers' purples, yellows, blues and reds
as its medium and message; and its smile;

today, the spectrum is for me
metaphor enough – its rainbow limits
playing now-you-see-me... with the retina,
hinting at the formless always beckoning
there, beyond the form..

metaphor enough
for heaven's mind itself; and heaven's smile.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Heidegger Meets Shankara

Beyond all being
is that Being –
that, whose Being
is our being.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Heidegger Questions A Japanese On Language

Like the delighted stillness of the silence
which is an emptiness that is full,

from which come the moments
graced by the specific; as

the scent of cherry blossom or
the petals of the plum;

when what endures, is the message
and needs us as messengers.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Heirs Of The Heart

Those you love. Those
you have loved. Those
who love you.

They live. You know
they live, somehow, somewhere.
Listen. Hear them. Aren't they calling?

What are they calling?
What are they wearing, as they call?
Are they wearing grief, loss;
your borrowed clothes?

Are they trapped in your memory?
Be them. Let them shine in you,
from out of you. They call to live
where they should live:
not locked in memory, but
shining out from you.
Be them. Be their life.

How you loved them. How they
loved you. Be that love,
Live that love. Let them
shine, so bright that
people recognise them in you;
wonder how to tell you without hurt...

Their purity. What they really were.
What they truly lived for.
Let it shine. Give them
the life they sought.

Listen to them.
How happy they are,
living in you whom they so love..
see how they shine..

! ! His Smile

He smiled ... it was as if I'd never seen
a smile before; as if, that moment, God
invented smiles; as if there'd never been
a reason for a gift that was so good...

He smiled... as if from every day and year
of his own life, with each its gratitude
to give assurance, that we're living here
to fill our living with that godly good...

Was this how angels smile? Was this as God –
who has no need to smile – and thus, whose smile
may be unbounded, when he sees mankind
now in His image, shining as He shines?

Was this the peace on earth of God's first dawn?
Mandela smiled.. and mankind was reborn.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Homoeoteleuton - For Danny

Greek and Roman poets prosaic

thought consonance was comic - almost, crime;

only the manic Germanic

tribes were not averse to rhyme..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Hope And Light, And Love

You – whose inner strength, I always think
to be the greater than my fluctuating own –
ask, only half humorously, as
business, family support, collapses all around,
for a poem of hope and light and love...

and I fall still and silent; for to me
only stillness, silence, are my answer
to those mighty questions of what within ourselves
we have, and have not; lose and find again...

and in the stillness of the silence, because
I am of 'certain' yet uncertain age...
hear the family voice still sounding in the ear of memory

of that sweet Stoicism of the Victorian working class:
...'working' indeed; even to the work-house...
and 'class'; yet class with pride; hope (wasn't the Baptist chapel
built along with Hope Street?): light; and love...

that Stoicism (would they know the word?)
that folds its hands onto its tidy lap, when
all around collapses, and says quietly,
"It's trying.. as the good Lord knows,
for he's tried me oftentimes enough..."

and Sunday starts and ends the week,
the 'day of rest' when God and Man
work hardest, and together..

that sweet Stoicism... that responds
to the muted tea-cup whine of others, with
'We must just count our blessings, dear...'

or break into the mutual relief of song:
'Count your blessings, one by one'..

and never was the One more to be sought, whose blessings
are only counted, as sleep's sheep leap

over the stile of thought,
counted one by one; each one blessing, blest,
containing All -

All, and as you said yourself,
Hope; Light; and Love; these three..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Horses For Courses

See them at the starting-gate:
impatient horses tossing their bridled heads,
rearing, backing, snorting;
silk-bright riders patient;
how have they attained this race?

they've shared a fortitude, horse and rider together:
out at dawn in all weathers, focussed, thundering
down and round the beaten, scuffed-soil track;
never a slack training session;

they share – without a common language
save that of the heart – their discipline;
share that rare sense of unity
once forged in battle, now in peaceful excellence;

'they're off! ' – the race begun;
all around, the watchers shouting, jumping, waving race-cards;
the rider, in the camera's eye,
so calm; invisibly controlling;

amidst all this excited noise,
they are the quietest;
amidst all this galloping,
they are the stillest in their mind;

yet who knows a horse's mind,
to say what's patiently endured,
the daily training, bridle, bit and whip;
or what's sheer exultation for a horse?
or where the discipline and freedom meet?

who knows what may be horse's sheer contentment?
knows what contentment may exceed
that of horse being horse? ...
as rider knows, that, win or lose, he's done his best,
for himself and for the horse..

what do horse and rider share

between themselves, that's
never spoken? For, see: each,
a clear and shining eye..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Housefly

Now that this housefly
has finished wringing its hands
over the past - what?

Michael Shepherd

! ! How To Quarrel

There were two monks who
shared a cell in perfect amity.

Yet they, concerned to perfect their compassion
for all humankind, wished to know all
mankind's troubles.

Mankind, said the one,
seems always to be quarrelling –
always too ready to pick some fight –
how can this be?

It seems, said the other, that in order to
assert their selfhood and to be 'somebody',
they must then invent an enemy,
who seeks to take something from them
that they deserve to have...

so then, they can allot
a 'mine' and 'thine', and pick
a violent quarrel to prove
their right to be themselves...

they'll find anything so to label –
'my tribe, your tribe'—even though
to anyone else, they seem the same –

my religion, your religion – though God is unaware
of any such division or allegiance; or when they're
really desperate for something to fight about,

'my postcode public territory,
your postcode public territory'...

Oh dear Lord, said the other monk,
how can we have compassion
for these suffering souls? We've never had
a quarrel...

Then we must invent one, said
the first monk: suppose I draw a line
in chalk along the floor of our cell..
and then we'll call one side, my space,
the other yours...

And this he did. Now, he said,
we can have a quarrel: look,
I'm standing in your half of the room...

No you're not, said the other,
it's not my half...yes it is, we've agreed,
said the one...

Oh very well then, take it ... you win!
said the other.. But there's
nothing to take! said the first...

The two monks sat and sighed.
They would never know how
human kind could ever own
anything worth the quarrel over.

How difficult a holy life can be.
Have compassion, then, for the plight
of those two monks...

*

[Based on a story from the
early days of the Desert Fathers]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Hurried Judgment, Curried Thought

'Animal sacrifice in Kali temples
and in Durga shrines is a disgrace! –

this is pagan savagery and
a shame to our pure souls!

*

(Please excuse the yellow smear
of chicken tikka on this screen;
chicken from a factory farm
that led a miserable life..
these lines were written in
righteous anger, and just after
a delicious Hindu meal.)

Michael Shepherd

! ! I Read Your Poem

In olden days we would have said

things like an act of grace,

an endeavour noble in intent,

humanity at its most heroic,

the heart speaking,

the soul's voice

and why not indeed

I read your poem.

I have nothing much to say

and yet everything to say;

writing a poem is all of those

and every real poem is

one great step for humankind in you,

an archaeology of the soul,

a self-exposure,

a challenge

so what I have to offer you

is respect. Pure, real, boundless, known respect;

you'll read your poem back

and your next will take account of that

better than any comment or advice of mine;

we're both poets; we both know

that we're engaged on a cosmic task,

on the kitchen table, and it's

no less than those images from the Hubble

of nebulae, stars exploding and colliding

and being formed; being formed.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Ibrahim's Tale

Ibrahim

Ibrahim was a shoemaker
in that Persian land afar
where wisest men practice crafts
in side-alleys without name
and teach with stories

One day, Ibrahim was overcome
by happiness beyond all belief
while the sun moved from there to here

He told his friend, who said
you look the same to me

He went to the doctor who said
we'd better keep an eye on that,
it might need an X-ray

He went to the priest who said
the Devil has cunning ways
to tempt with gifts

He went to the politician who said
it's just a way to avoid
your social responsibility

He went to the psychiatrist who said
such delusions are uncommon but
not unknown come back next week

Ibrahim walked home
through the market and stallholders smiled
even though he bought nothing

a stray dog followed him home
his wife said you're late for dinner
how lucky you are to have me for a wife

his children said
didn't you bring anything home for us?

But here the story of Ibrahim
splits into many versions;

so you who know that bliss
which overcame our Ibrahim
must complete it for yourselves
to tell to your children and
your children's children

so that wise men smile, and angels laugh,
and poets pause, and storytellers
nod to themselves, while
they shape and tack their shoes, that
a storyteller carries on wise shoulders
a responsibility to human beings
greater than any king..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Ignorance

Alas, no clear account can I relate
(as one who knows too well, that sorry state):
for after all, to know one's ignorance
would be a wisdom cosmic in its stance;

and so, wise men have brought their focussed minds
to plumb its nature, to aid human kind:
does it describe that 'nescience' which stays
as innocent as babe, of error's ways?

Or do we sense instinctively, all truth,
but overlay it with acquired untruth?
And if so, is the fault, (dear Brutus) , ours?
or is it universal as the stars?

'Innocence' as plea, Hindus refuse:
we're Brahman, that knows all – so, no excuse!

Michael Shepherd

! ! Ikon

The door creaks, as she opens it
and the fall of the heavy iron latch
echoes through the empty church.

The atmosphere inside, this cold day,
is heavy, as such holy places are,
locked now at night; heavy,
with what? Anticipation? Memory,
of all the human emotions
that have passed through them?
There's still the clinging promise,
the fragrance of yesterday's incense;
it could almost be a midnight forest
in its wood-scented mystery.

She lights a candle, drops a coin
slowly, as those do to whom
each coin has a meaning.

She is small, shrunken as the aged are,
wrapped into roundness against the cold,
yet neatly; today there's an extra sense of purpose
about her walk towards the glittering
gold ikonostasis –

is it the anniversary of the day
her husband perished in the labour camp?
Or the day her son died fighting
so that such as she might live,
to mourn him, proudly, all her life?

Or was she, is she, that unmarried, famous
junior lecturer who lost her job
for speaking truth, whose students
carried her shoulder-high and placed her
on the tank outside the university,
challenging its gun?

She kneels in front of the ancient ikon,

framed in gold; the ikon that tourists
note with a glance, as 'Christ'...though when painted,
it was known as 'Son of God'; now they call it
'Son of Man' – that seems to suit it.

She looks intently into its eyes
as she has so many times; each time,
a new day, asking what He has in store for her.
As intently as its painter, praying as he worked,
that He might come and fill the painted form
with His eyes, His heart, His soul; all that He brought to earth
from That which sent Him...

She looks into the eyes of the ikon –
or does the ikon look at her?
In some other world, there is mighty sound,
perhaps a word; the air is filled with soundlessness;
there's fire that burns forever; great waters flow
like grace itself; new earth is watered.

She sees, in some great where between
herself and all things, love that cannot be measured;
mercy that can only explain itself with itself;
grace that's only known; her life
opens itself to her clearly, soundlessly;
all is revealed to the seeking heart.

The candles flicker; the door creaks,
and the heavy iron latch echoes
once, in the empty church; the Son of Man,
in the form of an old woman wrapped against the cold,
steps out into His kingdom. A few snowflakes;
a pale winter sun. But look into her eyes.

[revised]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Impressionism In Paint, In Music, In Words

To know the impossible to be impossible
and yet to love the attempt;
to demonstrate that beauty is eternal, yet
seen only in that moment now,
never to be captured, ever changing -
'evanescent' holds a little of the sound of it -
this, the heroic failure that betokens love.

Monet was that hero. For perhaps you may
catch beauty's shadow in a photograph;
even glimpse its joy, there, in the sound of song;
but try to catch it - dab by dab of brush -
when in the time it takes to do this, yet another leaf
- there, watch it as it drops -
has fallen from that distant orange-yellow-brown
blur of an autumn wood - knowing as you render nature's generality
or catch a church, a haystack, in a sundown glow,
that all things pass -
that love's heroic: and when, in irony that surely
needs no underlining, blindness comes upon you, yet
you go on painting, as the water-lilies blur
into the water-weed, into the bridge,
into the time that runs down to the river, to the sea...

and in turn, Renoir, in his 'Moulin a la Galette' dance-cafe,
catching the human reflection of this flow, our yearning
for the perfect moment to remain, frozen, set, fresh-baked,
forever caught - this is what my life has led to,
this is what, surely, I deserve - under the lanterns in the trees
the young girls with their cheeks of peaches, apricots,
and lips like fruit that's waiting to be pressed,
dream of forever to be loved; while their tonight's men
smoke, and drink, and dream of where a young man's lust
might just be step into another world -

while in that room up there that looks down on this scene,
Proust, seeing the cafe's dance of fleeting beauty, writes to catch
those moments lived and lost and yet remembered;
and Debussy, his tentative composer's piano notes

heard just above the cafe's resident accordionist
whose sentimental music you too will remember
to your dying day, and smile a gentle tear - and when
past midnight, as the silence falls upon the thinning dance, and
couples, singing, arm-in-arm it home, and
Monsieur le patron extinguishes the lanterns in the trees,
and the humble workers' square is suddenly a nowhere place,
Debussy will hear the moonlight sliding through the window
onto the piano's keys...

of beauty, we can say not much
of all that may be said.

(To Michael Gessner, who reminded me about poetry.)

Michael Shepherd

! ! In A Greek Amphitheatre: George Seferis, Poet

Noon here in hot summer in this quarter-sphere of stepped stone;
the smell of herbs rolling down from the mountainside,
the light so strong that it seems to have bleached away all thought;
time is taking a siesta.

come sit with me here in this almost deserted amphitheatre
which has stood for more than two thousand years,
only the bees are quietly moving,
searching the flowers which grow between these huge blocks of stone
which someone quarried, someone brought here,
someone acted out the world upon, some many sat
and were moved to fear and tears;
someone ate olives, spat the pits between the blocks of stone;
now an olive tree bears witness,
its bleached roots like an arthritic climber,
splitting the stone blocks with the insistence of history.

'Memory, wherever you touch it,
hurts'...

merciful gods might have removed these stones
with two thousand years of rain, of wind, of searing sun,
so that the insistence of history might not be
so painful to a Greek.

The only other figure in this huge amphitheatre -
you see him down there? In the white hat
and dark suit of summer cloth? He's a poet;
but is his mind too, sitting in the audience? Or is he
on the stage? Is he
living the play; the hero with a tragic flaw,
the chorus commenting, the tragedy unfolding?

In Greek, the same word means martyr
and means witness.

He was born a Greek in a Greek colony;
at 22, the Turks flung them out;
he sailed in wine-dark seas of wars and occupations;

and when the sailor sailed into the port to take his place in his immortal court,
found Greece, not celebrating peace, but Greek fighting Greek;
the cruellest of wars.

It was not Odysseus but Greece itself
that wandering, had not yet come home;
the harbours boatless; silent the shepherd's flute;
the olive groves untended; hives deserted;
grapes that never tasted wine; figs that burst uneaten;
Olympia's grass, all silent and untrodden;
temples empty, marble columns
their cool beauty empty-armed without their worshippers.

Here at noon, the summer heat pressing and intense,
the air still, a bee passing across our laps
as we sit here on the higher tier;
a dark-suited poet, witness, martyr,
like an olive tree between hard stone,
suffers the playing out, the painful beauty
like a dark thought at noon,
the insistence of history.

'Memory, wherever
you touch it, hurts.'

Michael Shepherd

!! In Golden Gate Park. For Jim And Thanks To Lawrence

The older couple who've set down
their folding chairs, a blanket, lunchbox

not too far from the old Lincoln
inhabit three islands of peace

which by the time we're their age
we'll know perhaps to envy:

his peace, and hers, and theirs:
neither got high grades, but

they're wise enough to know
after all those years together

those three islands; watch them with discretion
and join them if you can across the years;

in that third island which is won
from two islands neatly cropped.

Michael Shepherd

! ! In His Eyes, His Eyes

His open eyes, one catching the sun,
shining towards me – presumably
they still function optically:
recording, unmoved, unmoving, my presence;

this dead soldier, sodden in the ditch,
half his body peaceful, as if
welcoming his death; the other half
unmentionable; animals must eat;

his eyes recording my presence, yet
the brain now with no need
to question whether I'm the enemy; or friend;
the medic; the man who's just shot him several times
at close range, standing over; or
the man he shot just now;
come to greet him as his newest friend.

Michael Shepherd

! ! In Memory Of George Herbert. For Fay.

I, upon this journey, question me:
journey, I to God, or God to me?

If I to God: I pray that journey fast;
if God to me: Thou first; that I may last.

Michael Shepherd

! ! In Praise Of A Fellow Poet

in praise of a fellow poet

when someone's doing
quietly
something which is
perfect in itself

then
to praise or to encourage
seems almost like
an insult
to them or
to perfection

I just wanted to say
what I've said

and you and I
share something which is
beyond the words

which we arrange
upon the page
to honour
'something understood'

Michael Shepherd

! ! In Praise Of Ego

In carefree, laughing, joyful mood –
let's praise the ego, to its face!

Our most faithful mate throughout our life;
with us longer than our parents or our children are;

at our heels at all times, proud of head and tail,
saying to the world that 'I belong to him! ';

faithful as a dog; and cunning as a cat;
between them, running our un-mastered lives;

(and like the cosy purring cat you stroke upon your lap,
ego's the secret dark night-hunter, out to kill all life..)

ego, more awake than we ourselves,
never missing a living moment;

every heart-beat an opportunity;
sharper entrepreneur than any city slicker:

'what's in it for me? ' ; there is no trick,
no turn, no market swing, that ego can't exploit and profit from;

so let's praise ego to its face; see the Creator's own full force,
brilliant and magnificent, manifested, used, in ego's skills...

but know, and know we know, its lifetime's bitter secret:
for all its skills, its energies are stolen fuel...:

moment by moment sapping secretly,
the consciousness, the wisdom, happiness,

that seem just out of our elusive reach..
So – as we watch a child, so innocent,

playing its merry games of fantasy,
running round itself in playground and in park,

we laughing in parental love, sing out those magic words:
'I'm watching you...! '

Michael Shepherd

! ! In Praise Of Ignorance

write in praise of ignorance – that is,
that state which we so easily mis-name;
which would be better known by that old term,
'un-knowing' – free of guilt or sin in one
who knows the truth and, knowingly, denies..

un-knowing should be celebrated; as
some youthful minor god in painted scenes:
adolescent in the goddess Wisdom's
splendid train; gazing up at her,
clear-browed; wide-eyed; attention at the leash;

not-knowing – like a runner on the blocks,
contained; elastic spring of energy;
yet fingertips so delicately placed
on starting-line; there's elegance to see
in our unknowing's race to reach the truth;

unknowing: which spurs every scientist
so to observe; infer; compare; and test;
evolve hypothesis; and test again;
then offer to the world as reason's law
of Nature's finer detail, which may yield
a harvest of some golden benefit;

admitting one's unknowing is the key:
(does this seem far too simple to be said?)
Poised between two beauties, Innocence,
and Wisdom, see Unknowing's beauty too;

then in that beauty, all the universe
shines bright and fresh and new, to be enjoyed;
none other than myself; who knows no claim
but witnesses all that may be revealed..

Michael Shepherd

! ! In Praise Of Praise

Good dog...! '...

Your faithful hound closes his eyelids
for a fraction longer - could this be bliss
so pure that humans rarely know it? –
rests his head for a few moments
on your knee; twitches tail, just once,
to indicate the words received:
the one phrase which, it's said,
(quietly; almost, to yourself)
completely understood and shared
by man and dog: fulfilment
of the karma of companionship..

*

Yesterday, I was praised.. or rather,
there was praise for something
that was enacted through me..

Such a moment is too valuable,
too full of self-knowledge, to be dismissed
with embarrassed modesty: live it:

for a moment, one is in the presence
of oneself: here's a giant; here's a hero;
who is oneself, and yet, is to be worshipped
as the fulfilment of all one's wished
oneself to be: being and worthship
come together in a purity..

so, praise the praisers! – who are all too few;
cast aside that English fear
that praising may involve some personal
commitment that one later may regret...

to be praised, is but self-dedication
in which praiser, praised, are alike; at one;
and from that moment on,

live together in that unity
and grow from it in ways
that must be lived and known, to be believed..

come now – tell me that you don't
remember clearly, the very words your teacher said
the day they praised you from the heart
so unexpectedly, you even thought them human..

or what your mother's friend (your mother,
who could never find it in her to so praise you in the words –
despite her sweetness for some reason –
with which, your mother's friend later told you
she boasted of you, out of your own earshot...)

praise the praisers! join their ranks
and find that magic wand:
spoken directly, face to face;
or if you must, discreetly passed,
its implications hanging golden in the air...
that magic wand, which grows the soul
of giver and receiver joined as one in One..

Michael Shepherd

! ! In The Beginning

In the beginning was the Word...
what's a beginning, then?

a beginning, perhaps, not in time;
a beginning, perhaps, with time itself;
in our time, the recognition's all;

beginning known within our being;
being that is beyond beginning;

and so, always being; always beginning..
so, in the beginning – is - the Word..

the Word, a sound? yet heard before the ear;
a speaking and a listening,
waiting to be heard...

the Word, finding for itself a time;
finding for itself a place;
a waking; a becoming;

for this, we know:
a beginning; a becoming;
the word becomes, as things become;
every word is a becoming;

that, the yogis hear;
that, poets listen for;
that spurs all philosophers;

every becoming is the Word;
every word is a becoming.

Michael Shepherd

! ! In The Empty Studio

The diffused northern sunlight
of this studio at dawn
matches the silence and the stillness

like the speaking silence
of the retrochoir behind the altar
of a simple white Greek island church –

that has no ornament; simply walls
painted in a pale blue wash,
the space, the air itself, as radiant with heaven;

behind the iconostasis – gold and candle and eternal gaze -
where praise is prepared; thought surrendered;
humility the robe; the sacred word awaits
the moment when it's spoken;

so this studio; and at its centre, calling,
stands an easel with a white canvas on it;
what waits in this empty studio
that's so full of emptiness that calls?

what challenges? This canvas
waits, as being ever does; full, content,
needing nothing but itself...

the silence will accept our spoken word,
then return to stillness;
the canvas will not be so forgiving;

'make a mark on me that will not diminish
my completeness...; so let our being
meet, before a mark is made...'

this holy place: only godself may mark
this canvas and yet not detract; from space,
draw space; or may with colour stain transparent
this white white radiance of eternity:

and in the place whence all arises,
Nothing and Everything smile together
in their secret play.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Introduction To Advaita As Non-Duality

How many years after our birth
before we hear some word or phrase
that speaks of 'unity'?

And then how many more,
before we hear such concepts
as 'non-duality' or 'advaita', as 'not two'?

Yet something in us has now, tucked away,
the memory of that moment after birth
when that unbounded birthright, love in us

first sensed that same unbounded love
in the one who held us close;
murmured some strange words

whose meaning was all in their sound;
whose gaze – for did we know? –
met our unseeing gaze with touch;

that moment at the outset of this life
when we knew unity could not be two
and that its name is ever love.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Is Music Mute The Poem's Ripened Fruit?

In a smart burnoose, Khadour looked on, amused;
it suited him, to pick the choicest fruit
from market stalls, comparing each with all
and, smiling, then point out the Eastern style
allowing customers to choose what must
be brought to table straightway, and what ought
to be allowed to ripen a degree;
and so, politely indicate the sin
of thinking that the West were always best...

[An experiment in five-stress lines
internally rhyming the first, second or third foot
with the last (fifth) foot;
as an alternative to end-rhymes..

The first line is from Elizabeth Bishop,
which promoted the experiment..;
comments on the effect?
or better, try it yourself?]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Is This Just To Say

'Shall I be gone long?
Forever and a day.
Where will I go?
Ask my song.'

The sweet cold plums
in the ice-box
were no compensation
for the note attached there
by the adulterer.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Japanese Toilet Wall

This Spring, a new name
among the old graffiti -
will it be true love?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Japa-Yajna

Carrier wave; sine curve; you see it
on the heartscan lifescreeen
in the intensive care ward

as if with no regard for you
it's self-sufficient; sufficient to the self;

the same curve that the flute's note makes onscreen,
pure as Krishna's smile; his lips
making breath into sound

hear that, hear that which
runs day and night; repetition
that always never does repeat

and only when you're still
will you know with Krishna

the sound of inner sacrifice
that never ends and yet
so pure it's given beyond sought;

flute's sound beyond all sound;
how still the room is now.

Michael Shepherd

! ! John Donne Remembers Saint Augustine

This all too heresome world weighs down my soul;
I need love's sweetnesses oft to be met:
while yet I pray to God to make me good -
please god, be it - not quite so soon - not yet...

Michael Shepherd

! ! Journey In An Underground Kaleidoscope

The Underground is a kaleidoscope:
at each station, a new shake; and

according to your mood
every shake's a magnification

of your love of humanity; or
confirms your worst fears;

shake

I'm sitting with the article
I wrote at home, hunched
over the keyboard
in a smaller world

now I'm revising it in private
but in this public space
of this kaleidoscope; it's good this way.

shake

A lad sits down next to me. After a minute
I feel he's discreetly reading what I'm editing.

I love this game. I tilt the paper imperceptibly
so he can read it better..
careful not to give the game away..

shake

He's interested; he's not reading idly; now
he's not hiding his reading any more;

now, he can't restrain himself at
the top of the page as I turn over..

his eyes shine. He stubs his finger at a quote
'Meditation makes me feel more myself...'

'That's it! That's it! ' he says; as if
I didn't believe my own quote..

shake

He's out the next station; that's
all he needed. All I needed. All it needed.

How bright the underground kaleidoscope
shines now.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Juno Watt - Personality Of The Year

Everyone's talking about her
this last year: on their cellphones to her,
talking about her on their TV sofas,
breakfast and evening celeb shows,
at the hairdresser, in the bus queues..

'Juno Watt? I've been asked to do TV...'

'Juno Watt? I've got tickets to Mariah's tour...'

'Juno Watt? He's proposed to me! ! '

And the columnists are asking,
'Will she last through to next year?
Will it be Celebrity Hopscotch for her
Or Celebrity Snakes and Ladders...?
Juno Watt.. I hear she's dating...'

She's even been paid to endorse
the products Tiger left behind:
'Juno Watt... our balls give your golf
more drive! '

'Knock knock..'
'Who's there? '
'Juno Watt...'
'Not yet.. but I suppose you're
going to tell me...'

Juno Watt: Personality of The Year..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Kabir Reading 'Kabir'

See this fine manuscript
so beautifully illuminated round the picture –

why, it's none other than Kabir!
reading a book entitled The Poems of Kabir;

he's smiling, laughing, waving his hands –
how can he be enjoying himself so much?

The manuscript doesn't tell you this;
only Kabir can tell you, in that other place..

of all the poems, he only recognises two
as poems that he wrote himself..

but here's Kabir's delight today:
many of the other poems, he thinks,

could pass for his!
How wonderful to be so praised in spirit!

As he reads – see, he's circled round with angels;
they're all laughing too.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Kabir Reads 'Kabir'

See this fine manuscript
so beautifully illuminated round the picture –

why, it's none other than Kabir!
reading a book entitled The Poems of Kabir;

he's smiling, laughing, waving his hands –
how can he be enjoying himself so much?

The manuscript doesn't tell you this;
only Kabir can tell you, in that other place..

of all the poems, he only recognises two
as poems that he wrote himself..

but here's Kabir's delight today:
many of the other poems, he thinks,

are good enough to be his!
How wonderful to be so praised in spirit!

As he reads – see, he's circled round with angels;
they're all laughing too.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Light Everywhere.

When I was young
and had nothing to say
I thought I was no-one;

when I was still
I thought myself empty;

Now I am older
and become silent
I am everyone;

when I am still,
I am full.

*

[leaning on Kabir's `ghar ghar dipak barai']

Michael Shepherd

! ! Like That

Was it being empty of everything
or being full of everything,
when the song came during washing-up?

Was it being empty of everything
or being full of everything,
when the tourist outside the school door
glanced as if expecting nothing but the good?

Was it being empty of everything
or being full of everything,
when there was nowhere else but here?

Was it being empty of everything
or being full of everything
when there was no when or where
or why or what or how or who?

Who is to say? It was like that. Like that.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Lonely Winter Afternoon

When the heron's cry
did not echo in the mist,
did the cliffs hear it?

Michael Shepherd

!! Love And Loss And Love Again - A Poem For Jenny And Her Friends

Loss can be good for us,
researchers say (Nolen-Hoeksema
and Davis,2002) – it's called
Post-Traumatic Growth...

When we 'lose' someone
we seldom see these days,
yet always love, we are in some strangely beautiful way
the gainers –

lose someone who, caught a glimpse of
down a school corridor, is like
a mirror in which you'll see reflected
yourself as nothing but pure love...

and when you meet her then, it's just as if
you meet love – and a modesty almost uncertain:
as if she had been bestowed the awesome gift
of a part of sun and sunlight, and told,
bestow this wisely...

warmth, and light, and beautiful humility –
even your great talent – I recall
a rare and radiant press review
of a concert in the Purcell Room
where you improvised on, was it, Ravel..?

and when asked why you never built
upon that boost, you said with typical
serious thought, well people don't seem
to be interested in that sort of thing...

so, the occasional concert; and another
undeveloped gift, for bringing together in opera
people who would never have dared
to seek the gift of singing in themselves...

so, we the gainers in this sad yet joyful way:
we saw you just occasionally; now,
as often as we remember you,
you're here again, as love.. just, love...

my only sadness, Jennifer,
is that one day, when on your face
(never tell a lady to her face
about her face – yet I insult you
by saying that of you...)

on your face I saw the look
of a little girl who'd done her very best,
yet feared retribution...what demon,
small or large, had you to deal with in yourself?

I regretted then, not speaking out
and asking you about that; yet
you, with your great talent to bring love
were better equipped than I; too wise,
I think, not to know yourself...

for what you brought in your sweet nature –
taking work where it would offer,
playing the piano for a celebrated
but also modest ballet teacher,
playing a white grand piano next to a fern
in Heathrow's nerve-strained hall...

what you brought was the essence of
that Indian 'Perfect Prayer' which so many speak
but not all live out: that nothing can be 'taken',
for the remainder is always perfect...

so we will mourn, or celebrate, dear Jenny:
we who were so fortunate,
and who shall remain blessed for ever
that you have lived on earth..

'sweet are the uses of adversity' – for
there's music in our souls

*

[Jennifer Bowring Pearce, >2007]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Love As Self: Self As Love

We do not have to seek for love
nor fear it ever go:
but simply, rest within ourself;
then, love perforce must flow:

for who's the sweetest company,
as parent, sister, brother?
Those restful ones, always themself;
as one who knows no other..

*

[This came after watching 'The Big Sing':
every seat in the Albert Hall taken
by those singing their hearts out
to fine words; while simultaneously and
in unsought parallel, love flowed..]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Love's Grammar Book

I love you.

That's it, really.
all there is to say.
sums it up.
in a nutshell.
the long and the short of it.
the be-all and the end-all.
I know what I mean;
you know what I mean.
more or less.
we know what I mean.
most of the time.

But though love's sometimes
best defined by silence
it may be good
to say a few good words

since you, and love, have taught me
love's grammar-book:

I love 'love'.
though love as noun is difficult to define.

I love love as an adjective:
love's.. just lovely, isn't it?

But most of all
I love love as verb.
and this I know:
this my love's active voice:

I love. (you) .
I loved you. How well I remember.
I have loved you. I'm so grateful for that.
I shall love you. That I promise.
and when all is done, I'll be proud to remember that
I shall have loved you;

and that
we shall have loved.

And in love's passive voice,
I'm so blessed that
I am loved;
rejoice in the hope that
I shall be loved
and promise that
you shall be loved.
I'll always be blessed that
I have been loved.
and that I can say
you shall have been loved (forever) .

Then there are love's moods
as they're called in grammar:
the indicative - I love you; do you love me?
the exciting imperative mood:
'Love me, do - I promise I'll be true...' or better,
'Love me! Now! ' ;
the subjunctive mood
which is rather subtler in other languages:
'Don't leave me, please';
'May we love each other till we die...';
'If only you were to love me
as much as I love you..'

And then, those other parts of speech
that few of us get around to sorting out
but all lurking there under 'amo'
in the Latin grammar-book of love:

The perfect infinitive:
'It is better - to have loved - and lost - than
not -to have loved -at all';

that great feeling
called future infinitive:
to be about to love;
and that dizzy future infinitive passive:
to be about to be loved;

the gerund:

'Oh the loving and the kissing
and the kissing and the loving...';

that cautious supine:

'in order to love...';

the passive imperative -

the parents' wish (with qualifications) :

'let her be loved'...

and that loaded gerundive:

'fit to be loved'...

All of which, I hope, leaves you
in that state curiously undefined
by grammar -

a sort of active gerundive:

'fit to love' - to love

love's grammar-book

in full

for love conquers all, it's said,

even a hatred of grammar.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Loving Life To The Death: Robert Capa

Behind the lens, the eye of the photographer;
behind the eye, the observer;
behind the observer, the immortal soul:

Robert Capa shot
(as they say) five major wars
as mankind's record
of man's inhumanity to man.
Finally, was shot himself.

When asked for advice
by a young photographer, he said,
"Like people; and let them know it.."

And so he printed out his soul.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Machiavelli's Advice To Princes

Cinderella
is a shoo-in.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Making Breakfast - A Study In Consciousness

Breakfast. Slick operation. You could
make it in your sleep..
you've refined the quantities,
the cooking and the timing
like a pro..

and eating it – you're even more
brilliant at that – you can
eat breakfast, read the paper,
listen to the radio or tv,
half listen to the wife and kids,
make and take those cellphone calls;
then bestow a salty bacon,
sweet marmaladey kiss on several lips
or cheeks – and off..

But today something gotten to you:
the sun is shining; all's well with the world;
this isn't Monday breakfast, this is
Saturday breakfast...

You find yourself making breakfast
as if you'd never made it in your life before;
you hear the cereal on its way
from the packet to the bowl;
smell the coffee before drinking it;
never has the toast been browner, crisper,
eggs more eggy, tomatoes so.. well, tomatoey;
sweet meeting salt in tasting mouth..
the world's made new today; and
somehow, you feel as if
you know that much more about yourself;
some sure sense of direction
seems to fill your heart and mind;
you're on good terms with
the Creation as of now.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Meditation

The wise say, those who wholly dedicate
their being to the Lord, receive from Him
the gift of His whole self, forever, now..
how irresistible this promise sounds!

But irresistible to whom or what?
The ego hears this promise; makes of it
what ego shapes; so offers not the whole,
the being; but what ego's made of it...

And yet, this is a start – to offer Him
not being, gift-wrapped in entirety,
but more, a catalogue: of all that mind
knows of itself; all that it knows it's not..

O Lord, my heart I offer to You, whole;
my mind, but part by part; in sum, my soul!

Michael Shepherd

! ! Meeting Brahman On Equal Terms

Posted: Thu Sep 10,2009 11: 52 am Post subject:

From ah to ha..

Sacred jokes don't travel well.
They have nowhere they can go...

He told me how as a young seeker
he went to the guru and asked
about the nature of the Brahman...

The guru's eyes twinkled as he said,
That's a very good question...
not many people ask that...:

here's a pen and paper;
now write your question carefully;
fold it neatly;
now put it in your dhoti kurta pocket there

and when you meet the Brahman,
ask Him the same question...'

Michael Shepherd

! ! Metaphor.

Like the unicorn,
they have to need to be;
to hear our need for them to be.

Like time,
they must creep up on the writer,
on the reader,
invisible
yet with inevitability
which cannot be escaped.

Like thieves,
they must enter unannounced,
take what they must.

Like mice,
they must take up residence
until there is no longer sustenance for them.

Like bailiffs,
they must demand entrance;
be admitted;
take their just exchange.

Like housekeepers,
they must earn their keep
by keeping us in all we ask of them.

Like lovers,
they must prove themselves
part of our lives
until our earthly sentence ends the dream.

Like children,
they must know their place;
then be loved for themselves
beyond life itself.

For they are life,

revealing its boundlessness
with all the freshness
of a lettuce cut from the ground,
the well-prepared, fine ground
in a landscape that stretches out, is limitless.

Do not deal lightly, or be profligate
with metaphors; they are our life-blood.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Metaphors

Like the unicorn,
they have to need to be;
to hear our need for them to be.

Like time,
they must creep up on the writer,
on the reader,
invisible
yet with inevitability
which cannot be escaped.

Like thieves,
they must enter unannounced,
take what they must.

Like mice,
they must take up residence
until there is no longer sustenance for them.

Like bailiffs,
they must demand entrance;
be admitted;
take their just exchange.

Like housekeepers,
they must earn their keep
by keeping us in all we ask of them.

Like lovers,
they must prove themselves
part of our lives
until our earthly sentence ends the dream.

Like children,
they must know their place;
then be loved just for themselves
beyond life itself.

Like life:

revealing its boundlessness
in a landscape that stretches out, is limitless.

Writer - reader -
care for a metaphor as for one you love:
as you love yourself;
they are our life-blood: for they tell of what
can only be said quietly, with a touch of hand,
to those whose heart is listening.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Metaphors, Similes And Stuff - Pooh Bear Explains

Christopher Robin and Pooh walked slowly down the path in the woods, treading on the occasional crackly twig.

'CR...' said Pooh, 'What's a Poeh Tree? Is it the same as a Poem, or a hum? '

'Well, Pooh, the very very best Poeh Tree in the world is your own:

'Isn't it funny
how bears like hunny?

It's what I call rum-ti-tum-itry. Everyone likes rum-ti-tum-itry. Even grown-ups. Rum-ti-tum-itry is friendly. Rum-ti-tum-itry is like two friends walking together. Like you and me, Pooh. Which makes you the very best rum-ti-tum-iter in the world...'

'That's tum as in...?' asked the Very Stout Bear, cautiously.

'As in a Hum' said Christopher Robin. 'But then there's other things in Poetry such as Truth, and Other People Reading It And Nodding. And Similes. And Metaphors. There's a lot in Poetry.'

'What's a Simile, CR?' asked Pooh. It sounded like what bees said just before they landed on something, like a hunny jar, or Pooh's nose.

'It's when you say something is like something else, to help people imagine it.' said CR.

Pooh had a Think. A Ponderly sort of Think.

'Like perhaps - 'happiness is like hunny'? ' asked Pooh tentatively. He suddenly felt very five-to-four-ish at this Thought.

'That's exactly it, Pooh' said Christopher Robin happily. 'Or even sometimes the other way around! '

Pooh felt warm inside - almost like after eating honey - knowing now that a Simile wasn't a threat any more. 'What's a Metaphor, CR? '

'That's rather more difficult, Pooh. It's when you say something is something

else, and people know what you mean somehow, and say 'Aha! ' and nod their heads...

Pooh had a longer, Pondering sort of Think.

'Like... teatime means honey? ' he offered hesitantly. Though he knew this was Truth and Other People Nodding, anyway.

'Something like that' said Christopher Robin. 'And then...' he said carefully, in case it was a bit too much for Beloved Bear for one day, but wanting to tell him all the same, 'there's the Extended Metaphor - which I think you might like, Pooh...' (he said hastily In Case) - 'like in a poem by Rupert Brooke, where he says 'Is there hunny still for tea? ' but what he really means is, he's a long way from home and can't get back in time for tea, and feels rather sorry about it...'

'I see...' said Pooh, thoughtfully - like people do who Don't Quite, but like to be polite...

Pooh decided there and then that the Poeh Tree was worth finding, now that he knew three things about it or was it four? It called for an Expedishun.

'Can you talk Poeh Tree, CR? Is it like what we are talking now?

'I think that's called a Prose Poem, Pooh' said Christopher Robin.

*

It was getting near to what Metaphoric Poets like Edward Bear call Time for a Little Something. Christopher Robin and Pooh turned and walked back slowly, the silence broken now and then by a crackly twig just waiting to be trodden on.

Pooh held Christopher's hand tight, as he was doing a lot of Poetic Thinking. He was wondering how anyone could be so far away from home that they couldn't get back home for tea. And worse, not knowing whether there was hunny in the cupboard or not...

But then he had a little five-to-fourish Hum, when he remembered that there was indeed hunny still for tea...

'Rupert Brooke at ten to three
knew he wouldn't get home for tea;

but now it's nearly five to four;
time for tea and Something More.'

Poetic Bears, you see, know all about Metaphor.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Mintbright Coinwords

On a sunful, funful, easeful sorta cloudwhite airblue day,
we sat exchanging coinages
in a smileful, timepass way;

quickthink and later sad,
poets know it well:
mindrich and speakful,
make each tonguword tell!

Michael Shepherd

! ! Minutes Of A Day's Work On The Bible

Around 1608; a pleasant day in Cambridge;
eight men sit round a table. Originally there were nine:
Dr Lively who presided at their speedy start
is now departed their distinguished company;
gave his lively life to this great enterprise, some say.

Among them still, the greatest of divines and
Hebrew scholars of their day.

This, the seventh version of the Bible
through its history; 'seven times purified'
as the Bible says itself,
through Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin,
and English versions over centuries...

Since 1604, they've worked upon their
allotted section of the Bible; one sixth;
now they're on the 'Canticles'; today
it's Psalm 46: God is our hope and strength,
a very present help in trouble...

They have arrived now at the final verses:
God has stilled the warring armies
of the outer world; and now to still the inner world...

'Lette goe; and knowe thatte I am Godde'..
that, the learned Hebrew scholars say,
is how it actually translates...

'Bee stille and knowe..' they find in earlier translation;
which command should they pass down
to centuries to come? Which sound tells the soul
the most, of its true nature? Or which sound will aid the soul
the quickest to return to its true self?

The scholars and divines, (all 54 of them in sum)
work at phenomenal, at godly, speed;
this is the great work of their lives;
'Let go'; 'Be still' – which has more
the ring of soul's eternity?

All have done their homework; rolled the words
around their tongue, their mind; heard them
uttered from the pulpit of their inner house of God;
a brief discussion; summary arms then raised in silent vote;

one command, they have agreed,
is for our present help in trouble, for
the moment now; the other is for ever;
the soul's instruction from its peaceful self;
as God speaks to the angels, who
speak to the hearts of men:

the room falls silent; while
the secretary scratches in the wet black ink:

'Be still and know that I Am God'

Michael Shepherd

! ! Miss Piggy Regrets..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today, madam..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today:

That tastelessly named flu's got her

(She forgot to wash her front trotter...) so

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today, madam..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today:

It's a swine of a stroke of bad luck:

Her eyelashes, she sneezed them unstuck... so

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today...

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today, madam..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today:

She's all pink from her snout to her face;

Her mascara's all over the place... so

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today..

Why not try the lamb today, madam...?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Monastery

Up the long flight of stairs
every tread echoes from stone walls
as if to comment on how stillness
tells of sound its silent origin.

In the quiet library, the central table
bears a careful written message:
'Silence is spoken here'..

and that's truer than
at first it seems to read;

round the walls, shelves of books
as silent as the monks
standing upright in their stalls
witness words that seek to share;
yet ultimately, wave fare well, turn back;

speak of silence sought and silence found;
yet cannot speak of silence;

in the name of silence, take a book,
well-worn, from off the shelf;
meet it in the silence of the room,
read a few words, and lay it down;
glance at the other readers round the room;
fall still.

Here, silence speaks of stillness;
stillness joys in silence.

Michael Shepherd

! ! My Past And Future Self

It has to be; one day, perhaps,
we'll know the wisdom absolute of this;

and yet, and yet... I'm just a little sad,
not to meet my self in previous embodiment

and say, thanks for the baton that you passed
in this relay race of self to self

through millions of forms of life, they say;
you played your part; worked through your destiny,

gave cradle-gifts; withheld some too,
to test me further on the path of life;

I hope you'll look upon me as your godly son;
smile; say, yes, he's made good use of life..

And I'm a little sad, as well,
not to meet my self in next embodiment;

and say, here's wishing you the very best;
sorry, that I could not give you more...

but this; and this; I hope you find these good,
and helpful; happy; take this love, this joy,

this hope, this trust; this baton's made of gold;
grasp it firmly; run a goodly race;

we'll watch you proudly from the stands;
smile; say, he's trained well for this life..

And now, this said, it matters, and it matters not;
as present melds into eternity.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Nature's Rebuke; Or, What Are Words Worth?

Only recently, you asked me
for my 'Laws' – as if you asked the Sun
just where his golden rays shall, in the moment, strike...

and now you rashly ask me, why, then, I create...

you should not have questioned me..
but understand me as I understand myself:
keep silent; understand by silence;
for I am not accustomed to your human talk..

For what is there to understand? What comes to be
comes as the object of my silent contemplation;
comes into being naturally; it is myself.

I too was born of such a contemplation;
and so I have a natural love for that;

as geometers contemplate, and then may draw,
so my contemplation – in my timeless nature –
brings out of passing time, the products of myself;

and if you find new lines
in bodies that come forth from me,
I did not draw them; though they come from me..

the lines, the frills
of daffodils
all shine, not by my planned design
but from tranquillity;

just contemplate;
and in that state
I'll be your village preacher;
taken, shaken, by surprise,
you too shall share my nature;

morning, evening,
here nor there,

earth hath no earthly manmade thing
to show more naturally fair;

be tranquil, Will, and just be still;
in silent scents, to taste my will..
all else is hubris; blasphemy;
shut up! and have respect for Me..'

*

[The first part of the poem follows closely
Plotinus' Ennead III 8,4,1-10;
the second part, er, followed..]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Never Say It Is Not God

Never say it is not God.
Hafiz said that, lived it.

And that's all really:
no need to dress it up,
make a poem of it,
claim it, as if
I thought of it first..

And anyway it's personal:
you and I could spend days
discussing what the last word means;
finish up hating each other.
It happens. And they have
a rifle in their hand, a bomb.

It's a divine game,
the game God plays.

You know the games all lovers play:
'Where are you darling? '
'I'm not here.. come and find me...'
ah yes - the bedroom...

'You only love me for my body...'
'Yes darling... but I love you for your mind too, , , '
'But you're always arguing with my mind...'
'Yes darling - that's why I love you...'

'Will you love me when I'm old and wrinkled and crumbly? '
'Darling, I'll love you all the more...'

'I love every bit of you...'
'Ah but do you love me with every bit of you...? '

'I'm a striped tiger come to eat you up every bit...ggrr...'
'And I'm a lion come to gobble up the tiger...'

Ah yes, the games that lovers play...

What makes you think God does not love
to play these games with you?

And even when you call Him God,
and not your Lover, or your Friend,
as Hafiz does - and many other names beside,
that could be His best game of all...

when the whole universe
and all its creatures, run
toward you, calling out
'I'm Yours... I'm yours for life...'
as lovers do.

Never say it is not God.

Michael Shepherd

! ! New Poetess Laureate For Uk

This is a formal announcement today:
we have a new Poet Laureate.. hip hip hooray..

'But who is he? Oh.. it's a she-poet Laureate...?
so (because I don't read poetry, of course..)
is that something I should shout hooray at?
or have committees once again, backed the wrong horse? '

Well, she says she's not 'going to write
for Edward and Sophie'...
she's Sapphic and butch, and called
Carol Ann Duffy

and you can guess, from what she says
that there'll be no Royal seal in wax
on her democratic classless ways...

(Right now, Supplement sub-editors are trawling her stuff
to find something printable
that's 'poetic' enough...)

The story is, 'she'd have got it on the last occasion'
except for the aforementioned Sapphic persuasion...

But aren't poets supposed to be beyond such trivial pursuits? ...
and just write poetry and truth; in high heels or in boots?

(And there's always the hope, with or without Royal permission,
she might say something new about the female condition...)

so, Edward and Sophie with your middle-class morals –
watch out! We could be in for some hard-hitting quarrels
re 'The Nature of Poetry' ... and about time too:
since poetry's subject is the deepest me and you...

so the Forum poets here (in this empty music-hall)
hope you stir us up, and have a prancing, dancing Artists' Ball;

as with controversial old Ted Crow, Poet Laureate and toughie,

we shan't expect respect – coz you ain't no fluffy Duffy...

Now chaps - gold watch and thanks to Andrew's poetic potion:
you could call it - for what words are worth - as
'tranquillity, recollected in emotion'...

...But sadly, already, in these economic downturn times –
Blackwells offer '3 for 2' on CarolAnn Duffy's rhymes...

Michael Shepherd

! ! New Year Irresolution

'So, what do you yourself wish for
this 2009? ..' the microphone
is thrust; the videotape awaits...

and perhaps, there's some golden link
between New Year wish and New Year resolution...
between the individual will and the universal..

meanwhile, the sceptic stands aside, at the crowd's edge,
without a wish or resolution; wondering,
'are things/is the world, a better place,
at this New Year than at the last? '

But, who then to set some standard
by which to judge this increment?

Who can measure happiness in bulk,
or goodwill to all men? How do Goodness,
Truth, and Beauty fare,
at this ending of the year?

One criterion is certain: fewer now believe -
now Christmas is for sale itself, with
massive reductions in all departments
of the human store..

yet we manage, thank you, very well
without the concept God..

But let's suppose - as some wise men have claimed -
that though man needs no god,
that God needs Man...

then God is one whole grisly year the wiser now
about this species, Man, whom He wound up
with His divine gold clockwork, and set down on garden soil...

now there's a happy thought for 2009...
a wiser God about His human child..

But how, you ask, the proof?
the proof, dear reader, of this charming
whimsy, is entirely yours...
and only to be made in present moment;
where God forever dwells.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Noh Poet

The cuckoo's sad song
says it cannot write high coos -
always six syllables!

Michael Shepherd

! ! Non-Dualism In A Nutshell: From The Sanskrit

Who has a child in him so bold, to ask,
'But is there anything God cannot do? '
'Yes! One thing – which to know, is your life's task:
God cannot separate Himself from you! '

Michael Shepherd

! ! Not Averse To Poetry..

Do you see life
through prose-coloured spectacles?

or has the squid of poetry
inked you into its tentacles?

There's much more rubbish writ in prose –
though soppy verse
can be much worse;

or tepid epics
with vapid topics;

or stanzas dull
and fanciful;

or limericks
with silly tricks; or

couplets mock-heroic,
like empty crocks echoic;

lines that would be better for
their not being stuffed with metaphor;

unkempt attempts at simile
that register but dimmily;

and 'moanalogues' from broken hearts;
sad mishap crap; linguistic farts;
slam-dunk bawls, that mean **** all;

rhymes that over backwards bend
to cap a couplet at their end;

elegies, whose energies
not rapt, but sapped; and seldom apt;

dust-dry stuff that vaunts 'tradition';

limp Latinate, like micturition;

or classic odes
with massive loads
of sheer incomprehension..

My final word, in fine old words:
say what you mean... why be absurd?

Michael Shepherd

! ! O Best Beloved

In the dark unsleep of restless night,
in the black heaviness of siesta in the sun,

in the enchantments of the world,
in a day of future dreams,

the Lord can seem so far away;
too far to know, too far to call,

in the emptiness of heart; in
the drowning whirlpool of the head;

is your head already sunk upon your breast?
O dearest - O beloved of the Lord -

your eyes are nearest to Him now!
too near even, for your arms to hold;

for His image is already there,
sketched upon your heart

in gold and silver, emerald and rose,
fragrant as a garden freshly watered

from the fountain that eternal plays;
His eyes are shining with the thought of you;

He waits there as a child, impatiently
awaiting His companion bursting through the gate

to play together in that garden without walls; for,
remember that He made you so to play with Him;

don't keep Him waiting; it's so short a distance
from your humbled head, there, to His image in your heart;

open all your senses to His bliss:
run, run...laugh; go play with Him...

He knows more games to play than any could devise;
run, run... laugh; go play with Him...

*

(Sri Vaasudevaananda Saraswati,1999)

Michael Shepherd

! ! On Being A Poet

When Hafiz
sang the poetry in his heart
in the beautiful gardens of Shiraz

they said his voice was like
pouring light into a cup
when the soul is thirsty

so no-one wrote it down; for
the page does not always sing;
better now, to seek out an old woman
who had heard Hafiz when she was young,
ask her to speak those verses
as she remembered them

or even to ask her grandchild
who remembered the light
of his voice in her grandmother's eyes.

Because Hafiz
never saw anyone
who is not God

he called God sometimes Friend,
sometimes Beloved,
or Sweet Uncle, Generous Merchant,
The Immediate One,
The Problem Giver,
The Problem Solver, or
The Clever Rascal.

Because Hafiz
never saw anywhere
which is not God

he gave God's address as
sometimes the holes in the roof,
or the cracks in the walls,
or even the back door

of a favourite pub

where God is the dancer,
the musician, the wine,
the beautiful companion.

Hafiz knew
we need poets
to bring rest and refreshment
because separation from God
is the hardest work in the world.

So don't do a thing;
just rest there, and
we'll bring you what you need.

*

[To Daniel Ladinsky, translator of 'Hafiz',
Shams-ud-din Muhammad,
c.1320-1389]

Michael Shepherd

! ! On Looking Into A Cot

For you and you alone,
Creation has somehow come about..

for a moment, held its breath
and then, breathed you,
to demonstrate its awesome powers.

For you and you alone,
worlds have collided: not
the planets and the stars
in their graceful distances
(though some say, even they colluded) –

but worlds of cause and mind and body;
for you and you alone,
miracles have become commonplace.

For you and you alone,
the gods invented blue:
painted the windows of your soul
which have yet to focus,
with a blue so delicate yet bright,
so here and yet so far;

eyes that just now for a moment opened,
remained unimpressed,
closed into a smile
at what you still remember deep inside;

For you and you alone,
a lifetime's been prepared
(some say you wrote the first draft of the script..)
but right now, you and we
live only in the present; may you
live always in that..

For you and you alone, all one,
Love is.
Love that made the world, sustains it; the

infinite electricity of your mother's touch,
your father's sheer delight;
for you and you alone, Love is.

Michael Shepherd

! ! On Not Writing A Poem

and sometimes I'm sitting, quiet,
wondering whether a poem somewhere
would like to speak through me
and it doesn't

but the stillness as I wait -
that's good.

Then just occasionally, when
I'm not visited by a poem,
I visit - without planning - Poetry.

It's a place without a name
where many things meet:
there's space, and hope,
and possibility, and, out of the present,
a future growing..
and something that's not less, or
not less bright, than gold;

where all the poems that have been written
mix on friendly terms with those
that are yet to come;

with a sense of company, humanity,
very undemanding, and what Pooh Bear
would call, Everybody Listening...

and there's no claim, no need
to write about I Was There
and Experienced This, and do you wish
you had too, and here's my name
so modestly after a line space

and it's very refreshing, even
reassuring in its way. Maybe
if we were back in, oh, Greek times?
I would wash, put on a white robe,
take a sweet cake, some oil, some wine, an olive branch,

walk slowly up to the temple,
tap the road dust off my sandals,
then between the cool pillars,
place the offering at the feet
of the golden goddess; silent
somewhere between thanks
and praise and the place called prayer;

and then I'd return home, peaceful
as if blessed. A more poetic image? Perhaps
it's the same place: the mind
was there, the body's here.

It's good. You were there too.

Michael Shepherd

! ! On The Incredibly Subtle Art Of Walking

You're walking down Princes Street
or across the market square, or
in front of the museum, or
towards the bus or rail station..

and he's there, with his poster on a stick
and handmedown clothes; and
despite lowering your eyes, he says to you,
'Do you have Faith...?' but of course he means
that other sort... or higher sort...or whatever...
and smart answers will drip off him
like the rain that's dripping from his mac...

so, no use pointing out that every step
you quickly take in passing him..
is taken in a total faith, unquestioning...

Walking is very, very tricky...if
you never learned... or have to learn again...
you want to move forward: shift your centre of balance
dangerously forward to be off-balance...
counteract that by extending one leg firmly...
now, with that leg as lever, return your centre of balance
through the centre of the body, to your other leg,
which you then extend, repeating the mirror-image
(without prior thought...) of your previous action;
now add to this exquisite balance,
a swerve to left or right to avoid
the oncoming pedestrian who believes
his ego has the right of unswerved way...

Congratulations! You've just managed
two steps, in one of the most intricate manoeuvres
a human being has invented, since... since when?
(Of course, you don't believe in evolution,
Adam walked upright, right...?)

Yes, you have faith, my son... but
try not to think too much about this

as you walk...yet, perhaps
a little wonder, even gratitude
would do no harm... now,
where's my walking-stick?

Michael Shepherd

! ! On The Morning Of Christ's Nativity

This starry dawn - the wise men yet afar -
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?
All birth's a miracle; not less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;
straw is rustling, as they, manger-drawn,
find unfamiliar form- so warm - to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

! ! One For Ramana

The thunder asked
what is lightning?

The root asked
why is a flower?

The pupil asked
who is the teacher?

The space asked
where is everyone?

The circle asked
when is the end?

The stillness asked
whence word?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Oneliness

Sometimes the keyboard
gets fed up with sausage fingers
and takes matters into
it own electric energies,
its cyber wisdom that knows
only nought and one..

and who wants to hear a poem
about `my' loneliness
as if writing about it will dump it all on you
and I can get on with my life

but oneliness ah that's something
I don't even need to write a poem about
I only need to say it and you know
exactly what I mean
now the computer has reminded me:

when you're complete, invulnerable,
need nothing more; when even dreams
fall still in awe of oneliness..

oneliness.. it has the sound of authority
as if medieval mystics like Juliana of Norwich
or the writer of the Cloud of Unknowing
are sharing the knowing of it with us;

perhaps the computer, too, switched off at night,
sighs and knows with a shiver of delight
that state that knows itself like maybe
nought and one may know themselves; like
truth just knows itself;
so good, so beautiful; warm
as a shared heart;

oneliness

Michael Shepherd

! ! Open-Air Concert

How soft the faces
of listeners to music
this summer evening!

Michael Shepherd

! ! Opera Dei- Mozart To The Life

It's a snapshot, except
before the age of the camera
yet more of a decisive moment
than any posed painting

as any photographer,
lighting director, would see,
he's next to you, could be
round about the fifth row back
of the stalls; looking so straight ahead
that it doesn't seem to be
the stage box; and it must surely be
a grand theatre, the lighting's strong

on his white neck-stock,
his powdered hair, even catching
the lower white of his focussed eye;
he all there, he's all here, and
attentive as a critic; the opera,
as it surely is, is playing and engages
all his faculties; and yet

there's an appreciation
holding his lips far from the
childish joke, the poverty, the family deaths,
or even from the unimaginable creation
of music that speaks of something
deep in human hearts, speaks
of something beyond the human heart.

He's listening to the music
as if he'd never heard it before yet
you can see it's all inside him, too -
whatever 'inside' could mean
to genius;

it's Mozart, there beside you
as you sketch him, as the
music you're not watching

as you watch him and your pencil
x-rays your very soul and
finds it wholly good.

So I'd like to thank him
in his celebration, our celebration,
for telling me just what it's like
to be told in music
what life's about, and
more.

Michael Shepherd

!! PRAISE

Whatever that you think you lack – give that! ' –
this saying, heard, lodged in my mind a space;
like seed that hides in earth – yet not inert:
its hidden clock an instrument of grace;

the mind, the soil, that meanwhile, does not know:
it neither knows what lies in its embrace,
nor its own precious nutrients which grow
this seed; nor sees the Sower, nor His grace –

until one day, when in some Spring of light,
I realised: I, meanly, denied – praise:
the praise of human beings in my sight;
and thus, the praise of that One source of praise..

so sought occasion, each and All to praise;
now Praise, with golden hand, seeds all my days.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Panchadasi Chapter Two

O Lord, You are my own self..
remind me, now, that my own self is You..

and that's about the measure of it:
if I were to speak of You, or praise You,
I would speak verbs, and nouns, and sentences;

remind me, Lord, that every verb
speaks of, and yet hides,
Your Creating, here and now;
that every noun speaks of, and hides
the single every name of You;
that every sentence describes, hides,
Your Creation and its beauty;

so take me, know me, Lord, to be
Your silent worshipper and friend
in the stillness of the temple of OurSelf.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Patanjali - For Alison

The boy Patanjali,
flying his kite in the breezy Thiramurti hills
one day cut the thread; the kite
sailed over the hills upon the wind;

asked why he had done that,
the child had no answer;
only his future life
and yoga sutras.

The kite was silent, dancing in its joy;
we, that joyful kite.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Peak District

Summer sunset lights
a mountain eagle; circles,
shares blue sky with stars.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Philanderin' And Phillarkin': How To Be A Modern Poet We All Love

Just two things. Write so that we can understand you while lurching in public transport book in hand and understand you because you're like us but imaginative and funny with it and make us think; but no fancy stuff: we want to be sure you've been there, done it, got it down on paper and that it's the same there as we've been;

and the other thing but it's not essential: the better you write, the more we are reassured by a colourful life well OK scandalous: a rich and very varied sex life would be good: a day with Paris, a week with Princess X then three weeks with some anonymous scrubber (no gender discrimination here by the way) would play well. And if 50% of your liaisons refused to talk (e.g. it was brief but profound) we could read avidly and then hate the other 50% who told all.. but that doesn't mean that a vigorous sex life permits you to say all women are hoes or call your very private wife ma bitch..

and drink to excess of course, mixing your drinks and company: though remember, dying young is no longer a career move in these times of trivial pursuits and careless raptures; as for drugs, OK if you must in which case a ho-hum public attitude from you indicating you don't either approve or disapprove (suggesting that the relationship between chemicals and creativity is too subtle for the tabloid headlines) would be better than some extreme stance.

So, Ruth, Derek, and that abstemious Hindu guy – tell your idiot supporters that more scandal, not less would well befit a poet who's to stand for all of us

as Poet Laureate, Prof of Po, Director of Arts Council Poetry;
to assure us that Dionysius is still alive and well and living
somewhere beyond sin and writing great poetry.

*Come to think of it, a rumour that Ruth and Derek
once had a stormy relationship with mutual recriminations
could make this one run and run.
Now that's what we expect of poets – a bit of phillarkin' on the side..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Platonic Theology

No wheres or whens
or theres or thens
in meeting angels
unaware

but oh! and wow!
and here and now
may shine angelic
anywhere.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Playing Leapfrog With Isso

The huge toad and I,
staring at one another -
who will think first, and what?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Poem For John Around The Camp-Fire

Arthur with all his knights around
sleep the sweet sleep of time
under the green hills of Avalon;

this we believe; this comforts us.
We'll call them when we need them..

unless, the sharp cold dark night-mists of time
make men forget to spell their children's minds.

And not only knights, they say,
but all his court, to rise at time of need;

poets, singers, clowns and wise men too;
all sleep the sweet sleep of those
who know what waking is.

Tread the green hills of Avalon
on a balmy summer night

and the faintest sound of horse
snorting in its sweet-hay sleep

should send you back to tell the tale
to those who must one day know

just when to wake the sleeping court
before it's then too late: wake,
golden; spurred; invincible like truth.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Poem For Mothers' Day

Oh we never know our parents...
isn't that the cruellest thing?

we were never old enough
to know them as they were;

how I wish I had been just as old
as she and he were; to sit
across the rug from them and say

now tell me the story of your life,
don't miss out anything..

how could I then not love you more,
you strangers whom I fought to be
myself; where were yourselves the while?

*

I'm crumpling this poem in
my salty hand and throwing it
into the wind whose wisdom
may dropp it at your feet;
your feet I never washed;
would wash now with my tears;

and then, perhaps, wash history
clean, with touched hands, shared laughter;
as clean now as ever after.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Poetic Sandwich

On a crowded commuter train
pressed between two poets;

caught too for words:
bystanders pretending not to listen;

but today riding shotgun
on Poemhunter between

two poems by Hanque O
full of fresh air and new day. No problems.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Pooh Bear Defines Haiku

Haiku are Poohsticks -
plop! - then mind must cross the bridge
for a nice surprise.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Portrait Of An Unknown Woman To Herself

Bland determination sat upon her public face
where once a smile was;
so busy doing good
she had no time for people.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Prayer Beyond Praying For

Sometimes, perhaps, the question,
what is prayer? Am I missing
something too precious, not to know of?

Don't ask. Instead,
peel a potato; scrub a carrot;
find there, prayer –

all your senses, all your faculties,
seeking the very source of things;
finding their own source;

focussed to a fine fine point
on knowledge; consciousness; and bliss;
and love; let's not forget the love;

that's prayer. Standing very still by
the childbed, the marriage bed, or the deathbed –
your whole being concentrated in a fine fine point;

so many perfections found to be
in so many perfect places,
in so many moments out of passing time.

And in the stillness after action,
prayer was there before you sought.
You were always prayer.

*

[after a thought from Plotinus]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Praying Hands

When the whole church kneels to pray
- though some of us just pretend to kneel:
leaning forward uncomfortably,
our ungainly bums only observed
by the row in the pew behind –

the lady next to me does it in style,
yet with observable humility:
she was taught to kneel, I guess, in
Sunday School when she was five or less,
and about seventy years later,
here's devotion's lifetime posture still:

erect, elbows on the pew's bookshelf,
so that her hands together point straight,
let's say, to heaven; counterpointed
by the head a little lowered in humility;

and I study, discreetly, these praying hands,
subtly shaded by a lifetime
in rose, white, grey, yellow, brown, red, blue;
here smooth, here barely covering bone,
here worn, here wrinkled;

the rest of her, devout; an innerness
which I can only guess at
in her lifetime stance; but these hands
with their lifetime of a woman's work
have, this Sunday morning, offered up
their mighty selves unto their maker God..

When my mother's dressed for Sunday
she's a stranger to the child in me:
dressed in matching hat, gloves, handbag, shoes;
not for the public eye or anyone's approval,
but as the public dresses for its God;

and I glance at these hands, which speak to me
of prayer, of life, that's way beyond my childish mind;

these stranger hands, with more things yet untold
than I would know or dare to ask of her.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Premadarshana, Or, A Short Course In Love

To be is to love.

To love is to be.

Roll these life sentences
around the space
where your thoughts were

now pretend you never read this.

just be;

pretend you never read this.

*

[from a thought by Mira]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Quest And Question

To ask a question beyond answering
may seem to some to be a waste of mind..
and yet it may advance some reasoning,
thus, other questions, real answers find:

for instance: if a soul remains itself
and yet is re-embodied many times
until it is returned to perfect health,
no longer grimy with our human crimes –

how can we guess, in this life's noble aim,
what hideous past so slowly drags `our' feet?
And – if we knew – would then some devilish claim,
the aim, to free our self, somehow defeat?

No answer comes; the question hangs in air;
but now it has been asked, truth may appear.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Reaching For The Dictionary

That efficient movement of the arm –
let it be without impatience,
watched, aware, even graceful –

does not feature in a ballet,
or a film; although it could;
unlikely to be described in a novel;

and as for poetry... no poem yet,
no ode yet owed, to that word-hoard
with which, indirectly, poets live and breathe
and share their being...

but when the moment comes, is seen to come –
how beautiful that movement, full
of assurance, of anticipation
of what this may yield...

for lovely though the world
of that poetic imprecision
which teases the reading, writing mind,
plays with the emotions,
releases the imagination like a glorious balloon...

it's now the moment to look down
from the basket of the balloon
soaring so gently over green fields and earth,
and look for landmarks for a clear descent..

sometimes, it's those geeky, Greeky words
like metempsychosis or synecdoche,
ontological, epistemological...

sometimes, those simple words
like soul, or self...

the pages thumbed over – the choice of paper,
so thin, so strong, just right, itself
brings an intelligent respect –

aah, that's what it really means...
a moment of treasured satisfaction;
the mind a little clearer now;
the heart perhaps, may know its warmth
in later, wiser ways; actions, too,
may (if we ever notice) be subtly altered,

as the flutter of the butterfly's frail, strong wings
in some Amazonian rain-forest,
is sometimes said to be felt
throughout the world...

universal mind may breathe a gentle sigh;
language itself, allow a passing smile;

there's order in the world; harmony
is heard in music beyond words;

the arm and hand, now so graceful,
reassured; the beauty of the mind
so quickly registered that it may
escape; a gratitude perhaps
as quick as eye-blink, and as unobserved -

the arm and hand replace
the dictionary there upon the shelf.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Reading The Poems Of Billy Collins

When did you last turn the pages
of a book of poems as if it were a novel?

and how could a Poet Laureate 'rejoice'-
as they say in flowery poetic language
in the name of Billy?

and it's not so much reading
as being with: as if you're in the same
room with him: he's over there in the recliner,
self-contained but friendly; he may
say nothing; or make an inconsequent remark;
or launch into a fantasy; or say
something unpretentiously profound..

it doesn't matter now. You're in the same room
with him, just being.. he's not making a poem
like you hold a glass up to the light
and polish it; he's not even selling 'being'
like some New Age guru; he's not asking
anything of you.

And thousands who view poetry with suspicion
sigh with relief; take up his latest book
and glance at him there across the room
with a half-smile that somehow reflects his
just being Billy Collins. No, not even that;
just being.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Rembrandt's Darkness, Rembrandt's Light

Here's a painting by Rembrandt van Rijn –
mark how he bestows the light...

the light of Rembrandt's conscious painted scenes
falls where consciousness itself shines strongest:

here on a thinking head, deep
in contemplation of the truth invisible;

here on a melting heart; there,
on a pregnant belly full of life;

on this marriage bed, her body
dissolves into the light of love;

here, the golden helmet and the breastplate
say, heroism has descended on mere man.

But mark, too, that other miracle:
see in this corner, the area of black paint:

this is not darkness; not negation of the light;
this is what cannot comprehend the light;

this is the darkness of the unmanifest,
from which all miracles shall in time arise:

this is the black paint stroked on the canvas
by the same dazzling intelligence
which was Rembrandt; the light
yet stored in darkness; what would that light
of things seen, be, without the mind
that understood and marked the not yet lit?

The secret of that darkness fills
with a brightness that's more beautiful than beauty,
the mind that knows to shut its mortal eyes.

! ! Restaurant

Restaurant; trattoria; tapas-bar;
weinstuben; sushi; cafeteria; eaterie; drive-by; gastro-pub...
what's in a name? A meal by any other name
would smell as good...

In 1765, M. Boulanger (well named) , a humble
soup-vendor, opened an establishment,
whose soups and broths he rightly called
'restaurant', for they were restorative...

Watch this old French film: its very flickering
and jerking seems to give it life: waiters
in their long aprons, whisk in and out
to serve these terrace tables which we're watching
as that accordeon wheezes, or
the barrel-organ evocatively, endlessly,
rolls out its sentiments..

black berets; scarves; thoughtful Gauloise smoke;
the girls, neat hair; that simple chic
that rich and poor Parisiennes seem alike to share;

this contented man, almost a stereotype
(and yet, he lives a life..) , rather overweight,
has evidently just emptied his plate,
lights his cigar; complacent? Or,
in so civilised a measure,
restored to his former self?

This pair of lovers, evidently
having had a tiff, their coffees yet undrunk,
talk into each other's pleadfire eyes,
reaching in them for a heart;
ah, now she stretches out her hand
across the table to seek his;
the accordeon plays its triumphant banality:
their love, restored..

See there, at the furthest table,

that heavy, bereted, pipe-smoking man
who writes intensely; looks up briefly;
curtly indicates to that young girl
to sit with him, but not to interrupt:
isn't that face familiar, at this Left Bank table?

Is he restoring a familiar world
to sing the barrel-organ's tune;
or looking into a nothingness,
a being, a becoming, which will
in time, shatter all café-table minds,
steal waiters from their life of service,
yield Calais's burghers to Hamburg's faster food? ...
or will the world read; worship for a space;
and then, from black-clad existentialness,
restore itself to brighter mental dress?

Café tables, open to the warm Spring air:
so old a tune, perhaps; but love is there..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Riddle Rap

Didn't seek it; didn't choose it;
didn't want it; can't refuse it;
so it's up to you to use it;
you must suffer if you lose it;
give account if you abuse it...

what is it?

Now...

*

[Courtesy Hindu Association of West Texas 'Religious blog' initiative..]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Rilke In Rome

The chance remains of another time
and a life that is not ours...
no, there is not 'more' beauty here than elsewhere -
but there is much beauty here,
for there is much beauty everywhere.

Waters unendingly full of life move along the old aqueducts
into the great city
and dance in the many squares over white stone basins
and spread out in wide spacious pools
and murmur by day
and lift up their murmuring to the night
that is large and starry here and soft with winds.

And gardens are here, unforgettable avenues
and flights of stairs, stairs designed by Michelangelo,
stairs that are built after the pattern
of downward-gliding waters - broadly bringing forth
step out of step in their descent
like wave after wave.

Through such impressions one collects oneself,
wins oneself back again,
and learns slowly to recognize the very few things
in which the eternal endures
that one can love.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Rumi's Never Far Away

There's a tavern where
Prayer, Praise and Self-Discovery
meet to drink wine together.

They never tire of each other's company.

Sit at the next table and listen
to their conversation. How
could they not invite you
to join them?

Michael Shepherd

!!SELF'S GRACE

It's said that we are graced
specifically, in three ways:
(though we might add,
but what is human life but grace?)

those three, firstly the divine grace
which we may turn to, any time,
in the scriptures as set down
(which we must bring to life ourselves..)

and then, the grace which flows
through the good fortune to find
(or does he or she find us?)
a teacher who may steer our course
through life, through teachings, and
through the understanding which we bring;

and third and last – and most mysterious,
most powerful, most firmly set;
and most of all, which all our living life
partakes of: grace of self.

But what is that? So darkly set
by our past thoughts, and words, and acts;
so darkly, lightly, made each moment's presence
by our present life; and which, darkly again,
must influence our future life in ways
or even in our future bodies, if
such teachings as the Hindus hold
may energize our ways...

Can we, should we, attempt a gratitude
to our mysterious former self – that thus
we are, and to our present moment, brought?

So should we, in some novel, inner way,
dedicate our present self – to... self?
Fall silent, still; and in that place beyond
all thought, all word, all act, all sense, all seeing,

dissolve into ourself; know only, being?

Michael Shepherd

!! SPLENDOUR

The splendour in the elephant..
the splendour in a king;

the splendour in the human race;
the splendour of the rain, the seas;

the splendour which is God in gods;
with that same splendour, make me splendid, Lord..

*

from the RgVeda

Michael Shepherd

! ! Saying The Unspeakable

Such as President Obama
may not say it; but I
who am nobody, may speak it:

the God of many names and One
does not wish division;
you and I (there are no others?)
do not wish division;
who makes division?

Why do all seek an 'enemy'?
The dispossessed invent an enemy
on whom to blame their plight;

the rich invent an enemy
to excuse their greed;

those who worship God under one name
make enemy of those who worship God
under another name;

even those who worship God under the same name
make sects in order to invent an enemy;

is it because it is easier
to make an enemy than a friend?

is it easier to fear
than to love?

is it easier to hate
than to love?

is it easier to count to two
than think of three or one?

do we feel more powerful
if we have an enemy?

and now we fire at enemies
invisible beyond the horizon..

are enemies more attractive
to our life than friends?

Tell me, poets, tell me, sages;
tell me, saints; oh tell me God;

tell me, arithmeticians:
when division multiplies

our enemies, why do we
so love division?

The God of many names and One
makes division in Himself
with love and without hate;

you and I (there are no others?)
love each other all the more
in the sameness of our differences;

does human kind
now hate itself so much?

who thinks division, loves division?
makes an enemy of otherness?
forgets that God is One?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Science Rewarded

As children, who have made
their first discovery of the natural world
by their own curiosity, rush into the room,
their eyes shining – so that their parents
love them all the more, even before
they tell them of this magic fact –

so scientists; rewarded for their humility
at the end of a long life, heaped
with honours; initials after their name
that no one understands;
the respect of colleagues;
loved by their students;

blessed above all by that golden thing –
the continuance of delight.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Screen Credits

Hollywood, Bollywood –
what's in a name?
illusions film illusions;
reality's the frame...

But Hindus have the best seats
in real life's picture-house:
resting in eternity,
watching all else pass..

*

(occasioned by reading the 'Hindupedia' website on Dharma, Ayurveda, and
much else..)

Michael Shepherd

! ! Screensaver

It's night. Across the Hudson River,
the New York skyline at its most
romantic: sprinkled in its wide white way
with office and apartment lights;
wispy night clouds add their movement,
setting off this jewelled velvet;
in the mid-ground, a fire-launch
throws a high and spotlit fountain
to assert that manmade beauty's not forgotten,
and citizens may share this high-rise paradise..

The French, who have a knack for the poetic phrase,
might pin down in words this strange emotion
of a city seen at night – something
like 'nostalgie de l'inconnu' –
a nostalgia for the unknown...
paradoxical sweet yearning in
a thousand lighted windows behind which
humans like ourselves whom we will never meet
share our lives; in this still night scene
(the distant sounds but faintly heard,
though not on our saved screens)
elevated to the holy mystery of life;
the soundless magic of a nightclub
saxophone and wistful clarinet;
a rhapsody in moods of blue.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Scrooge Does Valentine

If your partner doesn't know by now
how much you love them
without all that obligatory stuff today
which they'll know you're doing
because everybody else's doing it, and they
will have to pretend it's a big deal -
they don't deserve you.
Ditch them. Today.

If you don't celebrate your love
every day and not just this one
in some way or other, and
let them know just how much you care,
love, respect, need, thank -
you don't deserve them.
Start a new relationship with them
today, and every day..
Today. Or else.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Seasonal Jangle Jingle

Mirthful and merry,
jovial and jolly,
in-laws for Christmas,
prickly as the holly.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Self Liberation

A noun, a name, a concept perhaps,
sitting on the page..
asset-optimization; thought-structure; self-realization...

suddenly, from something you've never heard of,
it becomes a consumer desirable...
it's on your shopping list...

better approach it with a laugh; with joy:
I sat there with her, drinking tea
and complaining ever so politely
about the difficulty of being me;
the air in the room grew heavy and even seemed to yawn..

suddenly she sprang to her feet,
opened her arms (I see her now) spread wide
and said (she almost sang) : 'Be like me! Throw yourself
on the mercy of the Absolute! '

The whole of the dance of life
in a single movement:
how could I not believe her?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Selfe's Grammar: A Sonnet In The Style Of George Herbert

O Lord: my dearest Selfe – why need I name Thee?
Whom I need not call - forever near;
O Lord: my wholest Selfe – what grammar speak Thee,
who art Word and Speech, and Mouth and Ear;

Thou art not circumscribed by any Noun,
that any but Thyself hath speech to say;
nor Pronoun Thou – who art both I and Thee
and He and She and every It and They;

All Verbs Thou art; and every verb, Thy act;
and yet, Thy Stillness knows no verb that moves;
no Adjective may praise Thee as Thou art;
no Adverb tell how Thy Love constant proves;

O Lord, my whole dear Selfe: my silent prayer
may speak the louder; Thy sweet Stillness share.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Self-Knowledge

Show me a wrong conclusion
and I'll jump to it.

Show me a wrong tree
and I'll bark up it.

Show me a wild goose
and I'll chase it.

Show me a hare
and I'll hare after it.

Show me a conspiracy theory
and I thought of it first.

Tell me I'm too passive
and I'll punch your face in for saying it.

Tell me I'm too aggressive
and I'll break your bloody neck for even suggesting it.

Call me iggerant
an I'll teach yer...

Who you lookin' at?
Saw yer lookin'...

Michael Shepherd

! ! Senryu To A Curry In A Hurry

The throat smiled, that warm Spring evening;
the stomach sang it to its heart;
but the guts soon shouted farewell.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Shakti

It's even simpler than that:

give yourself to the oneness
in one thing, one activity:

and if it's that, in purity,
they'll come to aid you with
wonders yet unknown:

it's said, they have no choice;
they too love oneness above all.

*

[shakti = the powers of the self]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Sharing Eternity - For The Sorrowing

It should be so obvious:
all the 'eternal values' which we may see
as worthwhile in our life –
these, we share with those who've gone before..
what else more worth the sharing?

and share, more closely than we know to seek:
those whose 'loss' to us we mourn –
especially those so recently thought 'lost' to us –
they are the ones still closest to us:

they delight to hear from us, chatting in our heart;
in their eternity, so willing to forgive if we but ask;
need no medium, planchette or ectoplasm
to be contacted; if we but wish;

and in the wisdom of eternity which they share
with us within our inmost heart,
so eager now to give, and to forgive, and give again:

beloved teachers, to continue so to teach;
beloved ones, to continue so to feed, draw out our heart with love..

then share eternity, and live!
it should be so obvious..

*

[from the Shaivite teachings]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Shaving Mirror Haiku

Does this mirrored face
have the same thoughts about me
as I have of it?

Michael Shepherd

!! She Thought Of Plum-Blossom; Touched The Strings

Posted: Mon Mar 02,2009 1: 34 pm Post subject:

She thought of plum blossom, touched the strings

Smiling gently in her mind
this mid-winter morning
at the thought of Spring

she wraps herself in padded cotton kimono,
tiptoes through the snow
to the plum tree;

touches so gently tips of twigs
where the buds, too,
warm at the thought of spring;

then bends down, parts the snow
so carefully,
where the shoots of crocus
will soon pull aside the snowy duvet;
stretch; look coyly at the sun;

returns in her own footsteps in the snow;
takes up the shamisen,
touches the strings; is about to sing;
instead she smiles; almost sighs, like a lover,
black almonds in the corner of her eyes;

sounds of shamisen
can be heard in the garden
this winter morning.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Silence At The River Bank

This winter dusk, the wild goose's cry
disappears into the stone cliff:
stillness.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Singing

If the words are good and true,
it's as if the centre of all things
fires and fills; informs the heart;
the heart, the chest and lungs;
the lungs, the unhesitating throat;
space fills the head and voice:

and then, no longer pupil,
but the teacher of the world;
hearing from the centre of that sound
that sound itself may bring about all things.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Singing The Bruised Blues

Poetry

needs listeners to
reflect love's bright
refulgence

otherwise

it dries and dies
a personal
indulgence

Michael Shepherd

! ! Some Musings On Journalism

On the scale of public aspiration,
'journalist' comes second bottom to 'politician'
- in Britain; whereas in France, it
comes second top after 'author'...

to be interested in everything, by this calling;
to be interested in everyone, by this calling;
now that's a calling worth responding to:

to 'interview' by asking a first question;
to listen to the very end of answer
until in the silence after the last word,
the next question emerges in the mind; thus

to question so that enthusiasm's touched;
and in the person who confronts you,
the glow of heart's true love brings all the light of self
to make the room a timeless temple of humanity;

to have an interview end as such a blessing; and so,
as one exchange of heart returns to being two people,
switch off the recorder, close the notebook;
with glory-lit and humble, slightly moist eye.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Sonnet On The Morning Of Christ's Birth

This starry dawn – the wise men yet afar –
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?
All birth's a miracle; no less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;
straw is rustling as they, manger-drawn,
find unfamiliar form – so warm – to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed,
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Sonnet: On His Deafness

'Speak up! No need to shout – I'm not that deaf..!'
-do I have any real right to complain
if years of partial listening have brought
now partial hearing in their fateful train?

O Milton – isn't it curious: the blind
evoke our instant feelings of compassion;
while deafness calls some idiot state to mind –
evoking, far from pity – irritation!

Those saintly mystics would just praise their God
that He, to speed their simple saintliness,
brings outer deafness, so that inner Word
in cloistered silence brings a greater bliss..

So may I bear affliction in good part:
and hear a greater, louder word in heart.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Soul Song: Is This Farewell, Or Simply Au Revoir?

'Soul' – you've stood your ground now
for many thousand years; even when
they said God's dead – and lightning did not strike..

you've held our hopes of heaven; even when
we ceased to know just where they were
no longer sky and blue and white and grey,
in thunder and in innocence;

and kept our thoughts of death and life,
filed 'To Whom It May Concern';

you have two lodgings still: within
church doors; at graveside; and at prayer;

more of a signpost: 'Keep to
the public path', than certain destination;

and still living in that music's ecstasy
that stirs the feet and lets the heart burst forth...

but now? as God and heaven hide their face
because we cease to look their way,

have you drawn up that lovely silken veil
across your face; that Indian face
that knows its 'soul' as servant of the Self;
has known it now for full ten thousand years?

or do you lurk now in laboratories
of cranial research, brain-scan; and
consulting rooms of cognitive research;

to walk in, smile and laugh and say
oh did you miss me? ...

or do you whisper in the present ear
of writers on The Power of Now?

Or one day soon, will you reveal
you were, before the Holy Spirit was?

Tomorrow, Soul, how shall I say your name
in silent prayer? in mind beyond all words?

Love needs no name in presence evermore; so,
'Soul' – is this farewell? or simply, au revoir?

*

[out of a conversation with a Doctor of Theology]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Sounds In Mind

This mind is full of sounds...
like Shakespeare's island; though
no mind is like an island...

where are all those sounds stored,
indexed, waiting tidy on their shelves?

Only when a sound returns
do you realise that it's been missing..
hasn't deprivation always been
the Creator's pointed message to us?

just now, sitting with a teacup,
after a 'testing' week...
a gentle, sweet and reasonable
woman's mother voice returns
to mind's uncatalogued fine inner ear;
reminds me it's been absent for awhile..

and the world that seemed so alien last week
surrounds me with its mellow sound of care.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Spiderthread

Spiderthread

This cool early morning
when summer is remembering autumn

a spider hangs busy
off the end of a twig;

it has plans: a thread
stronger than steel, it's said

which runs out and out,
back and back

beyond the horizon,
beyond the creation of the world

into the mind of God.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Spring Cleaning

O Sun,
you speak in metaphors

shining with a wintry discontent
grey-yellow on this dust

that dodged your view
until today

or perhaps, you are yourself
the brightest fiery metaphor of all

Michael Shepherd

! ! Spring In Yoshino

The cherry blossoms
heard the temple bell and bowed;
fell gentle as snow.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Stevie Smith Reading Her Poems

She was not yet really 'known' -
but asked to read by this small group
of older Jewish refugees and eager youngsters,
talent destined for a fame,
at the tiny Gaberbocchus Press

which did not affect at all
the self-contained aloneness
that walked up the aisle from door to barely stage

and in a clear dry voice neither apology nor hope
read her poems that gave a meaning
to the new word 'throwaway' - they were her,
she read them, threw the invisible sheets away,
and if you caught them as you laughed
which was easier than crying tears,
so be it.

Her voice at the poems' end
was herself: as if, not waving, no, but drowning, neatly,
with a certain acceptance,
in the incomprehensibility of life; she read
as if when the poem ended
you might quickly but quietly rise from your seat
and leave, not rudely but because
there was nothing more to say

Michael Shepherd

! ! Stillness: A Poem For The International Day Of Stillness, November 28

'Stillness is my beloved teacher.
From her, I learn new things every day.'

I said to Stillness,
how can you teach me so well?

Stillness said,
By being with you always.

I said to Stillness,
How can you teach me so much?

Stillness said,
Because you have much within you;
I, but a mirror for your mind;
I, but a mirror for your heart.

I said to Stillness,
O my beloved teacher, will you
promise me you will never leave me?

Stillness said,
I cannot leave you;
though you can leave me..
but what is stillness without a companion?

I said to Stillness,
Is your work hard?

Stillness said,
I have the most wonderful task that I could wish for:

I sit with babies while they smile;

I sit with children in the classroom
as they delight to learn;

I sit with the angry and disturbed,
And watch them grow to peace;

I sit with the sad and lonely and bereaved
and watch them rediscover happiness and joy;

I sit with kings and queens and rulers
while they find wisdom and mercy;

I sit with governments and committees
while they find reason and justice;

I sit with artists and scientists,
and watch them find new things outside themselves,
and find new things within themselves;

I sit with those who pray or meditate,
and watch them find God in themselves;

I sit at the feet of saints
while they become perfection;

I fly with birds, in the silence of the air;
I watch the animals as they explore the earth;
I hear the growing of the trees and plants;
I listen to the opening of the flowers;

I walk in the gardens of the dawn;
I walk in the gardens of the dusk;
in the deep of the night, I watch.

Said Stillness,
I am the friend and the companion of all;
who would not love to share my life with me?

I said to Stillness,
may I never leave you.

And Stillness looked me in the eye,
and Stillness smiled at me:

'I am born with every creature born

to be their friend for life.'

*

(With acknowledgements to Iain Trousdell of New Zealand, whose poem quoted from in the first two lines inspired this extension..)

Michael Shepherd

! ! Studio Visit

Feet slightly apart, firm
as at stable ease, yet
ready for the glorious unexpected;

left thumb, pressured
white to pink under the nail,
hooked through wooden palette,

its organic shape summoning
some internal organ – heart,
lungs, kidneys, liver –

squeezed dabs of pure pigment,
waiting, vivid, muted, or in
a cosmic swirl of some new sight;

looked me in the eye and said,
ordinary is so beautiful... the studio silenced,
paint brush poised,

and the whole singing world, given
now a blessing, to be its ever
miracle of light and life and space,

of the ordained, of ordered
breath of life shaped as a palette,
shaped as an eye, sheds inner light

on outer, mind that knows only
present here and now; his gaze,
still on mine; waiting for the sight

of the miraculous in pupil of my eye,
mind as his canvas, waiting too
for the world made ever new;

'only watch, and all else happens;
ordinary is so beautiful.'

! ! Sufi

A broken reed. No longer
its feet in earth, its stalk in water;
what will become of it?

Taken by grace; cut; shaped
into new name, new form;
breathed into it, the breath of life;

the breath, heard by a song
unmanifest, that waits to be born
from cause to mind to sound:

how can this sound be described,
the joy of broken reed now flute?

Now the reed can sing; speaks
of how it cried its loss;
yearned to find itself again;
knowing in its heart
that wholeness waits, somewhere, for ever;

now it sings for joy, so purely that
no ears, no heart, can resist its call;
nevermore to part the reed, the flute, the song.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Sunlight On White Paint. For The New Year.

The house across the way is newly painted white.
Right now, that's all my being seems to need:

this winter morning, sharp, cold, bright and clear,
the morning sunlight pours across white paint;

contains a thousand messages, in me
interpreted.. or simply left to be..

this moment, that's as much as being craves:
this morning's glory; and I, born for praise..

even as I write, I watch the sun's
white paint brush move across the house's front

and tell the eye of reason that this world
is turning, basking, in this morning sun;

already sparkling on the Bondi waves
as if the world had just been washed anew;

cast early dawn's pearl light on Taj Mahal
as if the sun itself could never tire of beauty;

Italian villa forecourts just hosed down,
the air all fresh to meet the warming day;

the gardens of Carmel, eight hours from now,
will paint their flowers fresh with mist and dew;

as every carefree holiday yourself
recall, as proof eternal of pure soul..

and here - the witness of my silent mind
needs nothing, need go nowhere else to find
its very self, this moment without taint:
immortal sunlight shining on white paint.

! ! Surgery

Just back from the surgery

(at least it's 'the' surgery, not

cold-steel 'surgery'...)

Surgery. Well-named.

Surges of fear, apprehension,

remorse, injustice, you name it.

On second thoughts, don't bother.

The reception room's OK though.

The counter staff are always ready for

a laugh, a smile, a bit of banter.

Today, it's 'Do you mind being video'd?

It's a training video. If that's OK, would you sign

now, and again afterwards? '

Cue for joker: you should have warned me,

I'd have gone to Make-Up first, and I only give my signature

for charity these days...send the fee to my agent

and next time my people will talk to your people
about the Pers. App....

but they stopped listening halfway.

Then the surgery... it's like a scene

From Malice in Blunderland: as I enter,

I shrink, am diminished to

a slithery list on her computer screen;

judgment day records, and doomful events of personal life

now mere one-liners..

a case-history with the added social disadvantage,

sorry, negatively endowed, of

having a face and body..

Look for the camera, natch -

always ready to falsify my life

for no-one who might care.

Damn, it's behind me;

looks like truthday here.

Spare you the details

in case you tell me worse.. so

Exit Dwarf, as Shakespeare would have penned it.

You could have surfboarded on the final surge

of peripheral dismissed humanity;

too mean now, to say goodbye

to the deception staff.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Swan Song

Is evolution wiser than we know?
Are we to believe it nothing more
nor less, than threats, in holy or unholy
alliance with blind chance;
survival of the fittest, its whole aim?

And swans, but upside-down giraffes?

Once upon a time... when food became too short
for the short-necked to reach the last top leaves,
the ones with longer necks, survived;
female giraffes, noting this,
sought partners for their progeny among the longer-necked;
and so, nature stretched her expanding world
to – giraffes...

And when the short-necked ducks
ran short of food,
the longer-necked reached down in shallow water..
the females noted this.. and finally... the swan
emerged.. its feathers waterproof,
its bird-feet, larger; claws now webbed...

And thus, we sentimental human beings –
who cannot add such cubits to our stature –
stand and marvel; as those graceful swans
make life seem easy... little do we see
of where their work is done.

Mother Evolution, so it seems,
is liberal with her gifts –
here, an ungainly visual joke;
there, an elegant white curve of beauty.

Hindus name their holy men
as 'hamsa', swan: gliding over life;
their work, in inner realms we would not know;
giraffes –camelopards, as they were called
by puzzled Europeans; splay-legged,

with ears that look surprised;
walking periscopes; waiting
for a poet to join them in a question:
does Evolution need now, to evolve?

Michael Shepherd

!!THIS...

This...thing... which visits me,
torturer so intimate
which knows me better than I know myself:
calls out all my resources
to transcend its pains;
changes always its approach
as if it's quite determined to
leave no corner unexplored...
plays on my fears, my hopes, my dreams...:

what can I do but see it as
the hurdle (which I built myself?)
but failed to clear, the last time round;

have another try...see it from
the helicopter hovering overhead
which photographs, but does not feel
the rider or the horse; the going, or the race..

have another try...it is the way
to develop and refine your skills;
another day, another race; and

after it, serenity; detachment; laid-back day..
some hidden deal's been struck
and time has witnessed it.

You too? You've met this thing
emerging from unreason to the light?
Join me in the stillness; for that
which this affliction plays with in disguise,

this must be love; this must be grace;
this must know its own origin;
all else shall pass; meanwhile,
the joke is this: it's bearable...
if not, it wouldn't work...

This poem a knowing smile;

black demon with an angel's eyes.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Taking Coffee 'With' Jean-Paul Sartre.

It was 1952. We had a limited travel currency.
In Paris, I went one morning to
the Dome Café. There
sat Jean-Paul Sartre, smoking
a large meerschaum pipe
such as Kierkegaard or Nietzsche might have smoked;
he had his morning coffee in front of him.
Simone had not yet joined him.

A circle of young admirers sat at a
discreet distance; most wore black
but the young women could not avoid
a certain Parisian chic in their sombreness,
their existential frown and turned-down lips
around bright eyes.

It was the chance of what we call
a lifetime. Dare I speak to him?
Nothing ventured, nothing gained:
a human being must live his words,
act out his own chosen life in honesty
like Ché Guevara..

I moved to his table. The circle of admirers
were all attention. I saw two of them
surreptitiously take out small notebooks.

'Is this seat free, Monsieur? ' He knew me for
a stranger in that theatre of the absurd
we call life, where all are strangers.

His arm was a signifier. His hand
indicated an empty seat (not the closest,
which awaited Simone) : his shoulder
gave the slightest Gallic shrug. We make
our own decisions, live by them.

An awed waiter, affecting nonchalance,
brought my coffee. Should I speak to Sartre

of teenage mountaineering in Canada
and the discovery of philosophy?

No. We would then be
to each other, The Other.

We sat there silent: two beings without meaning
whose meeting was prefigured, whom
only a Creator could have put there;
a Creator whom we must deny.

I spoke through the dry lips of one
who had not yet attained an authentic
aloneness:

'This coffee is good, n'est-ce pas, Monsieur? '
Two students took up their pencils.

'Ca, c'est.. vy I com heere.'

We sat, two human beings magnificent in the
heroism of their aloneness, enjoying,
if that's the word, a shared appreciation of the coffee
carefully watched by the intellect..

The coffee drunk, I stood up, with a
slight bow – 'Monsieur..'
He glanced up, but not at me;
Simone had appeared.

I walked away, glorying in
the heroism of those who know they have no heroes,
writing the words of their life,
living by them. The students, awed,
watched my body language for clues
to existence, which might then reveal
essence. Or not.

.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Talking Hawking Meeting Dawkins

Suppose that 'Evolution' were throned God,
with all the praise and power accorded That?
Where would that path then lead the human race?
And what new thoughts would fill our mind and heart?
Evolution would then rule three worlds:
As Spirit's cause, and Mind, and world of Form;
would then be seen in Beauty, Goodness, Truth;
no longer mere Survival's tooth and claw,
but Lord of evolution of our minds;
of spirit, too, in seeking its true self;
new Age of Reason, calling all our powers
to seek ideals as real; rightfully ours
from genesis to paradise above;
no longer as survival... but... as Love?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Teacher As Healer: An Observation

Even before the question put,
they're full of quiet attention; something
is already being listened to.. makes
that space, in which a question
may be floated on the air..

tentatively perhaps, or self-concerned,
the question's put; and listened to;
perhaps with gentle nod of head;
a keen attention; even a half-smile:

you and they are meeting now
in the fullness of the heart, in
a place that's fully shared:

the teacher, almost eager, so it seems,
to hear more of your truth;
to hear the truth of you.

And as the question nears its end,
the answer floats upon the air
as if it and the question are but one;

the answer gently given, as if
already shared; not given,
not received; but already shared;

(and I saw: each time they said
the words 'it is', their spine
relaxed into a greater straightness..)

Who can describe that unity of mind -
as joy in stillness; or the bliss of peace?
Somewhere in the world of name and form,
something has been healed;
wholeness has returned to wholeness;
perfection taken, and returned;

the teacher, too, is still;

gifts of grace have been exchanged.

Michael Shepherd

!! Technology - A Thumbnail Tribute To Martin Heidegger

Tekne', to the Greeks
was the art of bringing-forth
from the true (and, it's hoped, the good)
into the beautiful:

poetry; sculpture; machinery of wood and metal
such as that which raised the Parthenon;
raised Apollo, Venus, out of stone;
raised myth out of poetry.

And I, we, too have technology
forever at our finger-tips..

Did it happen through chance,
through procrastination,
or through attention given
to a task and needs,
this 'beautiful' solution
that mathematicians talk about?

it happened on one godgiven day,
scrubbing those shining new potatoes:
the right-hand thumbnail now grown long
suddenly a more efficient tool
for removing 'eyes' and hollowed dirt..

so now, this intimate and valued tool
carefully shaped between a v and u;
and from the fingertip to heart
arises wonder, awe: the gentle curve
of nail gives added strength.. how magnificent
the humblest, least worshipped fingerends
of these so precious hands...

Do I mimic man called 'primitive'
as I depend on nature's tools
to alert the inventive mind

by the attention which, taken so for granted
links us to the gods themselves...?

Tools first, then machines, then 'technology'
have no limits under divine law:
call them, the exteriorisation
of our brain, our mind:

thumbnail, bridge, interstellar rocket
are thus one in wonder; every action
now to mind and heart, a sacrament;
the bringing-forth, the showing-forth
of Man – the tekne of the gods;
the gods who live, who wake from sleep,
only when Man rounds the circle with his praise.

"Questioning is the piety of thought."

Michael Shepherd

! ! Telling The Bees

It was the year before last that
I started to notice it.

Bees wandered into the house
then didn't remember the way back

Bees. Whose sense of direction used to be
great than any Indian scout;

as if mankind had lost its most valuable gift
-what might that be?

Scientists are still working on the reasons.
There were more lost bees last year;

when they're half exhausted and quieten down,
staying on the window pane for a few second more,

I take a jam jar and a piece of paper
and take them to the door

talking to them as I did when
I buried that baby swallow when I was four;

indecipherable words that I would use
to a cat run over in the road,

a child in pain; some sort of sounds
of consolation for what's beyond words anyway

that only music could express.
It's ancient: you should talk to bees;

tell them of all that affects the house, the family;
when there's a death, you put a piece of black cloth

on the hive. In return, they do things for you
that are beyond your notice or their explanation.

How can I tell them, we're so sorry for you, we don't know,
when we do we'll tell you; it's probably our fault,

chemicals and stuff. So far this year, only one
huge bumble-bee, I couldn't catch it;

it hid from me. Perhaps they've learned
whatever it is they had forgotten;

perhaps they risked their lives
to warn us: you too have forgotten

something that could kill your species:
you too, have forgotten the way back...

Michael Shepherd

! ! That Couple

We love them dearly,
Individually – always will –

but together – lawdy lawd...
they've exhausted our sympathy,
our advice, our sympathy again...

they love 'making up'
more than rowing, separating – don't we all?

but they love making up, even
more than loving...

Michael Shepherd

! ! That Thou Art (For Arthur And Phyllis)

Was this first yellow primrose
waiting for me here
to join it in wordless praise?

Michael Shepherd

! ! That Ugly Man..

Who can forget- if and when you've seen him -
that student whose whole face and body language
shout at you the demand,
'Hate my ugliness! Tell me that I'm right
to hate myself! '

That man, of whom it's said
that once a lady saw, as standing right beside him,
golden Apollo alive himself? ..

Who can know what tricks gods play on us;
or who, of humans, devotes their whole life
to play out this charade?
And how deeply does this 'ugly' man
believe this to be his own self?

A living human parable perhaps:
here to remind us just how much
we yearn for, know of, that eternal truth
whose face is beauty; is, ourself.

Michael Shepherd

! ! That Word - From A Poem By Kabir

What is there to say
about that word?

Nothing. It is itself enough.

Everything. For everything springs from it;
whatever you speak, is praise of it.

Seek it. But where to seek it?

On a clear night, go outside;
see the stars of the Milky Way shimmering there.

Somewhere inside yourself, you will be near
that word.

When you have found that place
near it, guard it:

love its mystery – always beyond;
love its reality – all that springs from it;

writers write from it;
musicians sing it, play from it;
dancers dance from it;

renunciates owning nothing in their snowy caves
are full of it;

even the greedy seek it everywhere;
even disbelievers have to say it, to deny it;

we live in it, move in it, owe our being to it;
yet it means nothing to you until you seek it;

for inside that word,
everything is full of light;

there is enough of that light in one human heart

to light the whole world.

Breathe in that word;
breathe out that word.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Aged Poet. For Kealan If

When he was young
and life was poetry
and poetry was life
and girls made poetry
in his heart

he'd showed his poems to
an aged poet who
was quiet a while then
nodded his head and
smiled and
said 'keep writing'

and he swore that day
as long as he could hold a pen
he'd write some sort of poetry

and so he did and so he did

and when he was
too old to hold a pen
he spoke his poetry
some say in an Irish pub

and people came from miles around
and said sure it was a t'ousand times
better than to read his poems on the page
which was itself worth –
and that last phrase was poetry
for who is not Irish and a poet

and when he was too old
to walk down to the pub

they came and listened
at his door and at his window

and when he was too old to speak
they came to see his silence

and left as poets
for their head
had joined their heart

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Algebra Of Poetry. For Jim As If.

OK you've written 2000 crap poems you say.
Now pack up this arithmetical stuff:

there's an algebra to poetry:
equations full of unknowns:

for a start, the 2001th poem that you write
will contain 2000 times the...

well it's a complicated equation:
it starts with the familiar

x for the expression which has improved
a thousandfold since you began;

y stands for the hundreds of times more wise
you've since become, by just writing poetry;

zzz is the way, that half-asleep,
an unforgettable word or line can slip into your head;

z too, for zeal and zest, that Muses love
and fly a little closer while you write..

then, it wouldn't be a real equation without
'squares': for all that's squared within your mind as poetry takes shape;

and brackets: for that intrusive, brilliant phrase
that slips between the wagons of your train of thought,

sometimes so surprising that you're not too sure
it's true; but trust it; tomorrow, know it's right;

and oh so much more to this equation
of knowns equalling unknowns, spelling out a poem;

mass, energy, and the speed of light
writing themselves into some new formula

which only humility may harness;
a light to light the world with words.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The American Declaration Of Co-Dependence

The rich need the less rich
to oil their lives like soundless hinges
and do the jobs they would not want to do.

The poor need the less poor
to make the jobs for them to do

While those in the middle
have aspirations; work hard;
love their kids; and sometimes
feel warm glow of gratitude
for being safe and middling.

Then when times are tough...
perhaps it's time for charity
and co-dependence
and some noble human impulse
that's social without the 'ism
that scares the hell out of some folks

so don't take it out
on the President;
America is you.

Co-dependence.
Like when they first
came off the boat
that passed the Statue
with a cry of hope
in many colours.

Michael Shepherd

!! The Caliph, The Craftsman And The Imam (An Ancient Tale Just Brought To Light)

He was the pride,
sometimes the envy, of the village:

no wealth of jewels, but
a set of gleaming tools.

When asked, he would tell:
I go to the Caliph,
explain what I need and why:

I seek precious things
from the One who does not withhold...

and those around the Caliph
said to him, why are you so generous
to that humble craftsman of fine things?
And why do you listen for so long, to his talk of work?

The Caliph said,
I seek precious things
From the One who does not withhold...

And would you ask me
what the Imam said when asked?

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Coincidence Of Contraries

It's said that when the One eternal mind
bursts into glorious multiplicity,
its first divisions enter human kind
as dualism and polarity:

dualism may be met by mind;
by reason, thus returned to unity;
polarity – that tool to stretch our mind –
may bring emotion's instability:

hate and love, close-twinning, may torture hearts;
joy and sadness dance our strength away;
whate'er we think ourselves, its twin still lurks:
conceit and worthlessness, each others' prey;

beware these contradictions in the mind;
yet, boldly brought together, One to find.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Conversation

You know, since you've played that game too:

Sometimes, consumed by glowing, burning love
of treasured child, or husband, wife,

it is one further bound of love
to speak of them with a detachment;

casually; offhand; as if it were
of no great current consequence;

you look into their eyes; see there what you see:
love's incoherent boundlessness;

are lost to love yourself;
smile; and play their game.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Dawn Of Christ's Nativity [sonnet]

This starry dawn – the wise men yet afar –
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?
All birth's a miracle; no less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;
straw is rustling as they, manger-drawn,
find unfamiliar form – so warm – to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed,
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Day When 'They' Killed 'Them'

It was the bloodiest day
in those long long years;
that day when 'they' killed 'us'
who were the 'they' to them.

The next day we buried ours;
fearing as we turned the bodies
to see a known face: friend, relation.

But it was the boy.
His pockets, stuffed with leafy olive twigs;
as he went out to fight for freedom
freedom which did not ask his life.

I did not know that tears
could be so salty on the lips
beyond all bitterness.

*

[taken from a described true incident]

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Desert Fathers

As far from men, as near
to God, as they could achieve, living
where the desert met the mountains;

their sustenance
beyond our supermart imaginings,
alone or with a few devoted
kindred spirits, they lived a life
of hard work, asceticism, prayer –

with all the urban wit of the best
gentlemen's clubs, all the perception
of consultant psychiatrists:
observing in themselves in solitude
all the ills of man, before, then, since:

'We have rejected the light burden
of condemning ourselves, and
we have chosen the heavy burden
of justifying ourselves, and condemning others...'

touché, Abba John!

They, a little lower than the angels,
between the desert and the mountains,
between the hard place and the rock,
between human tragedy and
the divine comedy;

on their face,
above rough cloth, rough hands,
humility; bright eyes; compassion's smile.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Early Blackbird

A blackbird has been sitting outside the window
for some time this morning, and
I'm trying to tune in to its blackbird thoughts,
if indeed it's burdened with such tiresome
delaying tactics to action...

it seems indecisive, though; evidently, plumply,
having well breakfasted; does
the head switching left, right,
a little slower than with alarm,
signify some Hamlet thought?

it could be wondering, if,
in view of what a blackbird would call
global warming rather than
an early summer,

it should sing?

since the early bird, it must have been
taught, or intuited, catches the first mate..

I try looking at it severe of mind,
as mindless tool of Evolution
(and yes, me too...)
only concerned with food and sex
and sex and food,
and other internet concerns
in cyber blackbird space...

but that goes nowhere in the mind..
I open the front door a crack,
whistle a poor imitation of a blackbird's song;
it twists its head for a moment
as of impatience at some irrelevant comment;
flies off; returns; like I do, when
I've lost the train of thought
that sent me somewhere in the house
but have forgotten what it was...

I'll keep an eye out for it tomorrow...
and turn back to the computer,
remembering Nicholas of Cusa
who says, there is no other:
always, we are looking
at the face of God...

Michael Shepherd

! ! The English Teacher

I bumped into my grandson's English teacher yesterday
at the football, and in between shouting like teenagers
I moaned about the state of A's Eng. Lit. not to mention Eng. Lang. -
you know, you've heard it all before... in my day.....never regretted....
he agreed, but said go easy on the lad he's only thirteen
they all want to be fifteen and grown up at that age,
they can't be seen by their peer-group to be 'for' anything too much
so they ridicule everything, it's either pretentious crap if it's modern
or stupid ancient crap if it's more than a generation ago...
they even call Shakespeare a sad loser until
someone says he wrote the screenplay for that film
though they're fascinated by the idea that Marlowe
was a spy as well as a crap writer not that they've read him anyway

but you know what he said
put them up on stage in the annual Shakespeare and make them
speak his lines, and they'll never forget it,
they'll not say anything about it to me except in private but
they'll remember it to their dying day it's things like that
he said that keep me in this bloody job.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Fish And I Will Chat

Sometime it swims right up to the glass
as if it would talk with me –
opens its mouth, fixes me with a watery eye;

a moment when we can exchange silent thoughts,
about whether it's better to be confined
in a tank, but free of all possessions,
compared with the freedom to acquire
so many possessions; or which of us
dislikes the more, a dentist's waiting room..

nod and smile to know we both share
that joke about the fish in the water
never being thirsty; swimming in what
we take for granted; like, say, grace, or God..

so the fish flips its tail, is off; both of us
in agreement about freedom, meditation.

*

[leaning on Hafiz' poem of that title]

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Five Of Pentecost - To Marsilio Ficino

Sometimes you spell it out for us:

God's earth – the matter of the universe,
holding without form at first,
all God's love, grace, mercy, pardon,
as our earth which was yet to nourish;

God's water – as His love,
flowing now; now binding hearts together;
baptizing with His grace;

God's fire – that warms, consumes,
shines as the beauty of His blessing;
a light so bright, we cannot see His form..

What then, would you say
of God's own air? That holy spirit,
that blows His grace as blow it will;
breathes through His boundless space
upon the souls in their own upper air;

And what then of God's fifth element –
the ether, humming His vibrations?
what of the sound of God?
what may we listen to, or sound, of Him?

The upper room
of house, of soul;
a rushing, mighty wind
whose sound blew through their lives
with many voices; tongues of flame
around their heads;
and as much spirit, love, and grace,
and as much nourishment and daily bread
as man to man;
as soul to soul;
as godself to godself;

perhaps, as John said,
remembering that Pentecost -

one word.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The God Who Talks To Children

Every child has known God:
not a God of names, or shapes;
not a God of do's and don'ts;
not a God of alarming things;

but God who's with you all the time,
can be talked with, silently,
because He understands all that you do,
knows just why you do it,
knows that you're really always good,
but somehow do these other things;
you know that you and He are just so close,
that He's always on your side;

And if He doesn't explain to you
why He seems to go away somewhere
when you are seven or so –
maybe He thinks that it's the time
for a game of hide-and-seek
between friends?

*

(extrapolated from Hafiz' 'The God who only knows four words')

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Good

Even before she held you tight to her
and murmured softly, isn't that just good? —

before you learned to hear, and speak, and spell
and comprehend the concept of the Good —

your soul already hungered for the Good it loves,
never to be quenched in its desire;

as your beloved cat, who in the day
manipulates affection, but at night

becomes a ruthless predator to feed its catness;
so your clever, cunning, hungry, godly soul;

even when your adolescent heart falls flat
at beauty's vision in a human form

soul whispers (unattended to) : now here's the truth:
that even beauty's borrowed and must be refreshed..

so soul may take a lifetime, till the mind
whose aid it seeks to find itself the Good

arrives; and sighs a lifetime's sigh; and rests;
and soul, which knows no failure, place, or time,
shines out to prove it never went away;
nor shall, nor can; her elsewhere light, our day.

*

[From Plotinus, Ennead VI 7,31,17-31]

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Guru Is Not Other: A Metaphysical Proposition

It was his distance, that at first brought awe:
so great, so perfect, so ideal.. so far...
so distance humbles, brings humility;
the beauty of his feet, on earth we share;

and then, as if upon a flat-race turf,
the barriers built.. as if there long ago;
he, further over hedge and gate and brook;
and I, but wilful weakness, wailing `woe'..

until at last I sought him as a friend;
to meet within the heart we truly share;
surrendered distance, consciousness, and time:
asked nothing; difference thrown into the air;

I care not now, for pronouns `he' and `me';
his eye, my I; ourselves one self to be.

*

Dedicated to the one who asked.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Guy In The Photograph

Out of the old tin frame
the 1944, I guess, photo, shines
a carefree smile from the 15-year-old
caught on a hillside in the summer air
in pure happiness..or so it images..

It's the only photo from the album
that I like to have around; I look at it
and marvel that I ever looked like that
for more than one unguarded moment..

Is the story of my childhood that I tell myself,
the agonies of growing up, the uncertainties,
the discovery that parents are not perfect...
the not knowing who one really is...or might be...
all that, a fiction, or a fraction of the truth?

From time to time, I glance at it,
(as my parents must have done,
with all the thoughts that I'll now never know) :
accept its mute challenge of beauty, goodness, truth...
he's expecting all that life may offer;
this is the guy I must keep faith with...
what else is there to say?

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Harvest Of The Mind

Consider for a while,
deeper mind as agriculture:

garnered seeds at rightful time –
deeds as seeds –
surrendered to the wisdom of the earth
which contains the wisdom
of all other elements:

surrendered to the faith in nature,
hope of harvest;

in the meantime, nought to do
but pray and praise and cultivate
that inner earth; care
for next year's seeding field;

repair the fences of discrimination; trim
the hedges, spinneys, copses,
where free nature of herself displays
so beautifully, that which is.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Heart's Light

Somehow, the words of Hesychius
have reached us after more than a thousand years
and from a desert place, Mount Sinai;
where he was famed for 'breathing Jesus'
(there's something in me says,
that's quieter than the pulpit..)
and thus, talked little..

but he said (and this they wrote down,
preserved, passed on, quoted, marvelled,
sought to practise; succeeded.. or ever, failed? ...

'One who watches carefully over the heart
will quickly see, how the heart
of its own nature, is emitting light'...

and I'm sad; with that sweet sadness
when you hear of a beauty that
you didn't know existed;
wondering, if one day...
or every day.. and how long
it would take, and whether
you, or I, would ever have
the strengths, whatever they might be,
to attain that state...

and how it must have been,
when word got round, and others watched
their heart, his monastery glowed
like a family of fireflies in the dusk,
as cool, as bright, as love bestowed
without the asking..

Tomorrow, you may see me in the street,
walking a little more slowly than the usual;
rapt in a wordless thought,
discreetly glancing at the passers-by;
beyond the judging failure or success,
treasuring a sweet silver gift,

a cool, new beauty promised.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Hinterland

Poems have a hinterland.

They come from a mind
that's left behind, a family,
a tribe, a nation,
in the dense equatorial forests of the human heart;
yet in its backpack, precious souvenirs..

has trekked through swamps and uplands,
dangers, adventures, pleasures,
then the scorching arid desert sands,
and there in front one day,
the matter-of-fact sea, lapping
with the lazy always-there...

and leaning down, place nonchalantly
the poem now a paper boat,
into that glittering, faithless blue,
launched to tide and wind;
should you have put it in some green bottle,
you who think it's precious,
with a name, address, so that they know
how far it's travelled...?
Somehow, that matters little in this present moment,
as the poem's past prepares to meet its future self;

Yet, you watch it, silent, 'til it disappears;
how close, to children, is horizon's curve.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Human Comedy

They laughed and smiled
when they conceived you -

and maybe God did too;

you laughed and smiled
when you were born -

what happened?

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Inner Magnet Sings Like Flower To Bee, Like Bee To Flower

The inner magnet sings
like flower to bee; like bee to flower -

Some traditions say, that
we all have an inner sound; which
we can train; or can leave it be..
as gold for Midas; Midas, so, for gold;

and this, it's said, calls pupil to their teacher;
teacher to their pupil; it is
that yearning to know more
that draws the two to unity;

and so the holy men
show no surprise to see you there
(unsure, nonplussed, and wondering..)
at their holy feet which are not theirs..
holy chicken, holy egg...

so here I sit, pen down, and silent, still,
loving this idea; asking nothing;
treasuring, now, this sound
I cannot hear as yet;
and yet, may be as loud
as pindropp silence in the heart:
the lovely sound
of listening itself.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Lake Of Metaphor

and perhaps I came to poetry too late
to dive, a slimmish youth,
innocent as youth was or is
into the rich waters of the lake of metaphor
fed distantly by mountain springs,
welcoming in its wateriness,
chilling too like a demand for respect,
welcoming and chilling as a life;
a few strokes and already the green bank
and pile of crumpled clothes discarded
quickly distant, and here
in the middle of the lake, the sky
has opened out as if it were
some rival to a mountain-top

and the hands press against
the resistances of language, the palms
flat as between praise and surrender,
cleaving a passage to the depth
and then the shore of metaphor; and
emerging, the sunlight
catching the sparkling water droplets,
the skin shivering but invigorated,
the mind full of life
like a poem rich in metaphor.

Older now,
waiting as in the paintings of Saint Jerome
at his desk walled in by books,
pen poised, eyes uplifted,
spirit, rich, yet
mind not full, but waiting
for the grace of metaphor
like the brushing of a white dove's wing

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Listening One

The Listening One

Does he, did he, know, what he contributed
to the truth of what was spoken?

Towards the back seats of the lecture room,
this tidy, slim, quiet, dark-complexioned youth
listened with unwavering attention;

so much in the moment, his mind, so visibly,
claiming nothing; receiving all that there was to receive;
contributing, all that an audience can:

under his so steady listening,
I could not lie, blur, dodge; be anything
but dedicated to the truth;
from his attention, through my own,
he gave the audience more than I prepared.

I wonder if he knows the gift he's shaped.
How many others has he blessed thus, with himself?

The Hindus have a name for him:
the Southward Facing, and the Formless One;
the Self as youth who teaches elders by his silence.

You may have met him, mortal, once or twice;
I wonder if he knows his priceless gift?

*

[A long-delayed debt of gratitude never since forgotten.]

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Lotus In The Heart

How many centuries of centuries and trust
did it take the lotus
to take that crazy jump
from the known earth to unknown laws of water –

to learn how to feed itself, to blossom,
to float on the water
without the water dampening its trusting, open petals?

That same love that taught it all these things
may teach that lotus in my heart
over centuries of centuries
or in one crazy, trusting jump.

*

[leaning on Kabir's 'jis se rahani apar jagat men']

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Mind's Polarities

It's said – and so it seems to be –
that when the individual mind
emerges from that place where mind
rests, perfect, and in unity with all things to be known –
in that place, which is; within us, and without us:

that in that moment, as the mind expands,
and as its sphere within expands to match that sphere without,
polarities arise; such axis as may join them
to lie hidden and forgot; instead we see
all as remotenesses, that grow ever more the farther;

and then – the awful nature of the human lie –
name them 'opposites'... and in that step,
a further one, 'duality'...

and so, condemn ourselves to fruitless life
where, across the vast mind's sphere,
sadness – let's say – sees, far off, that pure happiness -
too far, too far, to be within its reach...
and happiness, seeing far off, sadness, seeks in pleasure
to keep its distance...and so, the balance swings,
the world wags, and the mind knows only restlessness...

and knows, desire... how we forget,
we could not know desire, but that we knew
what desire desires; what's missing in our world;
sadness, knowing the happiness; what would sadness be
without its knowing, in full, its happiness? ..

if we but saw desire as grace; looked at it with clear eye;
we might see, lurking there within,
beyond the warnings of its waywardness,
that holy thing that yearns always for onefulness...

and as we have departed,
then by grace, so we return;
find by that third perfect point;
that eye that sees, from its eternal home,

duality to resolve in unity..
and all absolved, we're absolute..

*

this, by mine own hand... writ
in a deep yearning sadness;
sadness that would fain convince itself
that happiness, this morning, is too distant; so, then,
to abide in sorrowed sadness...

and yet, there are strange joys,
where sadness meets all other things, in duty and in law;
speaks of all things in some strange disguise;
finds its heart, where heart it never sought;

and so, if words may do
what words should do, I name this poem's end
its true beginning: name it now,
dedicating it, to truth and joy, and to myself:
A Poem in Praise of Happiness.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Moral Rights

'The moral rights of the author
have been asserted'... that, I'm told,
is what I should say when I write
anything for publication here; even before
I say anything..

It means, I guess, the more, the less..
than 'Copyright' which normally
gets printed just above it;
which just means, don't copy this;

whereas 'moral rights' convey
so much more...
suggesting that I even possess morality;
which, considering my wild, undisciplined
former life, you might well question..

but note, I merely 'assert' them;
feel free to challenge them (you note that 'rights'
are plural; plenty lawyer's fees there
to say, well maybe this, not that...

and you're free (your defending counsel may assert)
to copy my poem and put your own name to it;
since truth can be in no man's sole possession,
and my poem, bless its metered tropes,
speaks naught but the truth..

though now I mention 'truth', I don't recall
that phrase about the moral rights
upon the title-page of, let's say,
the Gospels; Books of Moses; Qu'ran; Upanishads;
those guys on whom we've so long depended
to tell us what morality should be..

so please understand, that when I 'assert',
it's more for my self-image than for yours;
makes me feel good; I must be
a serious author, if (in the subtext, scholars footnote)

the moral underpinning may be detected..

and that said – now to the poem.. Except
now I've forgotten what I was going to say..

Perhaps that, too, is a moral issue; but
I have the right to remain silent..
even if I'm up on this morality charge..

my defence is, that my Muse,
hearing the word 'morality',
flees my company. 'Twas ever so.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Morning Scent Of Rosemary

'Rosemary – that's for remembrance..'

Can you smell it now?
that tough yet choosy herb,
giving of itself;

remembrance, perhaps, for Northern Europeans,
of that package tour to Crete:
rising early, that first morning,
the body clock not quite adjusted,

the sun already warming mountain-sides
before it reaches down into the valley;

already, the intoxicating scent of wild herbs
rolling slowly down the hillside, telling you,
this, this, could be paradise..

below you, blue morning sea
beyond white walls of huddled houses..
still in the air, the hint of night-time's blessed dew..

rosemary: did you think it named
after the fragrance of Mary's own humility,
mingling with the scent of manger hay?
mingling with the sweetness of that day?

no – 'ros marinus', dew of the ocean,
is the meaning of its name..
though, how well it suits her memory..

suits, too, that remembered Cretan morning;
for before the Romans, Indians used those words;
the dew, humidity, rather than humility;
marine, cognate with the words
for the clear, pure light of sun on sea...

that Cretan morning:
the rosemaried fragrance of remembrance;

sunshine and white walls adoring one another;
sky and sea, two shades of Maryblue.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Necessity Of Luxury

and what at some other time
I'd call a luxury – or others would –

it's not, it's – oh – rightness -
used rightly...

like now, aslant in the reclining chair,
the patio door open just enough
to bring air into the room,

March air which feels like the most
precious commodity, substance, gift, grace,
where, how, could I say;

and the book of poetry held loosely,
glanced at occasionally;

some phrases, some words, of Tom's
growing timelessly, flowering,
seeding a generosity of new poems
too formless to call mine

but the warmth of his heart
makes mine to expand, and

boundless now; the mind too, boundless;
a boundlessness of poetry;
then, now, always; so that

in this moment, heart, mind, poetry, boundless,
there's complete liberation;
beyond luxury, beyond necessity

and poems may or may not be,
for being's all...

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Otherness

Oh the dark, dark otherness of others!
that brings on, such sadness, such despair...
deep, vast chasm in the heart...

Ah the shining otherness of others!
that brings on, such loving to be one...
the heart heals what the heart divides.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Place Between

Where and how to find immortal soul;
or self; eternal witness; eye of God;
or place, or space, within the eager heart
where All, or One, may hide – or may await?
So where to find first clue; or some frayed end
of golden thread that leads to golden light?

Not in the wrinkled brow... but in the simplest things
the greatest secrets wait, as we are told;
in the magic land that's called Between:

Between the end of one thought, and the next,
as it is formed within the mind – the briefest space
where nothing but the witness of our self
rests, perfect, pure, complete, within itself;
inviting us to join that rest for just as long
as we enjoy this satisfaction
of the presence of ourself;

And if that taste of presence pleases -
then, between each word we hear or speak,
we'll find the silence of ourself; and find
how each word comes from silence, and returns;
and as we relish and besport in that great space,
from greater silence, greater words may come..

There is no limit to that world, Between:
we'll find it more and more, within all things,
beyond all things; it is the music of our life
which sings its song through thought and speech and act;
a music in a boundless space, so vast
that we may meet our greater self – at last!

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Place Beyond Between

Not named as joy;
not named as happiness..

at the end of a thought
the eyes lifted; then,

only the senses;
only the senses' action seen;

only the endless beauty
of the beautiful unnamed;

only the glory of the food
of the senses unattached;

where is the mind
in this perfect satisfaction?

who needs to name this blessing,
blithe? or to name it, bliss?

beyond a name;
yet known.

*

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Poet

Favourite pencil
warm
from waiting

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Poet's Significant Other - For Mary And Todd

On the shelf above the crackling fire,
the day's work over, shadows swaying and flickering
across the room, in the firelight's glow;
here is love abiding

On the shelf above the crackling fire
a few slim books, some of them poetry, some of them signed;
open them and the world spills out
tumbles laughing and crying, shouting
like children home from school with stories;
like grandparents reminiscing over photos with a smile;
like the last of the night's pillow talk
one already eyes closed, the other treasuring thought

On the shelf above the crackling fire
two bookends hold the books in place
pressing lightly against each other
as two lovers walking through a door, a gate, from here to there
one bookend's image we know well
familiar to us from the books

How little we know, of that other bookend
without which, without whom,
there might not be these books, lightly pressing
on the shelf above love's glow

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Praisers

You might not spot them in a crowd –
but for that certain stillness of the self-contained:

in conversation, not until some detail
of an action, person, or a deed
sparks their mind; then from their heart -
not, pours – but rather, in a fine, fine stream
of exquisite precision, flows - their praise:

as if their whole self gives itself to you
in some new form of thought, in which
there is no longer, they and you –
you are united in exalted praise;

and their eye shines – inviting you to join
a world above: perhaps they sum the virtue
of a person, action, deed; and yet,
while they are speaking, praise is seated there
above the virtues; they are prophets, seers,
visionaries of that which in our praise, we are..

and perhaps, you try to join them in your speech –
how awkwardly praise sits upon your tongue!
you, who prided so yourself, a balanced judge
of all your fellow humans...find yourself
now at some sad and puny tongue-tied loss..

so, practise, in ourselves, a year or two –
(there's silent praise – the eye gives that away...)
and praise the praiseful in their mighty work:
another world awaits: where we become
the prophets of ourselves in timeless life.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Presence Of The Truly Great

Yes yes.. I've not forgotten that:
the presence of the great –

when destiny has brought you
to their presence; destiny
brought them, here, now, to you;

how in their presence, duality itself
is magnified: do your palms slightly sweat?

while unity is merely apprehended
as the world grows before your eyes?

Great crooks too – who believe
that the world, the oystered pearl, is theirs;

and those great souls: whose gift
it is, to know the world, and tell;

they show themselves; and you know that
you're graced – but by the grace which, as they show,

is always there; is always here; and humbled by this show,
in surfeit of this taste of grace, then quietly you leave..

And they recede – or do they? – to
the sternest test: the memory:
a photograph, or record of their voice..

Now: look upon their image, but without regret;
for this, your sternest test; the duty of true unity:

they come to life again; again in you;
you carry them to show the world anew.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Quality Of Mercy (Conditions Apply)

The quality of mercy,
Portia declared,

the quality of mercy is
suspended during the present conflict

the quality of mercy is
not the business of a Minister of Justice

the quality of mercy is
not a matter of individual conscience

the quality of mercy is
too subtle for public discussion
or law

the quality of mercy is
only for Shakespeare and stuff

the quality of mercy is
less stimulating than revenge

the quality of mercy is
no business of yours

the quality of mercy is
no concern of religious authorities
who should stay silent

the quality of mercy is
an outdated concept

the quality of mercy is
nothing to do with forgiveness
or circumstantial evidence
or the remission of sins

the quality of mercy is
no longer a matter of pride

the quality of mercy is
no longer a mark of humanity

the quality of mercy
would be OK if Obama said so

the quality of mercy
is one hell of a hot potato
cooked in oil

the quality of mercy
droppeth as the gentle
dew from heaven
upon a broken fuselage

and it is too much
or too little
for our understanding.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Riches Of The Self

Strange, to think that each of us
is filled to overflowing
with a treasure house of jewels;
sparkling when they're known;
beyond price, beyond touch,
beyond sight – yet not beyond
the sensing in one other self..

filled, and yet doubting, towards, even, denying..
awaiting - perhaps not ardently enough? -
the moment when they're called
to show themselves; the almost
(but not quite...) unimaginable

riches of the self..

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Salesman

The salesman – blue eyes
helped him get the job I guess;
what's behind them?

I'm no longer host in my own house:
he's cast me as opponent, victim

whom he will bully into gratitude.
He spreads his brochures on the table.

When he's gone, I feel dirty,
battle-worn; better phone

the man around the corner for a so-so job;
at least we know each other.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Searchlight

How George Herbert would have loved this word
for all the images it lights in mind!

The gloried sun of soul, no added light
needs, in unshadowed light of reason's day;

but in the murky night of ignorance –
then reason's other task, the probing beam
upon the dark, cruel cobweb-cornered mind
may shine; and as it clears the willing mind,
the sharper (and more seeming painful) those
last vestiges of age-old, flying things
that lurk and creep in coward-cov'ring dark!

A stormy sea needs most a light-house brave:
for age-old things resent the searchlight's beam;
but when the night, and that unknowing's cloud
yield to the eastward flush of dawn – how bright
the daylight shines, for those who watch all night!

And so, George Herbert, as you spoke the word -
in all things seen; for Whom, all done: our Lord.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Secret Of The Universe

I put the teacup down,
looked up from my book;

and whatever calls the eye
then called to me:

a cobalt blue glass jar
in front of a Chinese yellow vase

that seemed to hold between them
the secret of the universe..

the mind whispered, that's just not true..
it couldn't be that simple..

I dared to look again: now
it did not matter whether it were
the secret of the universe or not... for

it was enough. It is enough.

and there, perhaps,
and that, perhaps...

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Song Of Forever, The Dance Of Now

Before the world began... did our Creator
contemplate the way it should begin?
the sweetest way to animate and order
all this glorious whole contains within?

The Hindus have no doubt: a sound, a dance,
were our beginning; every molecule
of Shiva's body dances to the song;
his soul the music of eternal rule:

so should we dance our way through mortal life,
eternal music in our inner ear;
so make our life a flowing song, a flight
that sings immortal ether into air;

a sound, a dance, a rhythm; harmony;
from which soars each soul's unique poetry..

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Taj Mahal Of The Still Mind

How I suspect 'busy' people...

Who said that spirituality
has anything to do with busyness..?

They turn enthusiasm into 'duty';
turn duty into guilt...

How I love those people
who always have time for anyone..

they are like swans:
serenity above; activity below;

never busy; always active;
floating white, serene, unruffled,
like swans; like lotus flowers;
like love.

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Tale Of Emma Chissett - For Dan Dan The Betcha Man

Emma Chissett's
missed out lunch;
she's suffering
a credit crunch;

Emma Chissett
checks out who
today is offering
three-for-two;

Emma checks
the cornbeef tins
in those illegal
'sell by' bins;

finds 'eat by' dates
passed (hard to see.):
mentions this;
and gets them free;

Emma's icebox
shelves for meat
holds tougher cuts:
chew first, then eat..

Emma's sharp eye
spots bruised fruit;
negotiates
a price to suit;

Emma does
these shops a good turn:
avoids some angry
customer return;

she's there before
every Church bazaar:

spots the mispriced
from afar;

turns the expensive
fashion gown
to show the tear or stain;
brings the price right down;

and woe betide
a market stall:
'emmachissett? '..
and prices fall..

Emma Chissett, with
her sharp-eyed corncrake voice,
weather-hen of our economy;
true star of Market Choice..

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Teacher

I wish I'd known him better.
But our respect for him was such
that you only spoke to him
when you needed to.
In a way, that was to know him truly.

You wouldn't notice him, passing him
in a crowd; and yet, two paces on,
and you'd feel you had just passed
someone who walked in their own space
and left space itself quite unaffected.

To meet him, in the corridor, say,
early in the morning, was - what? -
awesome, refreshing, vitalising:
there was a sense that overnight,
he'd dived into some deep ocean
of sheer bliss; and emerged
like a morning seashore,
washed with freshness,
full of deep thought,
and his eyes
full of an understanding kindness
which stayed with you all the day.

What was extraordinary – of the many
things about this gloriously ordinary man -
was that although no-one ever saw him
looking at his watch, he was always
in the right place, and at just the right time,
yet never in a hurry – almost as if
he had some satellite navigation system built in.
And he always looked so genuinely pleased to be
just where he was. I don't think his facial muscles
knew how to pretend..

And so this spread to all of us around him –
and of course, he never put this into words;
yet love surrounded him; and we just loved

to work with him. Though there were some, new to him,
who could barely handle such goodness
when they met it – wanted to challenge it,
find some reason to pick holes
in such perfection, although it was
unboasted. But these, he seemed
to know instinctively, and why they were
just as they were; one day, he and they
would be involved in some unusual and difficult situation –
even on occasion, dangerous -
and they'd be friends with him for life.

It was said by those who had known him well in earlier years
that extraordinary and miraculous things
happened to him – visions, angels, future things revealed,
revelations of some law beyond all laws;
we never talked of this; the story was
that when one older friend had questioned him of this,
he'd said, he always knew it would in time
be what he needed to pass on to others.
And there the matter rested.

I'd say, for me, for life
he redefined the nature of true love.

for S.S.

Michael Shepherd

!! The Wasted Landing - Thoughts From An Airport Strike

In the hour of our departure O Lord
In our beginning is our end
To depart is to arrive yet not to arrive
at the same hour and place
in some other time zone
and in our departing is our arrival
and to arrive is to depart from where we have not been
and to depart is to arrive at where we will not go

into the departure hall from where we did not depart
into the arrival hall where we did not arrive
and the end of all our departures is our arrival
that we may arrive at where we did not go
and depart from where we have not been.

now and in the hour of our departure O Lord

I Tiresias have foresuffered all
on this self-same divan, or tired banquette
in the departure hall from where we have not gone,
in the arrival hall where we have not arrived,
and all our arrivings are departures
and all our departures are arrivings
departing from where we have not been,
arriving at where we will not go

the sun shines bleakly through the window panes.
into the planes the trim staff come and go,
laundered into skies we cannot breathe.
'All flights are cancelled';
'Sorry Sir, this ticket is not valid for this flight'.

I Icarus have suffered thus
in Greece, in Rhodes, on all connecting flights,
in Delphi where I was not warned,
in Cumae where I could not go.
Passport Control. Do Not Pass This Point.

Too hot the sun of Greece that day,
the sun I shall not see.
'Arrival Delayed'. 'Departure Delayed'

A cold coming we had of it:
the baggage heavy, and the escalator steep,
the information scanty and the children fractious,
and the people. Oh the people.

Cans. Packets. Yesterday's papers from yesterday's travellers.
Sandwiches we have not eaten.
Tread softly for you tread on my icecream.

Now and in the hour of our departure Lord

Michael Shepherd

!! The Wasted Landing. Thoughts From An Airport In Disarray.

In the hour of our departure O Lord

In our beginning is our end

To depart is to arrive yet not to arrive
at the same hour and place
in some other time zone
and in our departing is our arrival
and to arrive is to depart from where we have not been
and to depart is to arrive at where we will not go

into the departure hall from where we did not depart
into the arrival hall where we did not arrive
and the end of all our departures is our arrival
that we may arrive at where we did not go
and depart from where we have not been.

now and in the hour of our departure Lord

I Tiresias have foresuffered all
on this self-same divan, or tired banquette
in the departure hall from where we have not departed,
in the arrival hall where we have not arrived,
and all our arrivings are departures
and all our departures are arrivings
departing from where we have not been,
arriving at where we will not go

the sun shines bleakly through the window panes.
into the planes the trim staff come and go,
(they stay at Novotel Michelangelo) ,
laundered into skies we cannot breathe.
'All flights are cancelled';
'Sorry Sir, this ticket is not valid for this flight'.

I Icarus have suffered thus
in Greece, in Rhodes, on all connecting flights,

in Delphi where I was not warned,
in Cumae where I could not go.
Passport Control. Do Not Pass This Point.

Too hot the sun of Greece that day,
the sun I shall not see.
'Arrival Delayed'. 'Flight Cancelled'

A cold coming we had of it:
the baggage heavy, and the escalator steep,
the information scanty and the children fractious,
and the people. Oh the people.

Cans. Packets. Yesterday's papers from yesterday's travellers.
Sandwiches they have not eaten.
Tread softly for you tread on my icecream.

Now and in the hour of our departure Lord

*

(re-edited)

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Wisdom Of A Strifetime

Who is grateful for a long life
when that life gets just too long?

meanwhile, while
I can still cross my fingers without help..

there are things that it's taken
a whole strifetime for me to learn...

such as, cake tins work best upside-down;
and, praise is quite the best revenge...

Michael Shepherd

! ! The Young Poet

Poetry was something else

written by others

somewhere else

and came from

somewhere else

but the poetry

which he did not know

called one day

in a language he did not know

so he put down words on paper

and threw the paper away

but the words did not go away

and he did not know what poetry should do

until he wrote the words

which told him

what poetry could do

for only poetry can teach you poetry

*

Gertrude Stein stood behind me while I wrote this.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Their Presence In Their Absence

'Oh, how I miss her...; and him...; and him; and her...'
a pause; a sadness; a moist eye; a tear...
...and as you age, the list grows longer
until you wonder why you're not
already there on it yourself...

Oh, but think again... you miss them so, just
because you have them in your mind, so clear...
they could almost be here now, right beside you...
but they aren't...yet better...
they're there within that greater you...

you respected them; admired; listened to their every word;
loved them; felt them forever a precious part of you...
so now, they live in you; your presence
is their presence: and

you opened wide the pearly gates for them;
you waved them through the judgment day;
welcomed them with choirs of angels; even
thrust a ready coin into the boatman's hand
who took them to that dark and part forgetting land
from which, they may return more glorious...

you are a radiant heaven of their life; they live
eternal in your mind, your memory, your heart;
when people see you, greet you, they are meeting
more than that familiar you; they meet the presence of
a great company of those who've filled your life -
and now, you're filled with them...

listen! hear them call to you,
not to imprison them in the past,
but live, now, here, with you; live again
in the radiance of the self you share...

call to mind this glorious company
not on the other side, but at your side...

why, if this were physical, you'd have burst by now...
instead – see how you shine!

Michael Shepherd

! ! These Three

Faith; hope; and loving-kindness;
these three surpass all worldly understanding:

all these await in human nature
as inclinations that are natural;
to be awakened by the grace
that ever waits within us:

as these arise, faith takes the precedence;
then follows, hope; itself precedes
the love, the charity, the loving-kindness;

yet if alas, disorder, dissolution intervene,
first, love is lost; then hope;
and last of all goes faith;

yet, when these come into their perfection,
greatest of all these, is love;

hope and faith are then the charity
which love may shower on the world around
circle on circle as the gentle rain from heaven.

*

[leaning on the writings of Josef Pieper]

Michael Shepherd

! ! This Charm Thing

There are guys who think they have charm
and are so confidently wrong that
the molecules in our stomach grate together
as we watch them get away with it

and those who don't know they have it
and are deservedly babe-magnets
and what makes you think I envy them

and those who know they have it
but behave like gentlemen
so we try to like them

and those who so successfully
have it and overuse it that
we call upon the Fates and Furies
saying hey did you see that guy over there

you, I think, Billy Collins
know you have it but
don't rate it as important
as writing poetry, so

one moment, it's a one-liner
waiting for the full second house;

another, taking the short cab ride
from the Algonquin to the New Yorker
smiling secretly but
purely from the pleasure of sharing itself;

or sometimes, it's chiselled perfectly
on a fragment of smooth white marble
lifted out of the Aegean Sea
which sparkles timelessly
because that's how it is

Michael Shepherd

! ! This Door... (To The One Who Listened)

Take the deepest breath before
you open this immortal door:

here, you will first receive
what you think you want the most:

if it's to enhance your self-image,
that will be arranged;

if you want to tell others
what it's all about; even bully them;
there's a place for you;

if you want to come along to prove
that you knew it all already,
fine.. come in; and later, go...

if you want to prove your life
to have been ruined by others and
it never was your fault –
that can be arranged;

or if you want to be just a little wiser;
or life to be a little easier;
you'll love it here;

but this is the house to bless you with
two unsuspected further wishes:

when you have tasted
what you thought you wanted
you are of course, free to leave;

but if that which you thought you wanted
turns to ashes in your mouth,
you may wish – and whoosh! it's gone;

and then there comes the third wish...:
so deep in you that only now

you knew it to have been always there;

here you will find yourself
to be yourself;

so stand here on the pavement; pause;
these are not wood, but golden doors.

Michael Shepherd

! ! This Is A Shouting Poem

This is a SHOUTING poem.
Not a gentle wildflower poem
not a whispering-of-love poem
A SHOUTING POEM.

This is a POSTER poem.
Not a subtly persuading poem.
not a think-about-it poem
A POSTER POEM

This is a HARD OF HEARING poem.
What?
I said a HARD OF HEARING POEM

This is a LOST SPECTACLES poem
to test your sight.
No no not LAST TESTICLES
NO TRY THE NEXT LINE -
A LOST SPECTACLES POEM

This is a HAVE YOU SEEN MY? poem.
I know I put it down somewhere.
Are you sure you haven't seen it?
Oh no, you didn't use it for THAT...?
Why are you laughing it's not funny.
I hadn't even finished it...

This is an ACROSS THE ROOM poem.
Read it while you're in bed
watching TV
doing the ironing
reading the newspapers
putting the new wallpaper up
combing the cat
having a bath
washing the car
talking to the neighbours
gardening
this is an ACROSS THE ROOM POEM

This is a BLOWN ACROSS THE STREET POEM
no need to run after it
and pick it up
just watch it blow
maybe wonder
if you missed anything

Michael Shepherd

! ! This Life Is 'On Approval'

Is 'approve' another word for 'love'?
So that, when we say 'I love you!' there's the sense,
'It's good – I'm glad – that you are in this world! –
that you exist!' – so that, to love, becomes
an act of will; creative affirmation?

The sense of holiness; and music; sunlight; lemon curd –
from these, 'approval' stretches out a list
that may be boundless, as it sings them into praise;

approving even dreams into reality:
as if to kneel, self to self, with God
and, eye to eye, both say, 'I'm glad that you exist..'

*

[leaning gratefully on the writings of Josef Pieper]

Michael Shepherd

! ! This One For Hanque With Thanks

All around the world,
poems are talking among themselves
when the books are shut,
when the computers are switched off,
when old-fashioned poets put down
chewed pencils, sucked ballpens,
lips a little stained with the flavour
of ink that's washable or permanent;

poems talking among themselves
in that language that poems understand,
that poets seek to write;
poems murmuring, complaining,
sometimes shouting desperately,

who are these people who
have dared to speak our language? What
is their right and reason? When
did they arise? Where
did they get their ideas? Why
do they even try? How
do they hope to improve on this? What
is a poet, anyway?

The tumult of their languages,
the babel of upraised voices
speaking, though, with that unutterable
beauty of that sound which can really act,
can change the world of change,
can touch the heart for lifetimes,
melts a heart of stone,
brings tears to eyes needful of tears,
opens clouds to blue sky and to sunlight,
watches angels as they ascend and descend,
speaks of, speaks,
the unknown, formless, eternal, ever present –

the tumult dies down; in the
silence and the stillness,

only the pure sound of sound itself; and

in that sound the absolution:
forgive them, O Muse of Poetry:
they know not what they do..
yet in their hearts, they know
what must be said.

The pain, exquisite;
found worthy; loved.

Michael Shepherd

! ! This Peach My Teacher

This peach
that I've just eaten,
been graced by,
been blessed by,
been taught by,
been transformed by...

it's as if some
Messenger of the Gods
had arrived, stopwatch in hand,
saying, everything holds in perfection
but a little moment -
as William Shakespeare noted:

so I'm going to arrange things so that
as the stopwatch ticks out
ten seconds to that moment,
you'll reach out your hand to the fruitbowl,
take it, feel its yielding softness under velvet skin,
cut it carefully twice through the poles,
once equatorially... and as it falls apart,
spear one segment; eat...

this peach
was full of what even Rilke
could say no more than, peachness..

it was a living proof of Plato:
its perfection taught me
where essence meets experience,
where actuality meets the ideal of peach;
where a singular perfection speaks of
all perfections; where perfection
leaves from perfection, naught else but perfect...

how could such a perfect thing
have been invented by one
who does not love? Who is not love?
This peach is love itself, and I the worshipper

must needs make of myself a living God
to whom to kneel, to offer praise and gratitude
for all perfection known..

this peach my teacher.

Michael Shepherd

! ! This Poem

This poem
is friendly:
see, it's wagging its tail,
it will follow you anywhere,
run off and come back,
a perfect companion;

this poem
loves fun:
you want to play dressing up,
it'll laugh and rush off to the attic,
the basement, the dressing-up basket;

this poem
is serious:
you want to be silent awhile,
rest your head on its shoulder,
it will wait for you in
sympathetic stillness;

this poem
is humble:
turn it over, write
a love poem on
the other side,
it will glow with your love;

this poem
is disposable:
write a few lines, be angry
with yourself, scrumple it up,
throw it on the pavement,
someone may pick it up,
someone may tutt and place it
carefully for recycling;

this poem
is an origami:
you can make any shape you like:

a paper boat on
the waves of destiny;

a ladder to reach to where
you always wanted that fruit;
a crown; a dunce's hat; a witch's conic;

this poem
is elastic:
a tablecloth for a picnic,
a sheet to cover two lovers,
a ground plan for a new world;

this poem
knows where
nothing meets something,
nowhere meets everywhere,
no time meets all time,
anyone meets everyone,

this poem
has a bright eye
whether you read it or not;

this poem
likes you though it
hasn't met you;

this poem
is impervious to scorn;
it knows who it is,
and where things begin and end.

Michael Shepherd

! ! This Poem (Says)

This poem
is friendly:
see, it's wagging its tail,
it will follow you anywhere,
run off and come back,
a perfect companion;

this poem
loves fun:
you want to play dressing up,
it'll laugh and rush off to the attic,
the basement, the dressing-up basket;

this poem
is serious:
you want to be silent awhile,
rest your head on its shoulder,
it will wait for you in
sympathetic stillness;

this poem
is humble:
turn it over, write
a love poem on
the other side,
it will glow with your love;

this poem
is disposable:
write a few lines, be angry
with yourself, scrumple it up,
throw it on the pavement,
someone may pick it up,
someone may tutt and place it
carefully for recycling;

this poem
is an origami:
you can make any shape you like:

a paper boat on
the waves of destiny;

a ladder to reach to where
you always wanted that fruit;
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has a bright eye
whether you read it or not;

this poem
likes you though it
hasn't met you;

this poem
is impervious to scorn;
it knows who it is,
and where things begin and end.

Michael Shepherd

! ! This Your Gift

She said that each one in the world
has a special talent: what we're better at,
than anybody else... so, it's a glorious gift,
- a glorious duty - to know, acknowledge, this;

but what happens, so she said,
is that we know this, and deny it;
but then if pressed somehow, we make
a condition for ourself: 'well, only if...'
and this - the devil in the detail - is a way
to lock our talent in; to keep the world without...

I said to her, an instance? and she said,
this man, he had a gift: to be always
in the rightest place, and at the rightest time;
but when this was revealed to him, he said,
OK but only if I can give up my job..
but it was his job, she said, enabled him
to manifest that talent...

you may not forget this poem;
this was a lady I shall not forget.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Those Birds

Those birds outside your window at dawn
singing all at once fit to bust –

did you know they migrate from Islam
in the fighting season?

They're all Sufis: they sleep all night
with the Beloved; and in the morning

they exchange the jokes they heard,
the pillow talk from the night before sleep;

then the blackbird and the thrush
weave these into stories which they sing

all day; then at night the nightingale
makes them all into one beautiful poem

about being intoxicated into song
by the wine of Shiraz; the rose-water wafers;

and how those who say
that one cannot be intoxicated

by the longing for the One
have proved themselves wrong

and proved the nightingale right
as you can know in yourself

when the nightingale sings of this
to the heart's light pulsing in the stars.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Those Twenty-First Century Bluues...

So it's morning start time at the office.
Or should be.
Red-eyed, those tell-tale diagonal ridges
from eyes across the cheeks..
we roll in late, proud, but exhausted..
our wrists flashing with
bling allied to timekeeping..
but even we ourselves don't care;
and sore did you say sore...

By now, judging from my emails,
just about every wage-earner in the East and West
sports a fake Bulgari, Patek Philippe, Gucci,
weighing down their wrist; and
who believes or cares when we say, we keep
the real one at home?

Ah yes, at home -
where our nights are longer
and more extended and
you know just what I mean..

and we'd love to go freelance but
where but the office
could we discreetly boast, show off
our new swinging thingies,
or our pert bouncers, or simply flash our wrist,
to all those who are now equipped with just the same
by consumerism's joyless games
and internet's gross joyless claims,
and money now, only confers
the same as his; the same as hers.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Three Of My Friends

Yes, it's a photo of the three of them –
it's not so often I can get them all together;
they're so much in demand...

This one's Rosa. She has something
quite unique: she's no great beauty, yet
she has that something which
we've given up trying to define:
let's say, it's, inner beauty...

her girl friends are devoted to her;
men can't keep away from her:
when you're with her, you feel yourself
to... shine? As if you too, are beautiful?
(Her 'girls' admit it; men,
they do not like to put a name to it...though
sometimes contemplate themselves her husband;
glow with imagined, noble pride;
then sigh, at their unworthiness;
can't wait to see her once again...)

Here's Cora.. I don't see her much,
she's in demand for every possible
committee or whatever... for
her innate goodness seems to grace,
to bless, bring harmony, to every
well-intentioned, sometimes rancorous,
committee that she sits on...often, chairs;
we sigh and say, what is it about her..?
She just brings out the best
in everybody... when you're with her,
you love yourself; you never doubt
that you, too, always have the good of all
at heart..

This one's Max. He'd be at his happiest
in the research lab, discoveries
uncovering themselves under his steady gaze
as if eager to be found...

yet such is his ability to pass on
that love of finding out,
he's constantly in demand to lecture and to teach;
his students, past and present, stand in awe,
yet love him for himself: when you talk to him,
he listens to your every word,
his eyes, shining all the while; as if
beyond the words you stumble out,
he hears – always and only – truth itself...
and for a while, you feel you share
his clarity of mind...

Yes, I treasure that photo in its silver frame;
it's so rarely that I get them all together;
but they themselves just love it when I do:
maybe you see it in the photo there?

For as I stood behind the camera, I saw,
there's such respect there, for each other;
as if they know they share
a something so incredible,
that it's a joy too absolute to name;
I breathed the word: humanity.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Three Of Them

Three of them.

Young; they've written prize-winning essays
about their life so far
and what they've had to deal with.

Their photos are attached.

They smile from minds and hearts
open to the whole wide world

as if they recognise you, too,
standing behind the camera,
the whole world looking over your shoulder,
you too, all of you,
as the self of self.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Thumbnails And Finger Ends

A book of learned scholarship,
open in my hands, at the first page...

and then I saw, to the right of it,
my thumb nail...and marvelled –

at its perfection, at its beauty,
and at my own ignorance –

which strangely, was all part
of that same beauteous perfection...

the thumbnail: curved, as a hollowed claw,
the curve I knew would give it added strength;

sitting as secure as any child of love,
within the folded mystery of skin and flesh;

three-coloured: pale rising moon
emerging from its secret nail-bed
as some goddess might appear;

then the subtle shades of rosy pink,
hinting at blood serving readily
the nail's demands;

finally, the top (long, shaped, as best to gouge
potato's eyes, and other kitchen tasks...) :

I looked at it, and marvelled:
the whole creation, conspiring to present
this perfect thing...

Fifty years and more ago, I wrote,
in those years when I despaired
of making sense of so-called 'adult' world,

sitting at the desk, to find myself
before setting off to earn my daily bread,

I wrote – in lines that never quite linked up
their visioned moments into complete poems,

on white and yearning pages like a life unwrit:
'we know not our own finger ends...'

The wrinkled thumb and finger – they have lasted;
the holy mystery - praise God - remains.

Michael Shepherd

! ! To A Fellow Poet

What can I give you –
for only giving can I think of,
in this dark season of the year
which needs no festive name, to name the need...

this dark season, when hearts yearn
for all that's bright, and warm, and love..
what can I give you, at this time?

I give you – music... music, heard
outside the heart's dark winter door
to say, that all's not lost; all's never lost;
there's music still and always, through the door...
you'll hear, and know yourself to be that all...

I give you – laughter... laughter, on the face
of strangers, as you open that dark door;
strangers who laughing turn to you
and share their laughter and a proffered hand;
a room of laughter shared with you, illusions laughed away...

As poet gives to poet, these I give you;
they are – but poetry;
as poetry, may live.

*

[occasioned by discussion of 'the three persons' in poetry:
the confessional poetry of 'I';
the poetry that speaks and gives to 'you';
and the poetry of he, she, it, they – of universal truth..]

Michael Shepherd

!! To A Japanese Poet

Haiku's wet ink
shines;
a warm heart

Michael Shepherd

!! To A Much Loved Poet

You know how people who are
really serious – that's, not those
who pretend to be serious, or
those who are paid to be serious –
pretend to be not so serious?

And you know how people who are
really lonely – that's not those
who want sympathy, oh no, or
those who want to enjoy being lonely –
pretend to be not so lonely?

So she never quite believed,
for obvious reasons,
just how much she was loved
by all her readers:

perhaps and I only say perhaps
she might have feared to lose
that painful treasure
that we wanted to love away and
which made us love her
so much and even more.

Michael Shepherd

! ! To A New-Born Poem

The midwife's tidying up
with professional detachment

and there you are; wrinkled; pink
with a glow that no man ever made;

and I, a part of you for ever, yet
knowing, now, you're you...

one day in a little time
I'll take you for your first High Street outing
in the pram or baby buggy;

trying to pretend you're someone else's...
not one I'd fight my life for..

pausing to allow some friendly soul
to glance permission to have a peep;

smile; glow; say a few kind words;

then after that first stranger's looked at you,
I'll look at you myself; to see

if you look different, or look differently at me
now someone else has met you.

Sometimes, you are more beautiful,
more full of life, more independent and more you;

as if your path through life had taken
its first step away from me; and yet

along with pride, there's quiet, sweet relief:
you'll make it on your own.

But still, I touch your pillow, smooth your cover,
look at you for some reassurance

that we both know where poetry may go;
and you – you laugh, and kick the world away.

Michael Shepherd

! ! To Buson

The great temple bell
and small butterfly asleep
may both be surprised.

Michael Shepherd

! ! To Elizabeth Bishop

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting.

If this were a novel
by, say, Jack London,
something would be about to happen:
time would pass, events move on,
dramas unfold; we might see this old man again,
or we might not.

Instead, we share a moment outside time,
share our being – the old man;
Elizabeth, whose grandfather was his friend;
ourselves; knowing that, the more real this moment,
how frail our knowledge: historical, perhaps,
yet sharper, crueller, cold as this evening,
salty sharp as the encrusted herring barrels,
fluid, powered, secret, as this sultry silver water
lapping at the quay;
here, flowing, flown.

Michael Shepherd

! ! To Friedrich Holderlin, Poet

Here in this river valley below the Alps
which mimic high Olympus' watching spirit,
everyone's a silent poet of nature:
lakes; rivers; green fields; steeper goatfoot pastures;
forests; bare gaunt rocks and snow;

and the poetry of seasons of the year.
Once to see the seasons through, is to be
a little nearer God; to know
how gods measure out the earth.

Here inside the wooden room,
the measures, not so clear:
measured out by sterner, darker gods
whose seasons are not so predictable:
storms, tempests, thunder, flood
may last until we learn
lessons we do not yet understand.

Outside the window now
the last rays of evening sun catch
the metal spire of the nestling church;

its metal lightning conductor running
down its walls to that patch of earth
whose signs of scorching warn the devout soul..

Here inside the room, the poet too:
aspiring spire, lightning conductor;
rattling between heaven and earth,
torn by view of outside, inside..

Poets are only responsible to their words
when lining up their obstinacies
in the mind, on paper:
after that, must send them on their way:
the words mean more, or less, than the poets knew
while writing them; someone else may make
better use of them. This too,

the measure of the gods, of God.

*

Friedrich Holderlin, bi-polar poet-philosopher, 1770-1843; correspondent of Goethe, inspirer of Rilke, subject of much discussion by philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Michael Shepherd

! ! To Holy Russia

The door creaks, as she opens it
and the fall of the heavy iron latch
echoes through the empty church.

The atmosphere inside, this cold cold day,
is heavy, as such holy places are;
locked now at night; heavy,
with what? Anticipation; presence; memory
of all the human emotions
that have passed through them?

There's still the clinging promise,
the fragrance of yesterday's incense;
it could be a midnight cedar forest
in its dark wood-scented mystery.

She lights a candle, drops a coin
slowly, as those do to whom
each coin has a meaning.

She is small, shrunken as the aged are,
wrapped into roundness against the cold,
yet neatly; today there's an extra sense of purpose
about her walk towards the glittering
gold ikonostasis –

is it the anniversary of the day
her husband perished in the labour camp?
Or the day her son died fighting
so that such as she might live,
to mourn him, proudly, all her life?

Or was she, is she, that unmarried, once famous
junior lecturer who lost her job
for speaking truth, whose students
carried her shoulder-high and placed her
on the tank outside the university,
challenging its gun?

She kneels in front of the ancient ikon,
thick with gold; the ikon that tourists
note with brief glance as 'Christ'...though when painted,
it was known as 'Son of God'; now they call it
'Son of Man' – that seems to suit it.

She looks intently into His eyes
as she has so many times; each time,
a new day, asking what He has in store for her;

asks as intently as its painter: praying as he worked,
that He might come and fill the painted form
with His eyes, His heart, His soul; all that He brought to earth
from That which sent Him...

She looks into the eyes of the ikon –
or does the ikon look at her?
In some other world, there is mighty sound,
perhaps a word; the air is filled with soundlessness;
there's fire that burns forever; great waters flow
like grace itself; new earth is watered.

She sees, in some great where between
herself and all things, love that cannot be measured;
mercy that can only explain itself with itself;
grace that's only to be known; her heart
opens itself to her soundlessly;
all is revealed to the seeking heart.

The candles flicker in the draught; the door creaks,
and the heavy iron latch echoes
once, in the empty church; the Son of Man,
as an old woman, wrapped against the cold,
steps out into His kingdom. A few snowflakes;
a pale winter sun. But look into His eyes.

*

(revised)

Michael Shepherd

! ! To Ibn Al-Arabi, Sufi

God walked in his garden;
his footsteps became the universe;
his shadow became Man.

In the garden, the shadow
that knows itself a shadow
looks for the footsteps,
thinking only poems.

Michael Shepherd

! ! To Kobayashi Issa

A bath when you're born;
a bath when you die;
between, a long river

Michael Shepherd

!! To Parents

Come back, swim back... I need you...

When I stood a child upon the seashore
waving through the tears as first
the one and then the other
was taken by the tide until
no longer visible in that dark sea
too vasty to be thought about...

then turned, and ran back up the beach
to meet and greet my life..

that was, as it was; but now
I run back to the water's edge
shouting come back... I never knew you,
I'm grown up now, I want to meet you,
ask you all the things I never asked,
tell you all the things I never dared,
look you in your fierce, sad eyes...

come back, swim back, I need you,
for I'm grown up now; I can love you
without restraint; give love not ask for it...

or must I wait, until the tide
laps feet, then knees, then heart, then sight...
to join you in that dark unknownness which
may be, may be, an even greater love
than that which stands here at the water's edge
as the evening water darkens,
shouting swim back, swim back...

Michael Shepherd

! ! To Praise

Spring morning; air full of promise in the nostrils;
scents of flowers yet to bloom;

dew as diamonds on the grass stems;
sunshine on the hills across the river valley;

outside the rabbit hole, a terrier, crouched
on the scuffed reddish run-dust of a hundred paws;

focussed, completely still, every muscle ready and alert;
ear occasionally twitching at some movement underground;

now, all things are praise.

To live with praise, to live in praise,
to know; be blessed; be full;

joining, giving back, taste of that
which satisfies beyond all else;

then, dare to speak it: hear within the voice
knowledge of eternity in living now;

today, all things are praise.

The terrier, full five minutes still,
knows the rabbits knowing him;

gets up as if there's nothing in the world
but this moment; scampers, wagging tail;

glances towards you, as if to share
the joy of dogginess and paw and earth;

a sudden move of breeze, off the still sea down there
to bless the land; the view quietly sparkles as if to say,

you will remember this all your life
because a moment speaks eternity;

today, all things are praise

Michael Shepherd

! ! To The Bible-Bashers I Just Turned Away

They were black of course.
Saturday mid-morning; myself
just searching to round off
that poem on praise, adequately, so as not
to let down the poem up to there...

They were black of course.
Who else would hope to bring
the whi' fo' back to God? ...
even the Muslims have given up on us...
they, twentyish, I guess; he in front,
she all eager friendly smile behind..

they shone with goodness; goodness
that shone beyond what they, what I, would say;
beyond the headline of the magazine
he showed me, smiling, asked me what I thought:
'Are these the Last Days? '...

I said, I'd pass on that;
wished them my good wishes:
wishes nondenominational, unspecified..
returned to the computer, now to find
the poem on praise, a hollow mockery...

and to the mind, there came that potent line:
'Live each day as if thy last'...

They're probably still knocking, down the streets,
gathering reactions mild and wild ...
I'd just like it if they – all too late - could know that
for a moment, goodness met the eye of goodness,
yet found no time to praise in present words..

Michael Shepherd

!! To, For, Or Against An Irish Poet

When you re-ad aloud your own poems –
(prizewinners, dammit, every one) –
lingering on every noun, adjective and ad-verb
as if they are simultaneously ancient jewels
that you're touching, showing to us; and yet
new jewels you're yourself in wonder at...

clothing each word with the scent
of peat fire, soda bread, a glowing hearth;
a child asleep there in the corner;
a woman who's grown rich, timeless in your love;

outside the cry of curlew, seagull,
the slap of wave on cliff;

but edged, sharp, like the sudden
intake of breath, with centuries on centuries
of uprisings cruelly downtrodden,
famine, allegiances,
leprechauns and muskets and the Armalite...

all these wrapped in baby's or in widow's shawl;
the shawl of memory that is a poem..

when you read your own verse like this –
may-aking a trinity of vowels from each Anglo-Saxon one –

then, I'm emerald green with envy,
reading my own verse in your imitated voice
as if it were those precious ancient new-found jewelled words...

and wishing that all poets – or no poets at all –
were, are, shall be, Irish-born...

Michael Shepherd

! ! Today

Today

(Mark it in the diary -
then throw the diary away..) :

Today dawned with the unusual
wrapped intriguingly in the familiar;
a freshness unidentifiable;
a promise, that promised
nothing specific:

as if I walk in a world
whose infinite complexity
is no problem;
its multiplicity, a straightforward matter;

which delivers something hoped for
and yet never formulated with real meaning:
simplicity;

here and now, yet feels eternal;
a heavenly sense of down-to-earthness;
a freedom that can't remember
what it's freed from;

where activity only seems
to tell one more of stillness,
and noise just sings of silence;

a day that's a gift, without
a need to ask, or to receive;
where surrender is instantaneous, and continual,
and barely worth the mention;
where paradox is just a game;
where being, itself, is gratitude enough;

a day that says, this is how things are;
this is how it is... raising a quizzical eyebrow
and the hint of a smile:

you thought it otherwise..?

a day that deserves a new-coined word
to mark it as exceptionally
unexceptionable: the word has
spoken of itself:
oneness..

for the gift of just being is beyond
all thoughts of giver and receiver;
it's a day that promises to itself and myself,
what it delivers right now
in each present moment –

the indescribably magnificent,
glorious, who-would-have-guessed,
strangely familiar, and yet utterly new,
sense of the ordinary.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Translating Love

Oh, how to report to truth
the many shades of love?

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux,
monk of a silent order
writing what he could not speak,
writes of love for brother monks
without embarrassment;
expatiates upon the Song of Songs,
erotic metaphor, with passionate, pure heart;

finds so many Latin terms
for all the shades of love,
of which we can translate to English speech
but a modest few – love, delight, affection, charity,
true friendliness; the glowing heart...

Then, pen laid down, the saint
returns to narrow cell – and love:
in silence, stillness, solitude,
pursues translation's lifelong art,
but now beyond all words;
holy love into the human heart.

Oh, how to report to truth
the many shades of love..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Travel Guide To 2009

Let's get away from it all..

that is, to take 'it all' with you
and dump it on an idyllic beach
whose native population rake smooth
every morning

but who will remove your burden of thought
from that idyllic community
when you've come back?

OK go ahead, now hate me..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Two Birds On A Tree

Look at this old photograph..
some of these old photos look
more ancient than their, what,
hundred-and-twenty years;
as if the very air was different, then?

This one's simply of
two birds in a tree:
one sits and watches;
the other eats the fruits..

this moment, frozen, framed, in time,
takes on the epic stature
of a metaphor, a myth:
what of the previous second
in our passing time? What
of the next second?
Where have those birds come from,
where may they go next?

If we cease to patronise
their 'bird-brains', see them
closer to their God than we
whose minds depart so far from nature...

if we think they think, in thoughts
which we may share – then,
what are they thinking? what
do they think of one another?
I look again at the photo, speculate;
the photo grows in my concern
to some great tree of primal Paradise...
the Tree of Knowledge, could it be?

Is the one bird thinking,
what a fine place this is to rest!
A place to hide, if so need be,
among its leaves; a height,
an observation post,

I still, the world about its business;
in stillness, I a little nearer to God,
just a little lower than the angels,
without beating my wings to find
a heaven above...

Is the other bird thinking,
what a fine restaurant I've found,
that God provided; I so hungry
on my way; how much I need to eat
to give me strength for further flight...

and have these two birds even noticed
each other, and each other's state?
Are they two siblings from the self-same nest,
flying together through their lives;
loving one another until the last birdfall?
Two rivals, just about to fight to death?
Or, two fore-flyers of the same great flock,
about to land and strip the tree of fruit,
then rest, God-filled, to know Him in that stillness?

These thoughts; an ancient photograph;
now I wonder about the unknown photographer
who saw the world, in two birds on a tree.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Two Birds On The Same Tree

Two birds rest on the same tree;
their eyes are bright;

they look alike; yet one
is the Teacher; one the Student;

the Student tastes all the many fruits
upon that tree; the Teacher sits, just watches,

filled with love and pride;
the eyes of both are bright;

when the Student has tasted all,
the Teacher asks what has been learnt; for

only the Teacher knows within their heart:
that now the Student is the teacher;

the Teacher listens as a student;
the Student speaks now as a teacher

who has learned this of themselves;
the Teacher's eyes are bright:

knowing that to live it through
shows the knowledge to be true;

the Student is teaching the Teacher now, of
how to teach; the Teacher glows to know

the Student may surpass the Teacher;
knowledge shines from both their eyes;

who is the more glorious of these two
who share both the same name?

who rejoice to need the other;
who rejoice to be the other;

now they are silent; now the tree's rejoicing too;
Its roots above; its fruits below;

its leaves, a shelter;
its branches, home.

*

[Leaning on a poem of Kabir: Indian readers will be familiar with
'two birds in a tree' as a metaphor for acting with detachment; Kabir takes this
further, into knowledge gained from wise action...]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Two Cows Deconstruct Derrida

These two cows were ruminating
and one says, I was listening
to the milkmaid's transistor

and this French philosopher
was explaining that there's
no English translation of the French word
'betise' except 'stupidity' but

'stupidity' only refers to man
where the French 'betise' means
to behave like an animal...

and the other cow says
well what's wrong with that

and the first cow says
well his point is, English cows
can't be stupid; only man
can be stupid..

and the other cow says
well that's a relief then
so does that mean that French cows
can be stupid

and the first cow says
no because they don't have a word for it
in French

so the other cow says
so then is it better to be
an English cow
that can't be stupid
or a French cow
that can't be called stupid

and the first cow says
who cares, I've always said

the French ruminates too much
and then talk bullshit...

and the other cow says
I'm glad I'm a Jersey

what about that French milkmaid
I call sexyhands but
the farmer sometimes calls
a silly cow I wonder what
Derrida would say about that

Michael Shepherd

! ! Two Paper-Thin Haikus

This crisp autumn morning,
the great tree sighs
for its destiny: a dictionary.

This warm summer evening
the dictionary sighs
remembering when it was a living tree.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Unity Of Source

That's what she called it;
surprised that, as musician,
knowing how a piece of music
sets out from, and finally returns to
some chosen 'key' based on a single note:
which remains in mind of the composer
and the listener alike; calling back, after
the great adventure, to your loving home;

she, finding that poems, too,
maintain that sound, somewhere in mind – of
what the poem's about; and whence it started;
which guides each word that's chosen;
where it shall return to rest..

You hear this (even if you know
nothing about music..) in Mozart's playful sounds:
as if each day, he packs a rucksack with a snack,
sets out for hills and mountains, clouds,
the tinkling streams, bird cries, goats clambering and
bleating; maybe hears a village band
practising down there below; smiles;
perhaps clouds gather; lightning flashes,
thunder rolls; for that is life..

then, as the shadows of the evening mountains
begin to creep towards the city streets,
follows the streams that skip beside him down the hillside,
paths appearing now, by goats and men more worn;
knowing that, at the end,
his home will still be where it was
that morning after breakfast...

Sometimes, when no-one's listening but myself,
I sit at the piano, and play the 'Mozart game' –
strike a keynote chord; then close my eyes or turn away,
put a finger on an unknown note,
say, around two octaves above that; then
listen as a melody unfurls from inner ear; perhaps

an intermediate harmony assists; and
finally, return to that loved home; now refreshed,
shining-eyed; content; and needing only rest...

Unity of source..
you hear it now?
how much we know of this,
yet scarcely knew we knew..

*

for Elizabeth

Michael Shepherd

! ! Universal Joke

You can't get really near
the Beloved Friend
who some call God
without a sense of humour;

humour; and paradox:
sadness brings humility,
humility catches God's ear...
now you're laughing for sheer joy.

And have you heard this one...:
you can't take anything from this world
without the world taking something from you...
isn't that the best joke that ever was...?

Cows, who ruminate as well as Rumi ever did
Call it the Unified Field Theory.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Universe At Finger-Tip

Two or three months back
my little finger caught in a closing hinge;
could have been worse...

since then, the nail's been
every shade of blackish-brown,
living some ancient, primitive life, of battered claw,
or shellfish, bruised by rock and ocean,
yet preserving, in its shell
such tender life
as heroes live to save..

every day, I watch this primeval drama
as, secretly, beneath the horny shell
so measured in its protectiveness,
dying slowly like a hero who enfolds
a baby life within his arms,

secretly beneath, there grows a new pink life;
its promise makes me look afresh
at its neighbour nails; and marvel
at the delicacy of their shade
from crescent moon to nail so practical..
what lacquer could ever hope to match
this living beauty?

and I fall silent, still; humbled at this scene
that brings the universe's law and love
here to my finger-end. No name of god,
or evolution, or Intelligent Design,
may encompass my humility;
I who know not my own finger-end;
humility so still, it's even beyond prayer.
If praise can be one, without form -
then this is praise.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Unthinks-Balloon

Ask a saint
or ask a balloon

how fullness
can be emptiness;

how joyful they both are!

*

[leaning on Rumi]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Vaanii

Vaanii

You spoke of 'vaanii' as that speech
that follows true perception
with exact expression
in that glorious inner sound
that's followed into action..

intrigued, I took the dictionary from the shelf..

and it speaks of music..
like - I hear from memory -
that roadside stream accompanying your walk,
whose music – ever changing,
ever a continuance of the same –
speaks of its source among the wooded hills;
speaks of the beauties that it passed;
and of its destiny, in merging with salt sea;

as Saraswati, goddess of wise speech,
protected now within the deepest stone;
that music that the head hears and obeys in reason;
that music which the heart hears in the voice;
that music dancing in the graceful action:

unmistakeable as truth, it has a name:
vaanii.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Vanaprasthiya

Their grandchild's silken first hair
brushed with tender love;
their own hair, grey or white or gone;

household handed over to
their son, daughter, or
their spouse; now,

to find again themselves, to be themselves;
free, they walk the morning air of freedom
towards the woods; upon the way,
meet others of their age.

Trees - as every child knows
and old men may remember;
old women see through their own children's eyes -
listen with such silent wisdom,
that among the trees,
all become wise.

And so they, the honoured aged,
meet, acknowledge, greet,
speak as many words as truth may draw;
meditate; then, open eyes and every sense
teach, this is what a temple is;
this is what you are.

Evening stillness; then they return
to the hearth and warmth of family; as
a great grove of ancient, fresh-leafed trees
where in stillness soul meets nature
and finds truth arise.

*

[With thanks to Sunil Bhattacharya for some hints of history]

Michael Shepherd

! ! Verbs V. Nouns

Nouns...

they're dead things; names
you give to things to render them
immobile; to make them yours, your very own; fit for nothing
except scrapheaps, museums, dictionaries, armchairs;

but they make you feel good;
you have control over their world;
you don't have to think about them any more;
they're all locked up safe in your collecting-box,
the noun for which is head:

you can sound important with nouns:
this government's raft of measures
for fiscal stimulation of the economy

but verbs... ah, verbs!
you can't own them, push them about,
collect them, be important about them;
they own themselves;

they're outdoor words: going about their
lawful business, doing what they're best at,
measuring their own life as they work;
adapting themselves to what needs to be done
which nouns can't do without a committee
and then it's too late; happy
to be themselves, being; even
being while they're doing.. don't you wish
you were a verb?

Nature – (that's a verb, by the way,
not a noun) – is all verbs; evolution
is a verb (not a theory):
DNA's a verb – you can't own it
like a noun...it doesn't even
want to own you...

so, be a child – put your boots on,

run, splash, shout look at all those verbs;
how bright the world, what fun,
nothing to put in your pocket to take home

(or if you do, it'll change to a noun, your noun,
in your pocket, in your drawer, gathering dust:
verbs don't have the time to gather dust...)

verbs are for observing; verbs are for
seeing for the first time; wow! Verbs are for
inventors, explorers, tree-climbing,
coming home after a day of verb-watching
tired and looking forward to tomorrow
and sleeping soundly, maybe even
thanking, laughing, giving, living;

God is a verb.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Versus

Wood, leather, metal
clank together in irregular rhythm:
behind the Roman ploughman
crows and sparrows compete
to see what the blade throws up
from this red soil like ancient pots;
the horse, its patience godlike,
knows when to turn without
that hoarse, brief, ancient shout.

The old typewriter rattles on so fast
you cannot tell whether she is happy in her work;
again, again, the bell rings, telling her
it's time for carriage to reverse.

The poet's eyes are unfocussed,
lost to thought; the words come slow;
more certain, where the line may end -
the mind to take the mind's own breath.

Versus. Where the furrow ends;
and where the line of verse
asks some new thing of the mind.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Water Into Wine

Once upon a time,
Jesus, who called himself the true vine,
turned water into wine
in an act of love.

All over the world, right now,
a million grape vines
are performing the same miracle

slowly; silently; aided by the sun;
their roots, like farmers, coal or diamond miners,
searching in the earth
for the most precious;

it doesn't hit the headlines
but who dares say
a patient, silent, unsung love
is any less a miracle?

Who dares say that grape vines
do not seek and love
their beautiful perfection?

miracles, an act of love;
love, that miracle unearned –

what may we do to earn, to drink,
that wine of Love, but love?

*

[with a bow to Hafiz]

Michael Shepherd

! ! We As Parents To Our Parents

They never teach you this at school;
they'll try to teach you reading, writing, 'rithmetic
in their own instructed ways;

but now, if anyone suggested it, there'd be howls
about the impertinence, the interference,
the rights, the dangers of this and that -

but all the same, they never teach you:
how to get on with your parents.

Oh there are books and books and books
telling your parents how to look after you, but hey!
there are two parties here! Mom and Dad
can ask their own parents (sometimes - because they
were in the same situation as you are now and so,
reckon they can do a better job...) but
who can you, ask?

Philip Larkin told us memorably that
'they f*** you up, your Mum and Dad',
which may not be the case for all of us;
Hindus have their own stern answer to this question:
you chose them, in effect, as the result
of your behaviour in your previous life...so there,
work with that, kiddo, could be
the making of you...stop blaming it all on them!

So there you are, in this heated cauldron of love and hate, or
like sharp stones shaken in this bag called family
until the rough edges wear (each other) away and
those smooth round pebbles roll out to the world...

but perhaps a little help wouldn't hurt?
I was exactly four and a half when I told the truth about something,
since I didn't know any other way; and as my parents' voices
rose in argument about 'knowing what was best for me',
(I remember the moment now, so clear) I turned my back
on this so painful sound, faced the 'wireless' on the chest of drawers,

and decided there and then
that grown-ups made such a fuss when you told the truth
that it would be better not to - at least, until
they grew up a bit... and there, went half a lifetime
of prevarication, dodging the question, fantasy: never tell the truth
until you're sure they really, really want to hear it...

Then when I was eleven or thereabouts
(and again, I remember exactly where I was standing
at the time - the bottom of the stairs)
the solemn thought 'entered my head':
that in some way I knew but couldn't quite explain,
I was in the position, had some duty,
to take care, in some thoughtful way, of the minds of those
my parents...

But they didn't teach that at my school.

love, I knew all about; but
parents? Aren't they strange? They try so hard, too...
and no, I don 't need 'counselling', thanks -
I'd rather keep it in the family. All I'm asking
is, a few lessons, maybe? I'd even do
the homework.

XXX love you both XXX

[revisited]

Michael Shepherd

! ! What Is Your Substance...?

What's your 'substance', Aristotle, pray? -
that in your book On Metaphysics, you
should feel the need to look at 'being' more
than Plato said of soul? How 'know thyself'?

You focus your so glorious mind, O sage,
on what confronts us in our human state;
hoping that from there, all will disclose
itself; and so you seek to formulate:

in Book Four, Chapter Two, acutely list
four ways, four meanings, of the Greek as used;
to us, they're more apparent grammar-wise:
'being' as noun, verb, adverb, adjective...

you ultimately choose the languaged thing:
nouns as existence, substance - 'ousia';

no wonder Shakespeare took you up on that;
asking as he did, God's self in human form
what were the essence of that insubstantial
substance that the world's whole being holds:

and out from all these cloudy worlds of thought -
it's 'constancy' in godly human heart..

I wonder, Aristotle, if Will's search
to see the One that's constant in the All
would satisfy your subtle Grecian mind?

or, in Creation's grammar as it lives,
do active verbs precede substantive nouns?
And do we know our godly self more true,
as constant in ourselves, in Being Now?

*

[For Pete, who asked]

! ! What She Told Me

Arrived at last at the monastery
she listened as he asked

why are your aspirations so very puny?
why do you not aspire
to be liberated for the sake
of all mankind?

and, she said, she could
have cut the silence with a sword;

the two-edged sword, of unreason
and of reason; the same light
flashing from the hero's sword
or burning steady, gentle, from the candle
there in the temple of the heart.

Michael Shepherd

! ! What The Stone Said

This stone: scraps of wet earth
still clinging to it;

rounded, greyish; large enough
to fit into my palm as if,

cradled there, it's enough part of me
to tell me that it's more than
inert matter without consciousness..

its pleasing roundness – warming
in my hand – tells me a little
of its history:

once it was one of many, jostled
over years or centuries in
a river or an ocean bed;

to be thrown up, again and again,
from the maw of breaking, angry wave
onto a beach; then at some high tide,
pulled back again;

it's covered with its history:
a mass of scratches where a fiercer sand
from the hierarchy of stone's hardnesses,
scratched it; to be soothed and smoothed
by its fellow sufferers on the watered bed.

Warm in my cradling palm, it shares
or so it seems, my own consciousness:
the same consciousness as all Creation's wonders,
but here in supreme, uncomplaining,
inexpressive, yielding pure obedience:
a sermon in a stone; awaiting future call
to be raised up a man..

no wonder - as all children know –
'beach' (and can't you hear there,

tread of feet on hard, resistant, partially
yielding stones?)

and `shore' (and can't you hear there
the waves smoothe the sand,
then draw back to crash again
like a drawn breath of astonishment?)

- as children know: beach and shore
full of their shared consciousness;
God's playground which he shares with them.

That was what the stone said.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Where Do You Go, Girl?

Where do you go, girl,
when you fall asleep?

for even when we've spent a passion's time,
you, all woman and all animal,
and then drift gently into sleep
and I to watch you drift -
you're straight away a girl again.

Do you dream a girlhood's dearest dreams?
or roam a woman's world?
What girlhood's safe, safe place
do you retreat to
in your private sleep?

Was it when the only man to love
was your beloved father,
still recovering from a wartime's hangover
with alcohol - and your so fierce, despairing help?

Where do you go in sleep?
while I now watch this unknown girl;
an upper lip that asks so innocently
to be kissed?
And lower lip that just so innocently
enjoys?

Where do you go, girl,
so far, so many years away from me?
Where do you go, girl?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Where Prayer Meets Praise

Where does prayer end, and praise begin?
Can there really be distinction?

In prayer, we believe, we call upon the gods,
those forces greater than our smaller selves,
to give us what we feel we sadly lack;

In praise, we ask them nothing; simply dedicate
our inner selves to honour all we feel of worth;
honour, laud and magnify those highest qualities
that mortal minds conceive as boundless life..

Within us, then, some prior knowledge grown
of what we feel should govern our full life!

And now the blissful sages speak to us
and tell us that the heavens which we seek
are equally inside our very selves,
awaiting recognition and acknowledgement;

so what does that imply? That what we call upon
with prayer, must be answered; for it's there
within already – courage, strength or love;

and what we praise, is, too, all there within:
we praise ourselves, while thinking of ourselves
as other than ourself.. now, is this strange? or beautiful -
beyond all beauty: good beyond all good?
and true, for all hearts know the truth of truth?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Who Needs Speling Enyway

Why

I asked myself, a child,

do those marmalade jars

need to tell you

they're made of sevrал oranges?

Any child knows that..

Michael Shepherd

! ! Who's First To Bat?

'What is it like to be a bat? '
Sprigge asked the question first;
then Thomas Nagel took it up
with philosophic thirst;

What is it like to be a bat?
Who knows? Bats aren't so chatty...
but if you asked a bat, I guess
he'd say, 'Well.. kinda batty..'

*

(Written to mark the impending publication of the great man's essays, 'Secular
Philosophy and the Religious Temperament')

Michael Shepherd

! ! Whose Photos?

In the mind, there's a photo-album
stamped on the cover, My Photos?
with a question-mark –

the stranger's profile, immortalised
as they waited at the crossing lights;

the face crumpled with laughter
at the joke you missed, as
you boarded the bus;

the first glimpse of a future lover's
stance, expression meaningless:
strangely unattractive,
insignificant yet remembered;

whose photographs are these?
it's as if some other mind
borrowed your camera without your consent,
to leave taunting hints of timelessness.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Whose Tears?

I don't cry. Not
floods of tears cry.
The eyes moisten, but,
It's the rest of it...:
the chest heaves unsuppressibly, as if
it would leap out from the body's confines...
it's all beyond control;
'sob' isn't the right word
because it's all silent.

It never used to be like this;
now – well, I'm too embarrassed
to tell you everything
that sets it off.. just think 'sentimental'...
except that it's quite without those personal thoughts
like, what a cute puppy,
I can feel for her,
how I'd be proud to be him right now...

athletes of any sport or any nation
ascending the podium while
their strange national anthem plays...
and it's a sure bet;

anyone who fulfils themselves,
achieves something which
makes them clearly proud...

triumph over adversity, over handicap;
the Paralympics - have you noticed,
they're the most quietly satisfied of winners?

the shining eye of
someone who's given from the heart...
or someone who's received that gift...

sometimes the perfection of
a sung phrase, its subtle timing,
the emotion kernelled in a single note...

the first notes of those hymns they sing
when heroes finally are laid to rest...

or a convincing love story –
no, I won't give you the names –

or a moment of some unexpected truth
which speaks of something far beyond...

even a silence, an unfocussed presence
that holds some revelation yet
unformulated; only recognised..

I have this strange, beloved stranger
in my shaking chest,

a law unto itself, which doesn't
ask for my consent before
the convulsions start...

in a way, it's quite reassuring:
something within me, announcing
its independent life;

something capable of being stirred;
and when it stops its heaving,
here's the best part: then, it's gone –
no thought to smear the mind,
no mood to coddle or indulge..
it came; it went; so pure, so clean;

best to give it no attention,
let it live its life without my interference;
it's asking nothing of me but
to love its freedom; watch it be itself.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Why Should I Take Your Time...?

Why should I take your time
describing in loving detail
the day so many years ago
when I smelt the air on a cliff-top –
sunlight, stubby wind-blown salt flowers,
still glitter of the sea, etc –
and knew freedom, liberation,
the blessing of landscape,
the magic of perspective...
all in the unfamiliar, so innocent, cliff-top air
that touched immortal on the cheek...?

I guess it's like an expensive gift that you give
without unwrapping its elaborate protection;
inside, something both banal, and magical:

not the memory; but the memory
of being, just being; just being a child;
when the world spoke of itself
in every magic detail, unwrapped itself and
with so much to say...

the magic of memory; being, not quite forgot;
offered to you, not wrapped by me,
(watching your face as you open it...)
but, from yourself?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Why Shouldn'T Poems...

...be hot out of a
news item – even if
it barely ranks as 'poetry' -
if it moves a would-be poet
more than many a poem...?

Here's the story: Dr Jill Bolte Taylor,
who became a neuro-scientist because
her beloved brother was schizophrenic...
had an exceptional opportunity for research

when one morning a golf-ball-sized haemorrhage
in her left brain, gave her a stroke, which
she was able to observe as it happened...

becoming herself schizophrenic in a fashion,
so that one half of her brain said
this consciousness is boundless...
while the other half said, I'm me...

struggling to support one another as
for forty-five minutes, she tried
to find her office identity
in a blur of pixels that were a number
she must dial...

it took her eight observant years
to recover; now she tells the story,
(always herself, always as boundless
as her story):
some of us smiling through our tears, her tears,
her smiles..

maybe I could turn that into
more of a poem... but why?
Between these lines, between
she and me, I and you,
the boundless, too..

! ! Wild Thought

Twin squirrels leapfrog
on the gleditsia branch.
Do frogs play squirrel?

Michael Shepherd

! ! Winter Fun

Delicious snowflake
floating perfect then melting
on my outstretched tongue

Michael Shepherd

! ! Winter In The City

The snow is yellow
round the doorway to the pub;
gone, the sound of 'Aaaahh...'

Michael Shepherd

! ! With A Hey And A Ho And A Txtng To-And-Fro

It was a lover and his lass
with a hey and a ho and a texting to and fro
that o'er the sidewalks smiling pass
with ringtones, with ringtones,
with dotty ditty ringtones
while cellphones ring
hi! tingalingaling,
sweet lovers love a ring.

It was that cool dude and his chick
with a hey and a ho and a texting to and fro
swopping tunes and sharing pix
with ringtones, with ringtones
with dotty ditty ringtones
and all the birds
txt lv ya bf wrds
sweet lovers love a ring

Michael Shepherd

!! 'Woman -'

How can a mother ever quite forget,
or quite relinquish in her memory,
that state which babies share with saints:
to be free from all desires of mind?

And so the mother must take on
that strange but natural responsibility
to desire, for the baby in her charge; but then,
one day, to learn to stop to 'mother'
for the child's own growing sake..

And how much more, instinct and reason
must have played in Her; given a responsibility
greater than the world itself?

And who can ever know those private conversations
between the growing Child of God
and young earthly mother of that heavenly Child?

So, when at that wedding and its showing-forth
the servants were unsure, She was there
to say 'Do what He says'..

And from John comes that bald account
which we must read each for ourself:
'Woman, what have you to do with Me...? '

He, not yet ready as He thought,
for destiny; divisive miracles?

Who knows how many private conversations
lay behind that question and its rhetoric –
public, and recorded by that deeply impressed scribe...

and whether it was said with gentle smile
(who reads the words of Jesus as from One
who almost always smiled – His words, a gift?)

or said with firm authority, which we may take

as heard by Her, not with a fuser's shame,
but with Magnificat still ringing in Her mind?

And then, perhaps, She learned to grieve
and not to grieve, beneath a holy Cross..

I think this passage is forever read
by men in one way; women in another;
and perhaps, that's just how it should be.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Writing Poetry

To make of every poem
a challenge; face with joy an
honourable failure; blaze
with glorious sadness:
laughing at the glory,
smiling at the sadness;

but hearing in the heart
that which cannot be said, but
is to be ever listened to:
unknown, formless, eternal, always present.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Yahbu Haiku

The cherry tree laughed -
three days' yearly blossoming:
no haiku poet!

Michael Shepherd

! ! You, To Whom I Am Myself

O You Who Are - the formless, nameless One,
more real than all forms and names can speak:

You for whom we seek to find a name
and yet who has no name, who needs no name;

You for whom we seek to shape a form
and yet who has no form, who needs no form;

Yet whom we name in every name we speak,
and whom we see in every form we seek:

is there some name bestowed for nameless name,
a form imagined for a formless form,
by which all hearts today that seek themselves
may shape their search as if for One unknown?
may kneel in front of their own golden throne?

Should we approach you as the Lord of Hearts,
who's spoken of in heartfelt praise of glorious human brilliance,
endeavour, art, achievement and discovery;
the Lord who gave us hearts to know we love?

Should we approach you as the Lord of Self,
whom we all know when we relax, become
more our known self, in silence, rest, or company
that sparkles round a table built of happiness?

Should we approach you as the Lord of Consciousness
in whom we live and move, and be; yet never see
for you're the seeing in ourself; to whom we wake
and know, and stand securely, watching all?

I ask You for the sound of some new yet eternal name;
that sound by which all quickly know themselves
and talk once more from hearts forever free,
of what we are, and know, and love to be.

! ! Your Self: From Plotinus' 'Enneads' 6.3

Seeing yourself - at last - so beautiful:
cease, at last, that vision to deny!
What then, to see in your so glorious self?
What qualities shine out upon the world?

Loftiness of spirit; righteousness
of life; the purity of discipline;
majestic face of courage; gravity;
fearless, tranquil, passionless modesty—

and shining down forever on all this:
that glorious light in all things known and seen;
that watches even, its own watchfulness;
your self as all things, ever known to be.

And now you are Yourself: a blazing Sun;
glorious with the radiance that is One.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Zen And The Art Of Plastic Flower Maintenance

From time to time, when
I've been meditating, and
these things matter, I pick respectfully
the plastic flowers from their vase,
wash the vase, wipe the dust
off the leaves with a moist cloth,
dip the flower-heads in water
as one would give someone
a holy bath

and then replace them in
a slightly new position in the vase,
a slightly new position on the table.

absurdity and
something beautiful
have met and got along together rather well.

Michael Shepherd

! ! Zimbabwe

My heart, which lives
its own laws
cannot bear to talk
with my fine Zimbabwean friend
when he comes to Britain
about 'the situation'

my heart wishes only
to be in the presence
of a fine man
and to feel myself
a fine man
in his presence

together we are human
and there is no
despite

(for Taylor)

Michael Shepherd

! ! Zimbabwe - An Echo

The day before yesterday
they dealt with the terminally ill to free the hospitals.
Yesterday,
they dealt with those who did not contribute to the economy.
Today,
they dealt with those who oppose the government.
Tomorrow,
they will deal with those who have heard of a better life.
Next week,
do not be surprised at the truck
with bloodstains on its tailboard
at your gate tooting its impatient horn.

Michael Shepherd

! .. S A D

and sad, perhaps;
as of children
visited for the first time in their life
by sadness; pure sadness,
without friend or enemy,
just sad; sadness which does not tell
of its parents, or of where it came from,
or of where it might be going;
or of how long it might stay before it goes..
yes, sadness like that.

Michael Shepherd

! ...Their Blackness...

'..and their blackness is incontrovertible...'

as the mind surfaced out of sleep today,
these words – matter-of-fact, authoritative –
spoke in my inner ear.

had it been a fleeting image or
the painful ending of some dream – like
struggling to catch the last train
which all the time receded –
it would have been dismissed;

but the writer's mind seizes on such things:
this line, an Alexandrine or hexameter:
what scene had come before
this ultimate pronouncement?

was this the verdict of some shining, white-robed one
summing my mortal sins, written indelible?
what came before? had there just been
some paltry list of virtues dimly glimpsed,
good deeds half-done? or could I hope
this shining one spoke not of me at all?

was this a glimpse of what had gone from mind,
the glorious radiance of a perfect world?
or glimpse of compensatory twin mirror-world
which physicists speak of as balancing necessity
of charges positive and negative,
where all is in reverse; and so, perhaps the mind;
and black is good and God; and white is...trash...

or had the mind been in the world of art,
where, as in the etched fine lines like thinnest wire
of a Picasso or a Hockney – incontrovertibly
shaping in the finest, mindful black
a world of friends, of fears, of foes,
of loves and lives and lovely, lively things?

we know so little of the world of dream,
so close to poets' fantasies of truth;
and shall I wish, tonight – so far away this sunny dawn -
to find again that other world, where all is brightest white?
or meet that other world, where black is beautiful..

Michael Shepherd

! ? ! 'Please Read My Poems'

'Read my latest poems.

Here's a list of the twelve
you need to read first..

In return, give me a list
of any of yours you might like
me to read..

Though I can't promise to do that right away;
I'm very busy, writing poems and stuff.'

Well, go stuff your stuff
just where it came from.

Oops, I forgot to take the tablets..

Michael Shepherd

! 0009 Thank God It's Friday

I'm on night shift at the moment so
I miss the local news. But
I take the dog up the hill, there's
usually something going on.

there were three of them up
there today but I must have
missed the excitement; just
two old ladies and a young man
standing on that huge pile of skulls
waiting there beneath them
for the inevitable

they were telling each other
Jewish jokes to keep their
spirit up. I only caught
one joke - 'they say that
Jews are just like
other people - only
more so...'

Laugh? I thought the One
in the middle would die
laughing

I was halfway back when
It all went dark

Michael Shepherd

! 0253 To Li Po On Saint Patrick's Day

Dear Li Po

you wrote your Po-em of The Day
for Poemhunter
about drinking - and alone at that - without mentioning
that it's Saint Patrick's Day
when drinkers seldom drink alone
for the craic's the thing

so next time you have to drink alone
except for your shadow,
notice that your shadow
under the light of the Moon,
dances more drunkenly, and sooner
- happy shadow -
than you. You haven't noticed?
Then perhaps you're thinker
than you drunk you are

pionta Guinness, le do thoil

Michael Shepherd

! A Ring Of Bright Words Dancing

and that day
eighty words woke up, listened to each other,
smiled, joined hands,
danced in a ring

and as they danced around and round
the space inside the circle
became magic
the earth flowed
into a brightness in the air
which in its space
became sound

the words dancing
left a ring in the grass
in the sound of a poem

then returned home
to where words rest
in stillness and in silence
until called upon
to waken fresh

Michael Shepherd

! A Bawdy To My Mistress' Landscape In 17th Century Style

A rather lovely hilly place
resides below her lovely face
and beyond that, a lovely valley
reveals a fertile grove that's pally

[the first line comes from a lady's bio-data on this site...]

Michael Shepherd

! A Birthday Celebration

How strange it seems, that old age follows youth!
when all the world seemed one's own, at that time,
with time enough to seek a higher truth -
who'd guess the stairs so steep, so slow to climb?

Worn carpets and worn kneecaps are old age
- and yet, a blessed time for life of mind:
for those who wish, a different sense of wage;
free-chosen universal work to find;

and yet more blessed still: that earth-bound soul
to meet and greet, and work its soil and flowers;
to live with gratitude; and scan the whole
to find that One which proves the whole world ours.

As iron age yields to the gold of truth,
so our old age may find within, true youth.

Michael Shepherd

! A Buddhist Speaks: A Man Listens, Drinks

'The burning flames of anger have parched the stream of my being.
The thick darkness of illusion has blinded my intelligence.
My consciousness drowns in torrents of desire.
The mountain of pride has flung me into the nether worlds.
The driving blizzard of envy has dragged me into samsara.
The demon of belief in the ego has me firmly by the throat.'

(Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche)

[samsara = the flow of the world]

]

*

Oh Dilgo! You too? And you,
high in the snowy mountains, in a thriving monastery,
surrounded by devotion, love, study, meditation, prayer...

what hope for me and us, if this is what you find in you?

Then I remember your serene and smiling face,
untrammelled, unaffected, giving, and compassionate;
your first thought, before and after meditation
and the seeking of those light-clouded inner worlds,
compassion for the world; as you in turn were taught..

what hope for me and us, what can we do –
but, read this... not with self-loathing, but compassion,
the compassion that brought you, too, to write...

and I recall how snow, hanging from a mountain ledge,
forms drops of water sparkling in the sun and mountain air;
now and then, they drop; join together in a trickle;
a little way below, a mountain stream
gurgles, laughs upon its way;
makes a channel in the rock, splashes from the overhangs;
further down below (silent and still from up here, but for
a single bird, wheeling, gliding, in the lower air)
down below – a mighty river plans to form;
how pure its water tastes.

! A C*****s - Well, Ok, Seasonal - Plea..

Art brings a smile and a message.
Thus the art of 'Christmas' cards...
(and I use the word loosely,
as its public use is now disapproved...)

A folded card: that's four smallish sides to fill.
An appropriate seasonal smile on Page One;
Page Two requires nothing,
blank but room for something else to say
in lieu of that family catch-up print-out page
your children will have helped with; or maybe not..

Page Three offers a seasonal message – but
watch out these days – 'you can't use
THAT for THEM...' oh of course, they're,
what exactly? Crypto-Buddhists?
Lapsed Amish? Richard Dawkins and
his, er, dour or smiling family ?

Page Four – the great let-out
for the card's – and implicitly your –
abysmal grey vapidty...
it's a charity card!
No money for the Hallmark millionaires!

So spare a thought this season, for
those who have to choose those
cards for charities...

non-denominational, non-racist,
politically correct but only in
a negative sense – no dolphins
or humpback whales with an
ambivalent Monna Lisa smile:
your Japanese friends might sense a slight...

For suspected closet Christians
where the charity's along those lines,
it's back to symbol and the catacombs

and secret worshippers – perhaps
a burning nightlight, hinting
faith, in outer, inner, darkness?

or if that's risky, then the January snowdrop,
suggesting hope, continuance..
for children's charities, you can risk
a teddy bear – so far, no pulpit East or West
has denounced him as a capitalist, or as
American as Roosevelt...or an
endangered species thus dismissed...

but keep the smiling children off the card..
their faces might betray leanings
towards skin-colour preference,
adoption difficulties...

The 25 charities who have grouped together
as the '1959 Group' have risked this year
a Santa, face hidden but for pinkish nose...
cavorting on the ice, accompanied
by an antlered orchestra;
I guess the charities for multiple sclerosis,
epilepsy, autism, lifeboats, have agreed...
the rink-edge board behind him coyly
says 'Merr....stmas'...hmmm, close thing...

The glorious sunlit barn-end in the snow
of a Massachusetts farm, 'printed in USA,
finished in Canada'...uh? ... tells us that
the year moves round; nature, seasons, farm work
always with us; as it was in Bethlehem;
how sweet the fresh, clean manger smells!

we turn as always, to Page Three;
where heart warms heart with written words;
taste, politics, social obligation,
have no place here; it's simply, love.

Michael Shepherd

! A Cautionary Tale For Parents

" My mother told me
that I never should
play with the gipsies
down in the wood...

but she didn't tell me
why not, alas...so
'shouldn't...'
turned to 'should..' -

now I'm wiser,
but I'm pregnant..
guess I got that
roamin' blood..."

Michael Shepherd

! A Cream Tea To Live For

It's the flash of bright sunlight
reflected off a passing car
that stops me in my tracks –
picking out the teatime plate which
-since I'm one of those who motivate themselves
by the 'reward' system –
twenty minutes of gardening
have made all the sweeter:

a slice of soda bread, warm
from baking just two hours ago;
spread with crumbly-textured home-made cream cheese
(got it right this time, as much by accident) ,
and spread on this, red strawberry jam;
a slight mound here and there
implying a whole fruit promising itself
in this superior 'preserve'..
the sunlight shining on its gleaming surface

it's like those foodie photographs
(and yes, I know, they have to use
shaving foam because of those hot studio lights...):
those photographs in the lifestyle section
which we linger over, but have
already decided long ago,
yes, that's for me; or, that'll never be for me...

today, it seems, its perfection
is, for me: for this, heaven and earth were made;
if the gods are to be sought,
they are only to be sought
in the present moment.
Today, they do not fail. Nor I. Nor I.

Michael Shepherd

! A Garfunkel Moment

' I've always thought
the game in life
is to stay interesting
to yourself '

2007

Michael Shepherd

! A Girdle Round The Earth - I Fly, Master!

Right now, there are near 5,000 visitors on this site.

Let's suppose

you spend 8 hours a day surfing the web

and 8 hours sleeping

and 8 hours doing stuff

that's, er, 15,000 readers of one / lots of / poem(s) every suncircle.

And we thought Shakespeare's Puck and Ariel were fiction?

Michael Shepherd

! A Good Man In An Evil Time

This is the story I was told – I've omitted
the details which might identify
and narrow down the nation,
the place, the family, the man...

It was in his teens, at school,
when the national leader arose
to bring the nation to its future,
its fulfilment, its destiny; so, like
his fellows, he joined the youth corps,
their eyes shining with ideals.

When the war inevitably came,
the time to show the world,
he was conscripted as a soldier.
He was not easy with this; killing for any noble cause
was not in his beliefs; he sought advice
in every holy book of every faith,
and knew within himself that he was right:
life is in the gift of the gods, and not of men.

One against the many, what could he do?
Should he commit suicide, there and then,
or its equivalent, disobey until he was shot,
unrecorded, unpublicised? That too,
he felt was wrong, life denied.

He decided to do just what he was told;
but at night, alone, to lay all this in prayer
at the feet of God; to sleep then and awake
with a conscience washed by that same God
who, it seemed, allowed wars just and unjust
for reasons which few men may unravel.

As war continued, this model soldier
rose within the ranks; and by an irony of fate
was chosen to be on the staff
of the death camps now being secretly set up.
How intense his prayer now became;

how testing was this time.

The details of this now are all known
(more than even those involved then knew) :
after the war, when the trials of war criminals
attempted human justice, some leaders
felt that suicide was the honourable death;
some lived in hope, were tried and hanged;
some committed to life imprisonment
to repent their life; or not.

For him (and some camp victims who survived
even spoke for him; 'unyielding,
but never wantonly cruel' said one)
and truth to tell, at that sorry time,
those not involved
sneered at 'I was only obeying orders', and
to his fellow countrymen, he was an uneasy figure
to represent their national conscience
-for him, the ten year sentence
was much the same as a (conscript's) monastic cell;
adequate sustenance, housing, humble clothes,
and prayer.

Here the story told to me
breaks off; I cannot say
whether as a model prisoner
he won the admiration of his guards,
even the love; whether he wrote this down
and it was lost, or may one day make a book;
whether, if you met him, he would shine out
with love and truth and wisdom,
even saintliness; so that
you'd be proud to have met him; some say
that when he came out of prison, aged around 38,
he became a schoolteacher; some say, a priest;
others say, a doctor in a hospital..

I can only say, here was a good man;
and wonder how I would have behaved
had I been in his place; and whether,
as his life drew to a close,

he was even grateful in his soul
to have been so tested; and
to have known life whole.

Michael Shepherd

! A Hero Of His Clime

This morning, as I cut into
the tough flesh of the huge tomato
with its brown, half-healed scar
like an old sabre wound from some great battle,

the thought came, if you can call
a vegetable, heroic, and why not,
then this old bruiser is a hero...

its red proud chest so stalwart set,
saying, I saw the season through..
come rain, come shine, come wind
and foul weather - what's going on these days? -

I saw it all - and more than that -
I grew it - my way... and if they said,
as mortals do -
as if they knew a tom that's true -
you're not for us - I'll say to you -
I saw two thousand seven through -
I lived it - my way...

Michael Shepherd

! A High Cue, Or Japanese Billiards

Beware the person
who says 'It's not that simple...'
you may believe them.

Michael Shepherd

! A Journey Through An Interminable Poetic Landscape

In the midst of the dense thicket
of the poet-milky wood, just beyond the gas pumps
standing as lonely as a trio of crows
waiting for a poet's metaphor, and just beyond

where the pavement ends,
the road divided:
I took the road less travelled,
- unlike, say, a wise purveyor of ice-cream;

pausing only to think, as the evening
fell like sadness from my cigarette, that
the other road will be for me
for ever, the road I did not take

into the landscape which I did not see,
in the time that will not return;
but the road I took, led past
plum-trees, showering Spring's wild daffodils

as with a late Spring snow, falling quietly
like the sighs of young slant-eyed girls thinking of love;
I'm glad I took that road; for later, when Autumn
with its mists and mellow plumful fruitiness,

came silently, so silently,
I took that road again; although I'm told
the other road was much the same;
but now, as the brown leaves fell and swirled,

the small, hard plums had fallen;
I took some home, put them in the ice-box;
were they juicy, cold on my morning lips?
No. They'd gone; along with the girl

I'd brought home, and the crate of beer;
just a note on the ice-box door:

'I used to worship your poetry; now
I know that you've sold out... loser...'

Michael Shepherd

! A Joyful Death In Life

There is, it's said, a state of joyful death,
known to the wise; and this, more realised
than that cessation of our mortal breath
beyond experience; only surmised;

a 'death' that's not an end, but life anew;
a death that leaves no space where to be sad;
that leaves no time for guilt, regret or rue
but sets us free to know ourselves, and glad;

quite free of 'past' and 'future' in the mind,
a life entirely of the moment's grace;
the present taking care of what's designed
to teach the lessons which our soul must face;

consciousness then grows apace; and when
the ego dies – there's no more dying then..

[with acknowledgements to Eckhart Tolle's 'The Power of Now']

Michael Shepherd

! A Lady Beyond Death

She's dying.

She's had two heart attacks,
they say the third, the fatal one,
could come at any time.

But she's on her feet or sitting,
talking of things different.

Her husband - his love already
has taken him beyond grief - smiles, says,
she's somewhere between earth and heaven..

but I'm awed by her. She shines.
So this is just a hint of what
an angel is. A whiteness in the air
around her; she's like a young girl,
yet beyond life, and yet again,
younger than a life; unsullied.

She's somewhere, not between earth and heaven,
but somewhere where earth and heaven
meet, share their secret, know they're one.

She smiles towards me;
she's just - a presence.

Michael Shepherd

! A Life In The Day Of

It was a late, late night;
a wild, wild night;

primitive urges which people
might never have suspected of you
demanding to be slaked,
and slaked and slaked and slaked again

copulation and
population meeting
more than once in ways
no way related to
planned parenthood

but that's already in
the distant past – the nights
are your own; the day
belongs to others;

it's morning now; you open
an eye or two; stretch
luxuriously without a hint
of shame; then
a quick grooming – the fancy stuff
can wait til later..
and deal with what your inside
wants to put outside..

maybe a quick stroll in the garden
before or after breakfast
to see what's new; a few
moments to collect yourself; then
the business of the day

which seems to consist largely
for you, of satisfying the needs
of those strange and otherly
human beings with their irrational
urges for love, pleasure,

consolation, power, control -
compensation for the burden
of being a human being...
you do your best
to doze through this farrago;

you might call it life's office politics
if you knew what that phrase meant

but you're a cat,
and know no other life.

Michael Shepherd

! A Little Bit Of Tolle In Sutra Mood...

What a miserable day.

He didn't have the decency to return my call.

She let me down.

*

It is raining.

He did not call.

I was there. She was not.

[with acknowledgements and a smile]

Michael Shepherd

! A Little Grammar Is Most Becoming, It Becomes A Man...

And in case no-one mentioned this to you
on those hot summer afternoons when
you could hear the sound of bat on ball, or
ball on racquet, or foot on football, or
just people enjoying themselves out there
beyond the half-open classroom window –

a little bit of grammar can open your eyes,
open your mind, make you curious...
take for example the word 'become'..

many centuries ago the ancient Brits
got it from some 'Germanic' tribe,
and it meant, to come to a place,
be somewhere, go somewhere...

and later it acquired the sense of something
developing into something else, and
being recognised as that –
'she's become a real beauty, hasn't she? '

then in the Jane Austen 18th century years,
they would say 'what a very becoming
young lady..' though not to imply she
wasn't quite a lady yet, oh no...
and the verb had 'become'
an adjective sometimes (well, OK, a verbal adjective..)

or they'd say 'How well those clothes become her! '
meaning, not, she hung them up at night, and
in the morning found herself hanging there inside them...
but meaning decorous, well turned out...

then in the 19th century I guess,
philosophers of the heavy sort (we might assume
they'd reverted to Germanic tones...)
talked about 'Being and Becoming',

implying that two things were going on,
a bit like one thing standing still inside
something else which was changing;
or perhaps outside; a bit like God
(whom those philosophers didn't necessarily
believe in – but it serves...)

God saying 'I Am - BUT – I am going
to become – Everything! ! ... so,
Let There Be Light! ' and
you know what – there was light...

and there alas, we must leave
our friend 'becoming'; to become
what it will, or rather, how we use it; but
you must agree, life becomes more interesting,
even you could say, more becoming,
with a touch of grammar even
on a hot day when you're becoming
a little drowsy, please Miss, can I go
and get a glass of water...?

Michael Shepherd

! A Love Poem To A Poem

for there's what you planned to write about,
and what you find yourself
writing about; perhaps
find yourself, while writing about..

and there's the poem itself; did you
consult it about what
its plans were? and when
it's got itself written,
gone where it wanted to,
said what it wanted to say,
become what it wanted to become,
do you really know
what it's finally and really about?

is it telling you more about
you than you knew yourself?
is the poem writing you?

did we, as with the unicorn,
feel the unspoken need for it,
and it became?

in some other world,
did two grains of dust change places?
did a new sort of light
shine on a new sort of place
in some new sort of time?

poems are like cats:
we think we own them;
they allow us certain rights,
but they own us.

this is a love poem
to a poem

Michael Shepherd

! A Message Of Hope

to the joyless:
it's out there
somewhere

otherwise
there wouldn't be
a word for it
promise

to the joyful:
OK OK guys
easy now

Michael Shepherd

! A Metaphor In Search Of A Poem Perhaps

Like a favourite vase,
newly washed, saying
I'm beautiful as I am,
empty yet shining,
what will you fill me with?

Michael Shepherd

! A Not-Quaiku

We are born, live, and die.

It's tough.

Where's my ink-block?

[with respectful acknowledgements to Vita Brevis and Art Longer]

Michael Shepherd

! A Poem Deconstructing Itself In Homage To Barthes And Derrida (For Wendy If She Can Decode It)

I dreamed a dream profound and wise
about the state of man:
the brain a mass of wriggly worms,
the mind an old tin can..

The first word presents the semiotic question
of authorial authority:
is this a real person recounting
a 'real' dream, insofar as
dreams are 'real', and thus
presenting the authority of detached observation
(insofar as accepted structures of waking,
sleeping, dreaming, etc., are assumed,
thus 'fictitious' in an absolute sense)

or, is this a hermeneutic introductory opening
implying a proairetic forward movement?

moving on rapidly to the whole first line,
what is the authorial stance in 'profound and wise'?
is the 'author' asserting the semantic truth of this dream,
or is this a lexia which is presented to the reader to resolve
in his or her own reading?
or is simply buttressing the symbolic integrity
of the ontological construct presented?

jeezus the more I read the deconstruction
the more I think the first verse could be true

Michael Shepherd

! A Poppycocktail From The Taliban

And soon defeat the Taliban?
An opium dream! Why, no-one can!
It's all world trade: their export crop is
in high demand - it's opium poppies,
passed via equivocal Pakistan,
who somehow fail to impose a ban
on this corruption, which is wider
than any doings of Al Qaeda:
the most effective tool, the best,
for the moral self-destruction of the West.

Michael Shepherd

! A Psalm About Psalms

Overnight and forever
the earth is soaked in love.

Abundance knows no limits
to its gratitude, to its praise.

They have not forgotten
when things were otherwise.

Their faces shine.
With all this, their eyes are bright;

Here, now.

Michael Shepherd

! A Question About Art

Our world forgets – has never known, perhaps –
that questions are a treasured magic wand:

the question asked, the answer may, most like, come freshly said
out of a space that's new alike to teacher and to taught;

your question is today – how factual should I leave
my verse, or should I seek to 'colour' it with metaphor? ...

this image comes to mind: 'old master' in his studio,
famed painter of Madonnas with attendant Child;

demand's incessant; so he draws the outlines in,
and passes on the canvas to his studio hand;

coloured then, maybe he adds the master's touch of life --
the smile of angel's sweetness on the Madonna's face;

the glimpse of future in the Christ Child's eyes;
and off it goes to some great patron's church,

to comfort all of womanhood in woes and joys,
its colours gleaming candlelit in sacred prayer;

and yet, how connoisseurs may treasure that quick sketch
on scrap of hand-made paper, where the very touch

of sanguine chalk or silverpoint, reveal the immediate mind
of that old master, as it found the new track of the line;

the world will praise, admire, your coloured image of Her face;
but She will see, in pencilled sketch, how love springs from her grace..

Michael Shepherd

! A Question For Darwin

Did humming-birds
forget the words?

Michael Shepherd

! A Quiet Word To Poetry Teachers

The poet means
what the poet said;
look for the 'meaning'
and the poem's dead.

Michael Shepherd

! A Rainy Day Enjoyed

Waking this morning is unhurried, even slow –
the weather is saying something to the body.
The forecast for the day, it seems, is rain.

Time, then, for that ease of human living –
a day of light and measured pleasures,
to be indulged in, not too briefly,
not too long; to love each thing at home within itself;

open all the windows, and perhaps the doors –
let in that rain-washed air, conditioned, cool,
be inside and yet outside; it once was said
that rain comes only after sacrifice;
this rain is holy.

Idly open a drawer not opened for some time;
find there a children's toy or game;
live for some minutes as a child again,
smelling rain as you once smelled it,
full of the promise of a lifetime not yet lived.

Be that child again, in this loving house;
love this rainy day as children do,
living life the way it's offered; all
too present to need future dreams;

let the golden present sift gently through your fingers,
you, unhurried, loving life
as it now, today, loves you.

Michael Shepherd

! A Rant About 'Unacceptable'...

Today, and every day - someone booped!
Someone who's paid a lot, not to..

An apology, a resignation of their tarnished
position in our public life? Don't
make me laugh...

No - they grandstand, chest inflated
with their moral worthiness -
'This is absolutely unacceptable...'
implying, some minion... escaped my notice...
of course would never countenance...
...torocaca! That's exactly what
you just did - accepted it...

It's another variation of the now familiar
response to some organisation's failing -

don't admit it; just issue
(as you scrabble shamelessly through the scree
for the moral high ground, way beyond your reach...)
a mission statement - 'Our company upholds
the very highest standards of public life...'
blah blah... it didn't did it? ...

OK, having said that,
at the end of the day,
and other clichés that stick on our tongue
like an ice lolly that another has already licked...
whew....

Michael Shepherd

! A Robert Hass Prose-Poem Impertinently Versified

Hassless

For a summer week he watched her;
she watched him watching her.

He wrote his music; thought of her,
sixtyish, Japanese; flat-breasted like a boy;

she brushed her paintings; thought of him,
young, eyes like an untamed pony;

he grew to love the discipline in her painting;
she loved straightway his wild indiscipline.

That warm night when, on her tidy, well-swept doorstep,
music yet unwritten met rice-paper yet to be inked,

she told him of her mastectomy;
he looked her in the eye; held hands; and bid goodnight.

The blue bowl on his porch the morning after
full of rose-petals; underneath, dead bees.

Michael Shepherd

! A Silent Night, And Stars

Oh yes he said, there was a birth,
you ask me how I'm sure

remember shepherds train themselves
to see the slightest things
on dark nights, on starlit nights
when it's windy, when it's still,
when snow makes strange lights,
strange shapes, strange shadows –

under the shadow of that low stone wall,
there's a darker shadow... does it move?

yes, it's a great job, out there on a starlit light,
a great bowl of stars, nothing to do except
be alert the whole time; so you never miss
the unexpected; so peaceful, there's already love
for everything around you. Best job in the world.

so you can't miss anything out of the ordinary;
what's not so easy is to explain to others...
but it's all here in my heart; my children know it's true..

but it's funny how you remember the small things
on a special day.
The straw. When it's clean, it's always gold of course
and shiny. But I'd never seen straw shine like that.

And the cow's eyes. You know how cattle look at you
as if they're interested, but not very interested?
That one was different. It seemed to know
just why it was a cow..

And then of course the other guys.
You don't come so far, so precise
unless you're very wise.

Far things and near things. We each
have our special skills, he said;

in the high things and the humble,
love.
It's here, and there.

Michael Shepherd

! A Strange Glimpse Of Remembered Moments

Dozing this morning – was I awake,
or was I asleep? for many minutes,
I entered a bright and shining world,
but of my own remembered moments;

yet more than visual memories:
that state of mind, that happiness
which knows no other..

all was brightest colour:
the first Mickey Mouse Weekly
to come out in full, rich colour; (I'll swear
it smelled different, too..)

the new craft room at school,
the intoxicating smell of open tins
of bright coloured enamel paint,
the smell of fresh-cut wood...

sunlight on ancient grey-gold stone;
oh, a whole repertoire of memories
on which there was no need to dwell,
for they declared their shared totality...

but one brief, vivid glimpse I'll share
for your amusement and what else:
slightly curled, from being rolled in the post,
a copy of 'American Home' from the late forties:
against a blue blue sky, white clapboard and
white picket fence; inside, a gingham apron,
a sweet-smelling pipe, proudly ruffled hair..
a gingham table-cloth, hand-stencilled furniture,
blue and white plates against a butter-yellow wall..

all radiated promise, satisfaction, happiness;
as if winter sings of Spring;
all things were possible, and live on now;
but, above all, in myself,
a glorious sense – of ordinariness...

as if I was in place; had always been;
would always be; no other place to be,
no other self to seek, no world seen alien;

our holiest, most precious,
self-sacred moments, when experienced,
have this glorious matter-of-factness;
saying, how could this be other?
The glorious, here, is ordinary...
and back in your familiar world,
the ordinary must be glorious; deserved;
and to be savoured as its truth...

I opened my eyes, eventually;
saw no reason to deny that world;
to cover it with yes but, or, maybe;

later thought, only a poem,
to share this, give this back.

Michael Shepherd

! A Sufi Life

Pen in hand, and pensive...
sitting by the open window,
the curtains moving gently in the breeze,
listening to the spontaneous liveliness
of the fountain whose joyful drops
the sunlight plays with as they fall;

catching the scent of a rose
which comes and goes to the nostrils
as if it has its own intentions;

watching the sunlight moving round
the courtyard garden;
remembering with an inward stirring,
it's the earth which moves...

words passing through the mind;
in this golden stillness, all things
are a metaphor for all else;
it's beyond the tender tying
into lines of poetry;

just a light touch, these words;
nothing to prove; no-one to convince;
more like a hand unfolded towards life,
an acknowledgement;

as when you join the dervishes in turning,
and as the mind-free centre grows more strong,
more established (for this centre holds) ,
the thoughts spin off...

the poem too, spins off:
one arm upward which remembers,
palm open to receive in wonder;
one arm outward, palm open, offering all to all;
take it, while it's warm with life.

! A T - O N E - M E N T

'Atonement' – for me, it has a solemn,
lifetime, deathtime, this-is-final
ring to it – spoken in the severest tones
in some headmaster's study in the skies...

and you, feeling that this is the last chance
to rake up all your worst, your very worst
memories that still chill your heart after all these years,
so you try not to think about them...

so, to ease the sense that fate's about to pounce
and is it really true about hellfire...

you look it up in the dictionary

no, it must be some clever pun...
no, it's there in black and white
and Oxford blue...

at...one...ment... oh,
how pure upon the page the words here rest –
look now upon this book, sweet masters –
see how the angels smile at human guilt...
there's joy in heaven today...

just... that... you mean,
it's really that simple, and
all that stuff from the past...?
so I can just... oh wow...

'Sorry, I can't come to the phone right now,
please leave a message and I'll ring you back..
I'm having my daily at-one-ment...'

and maybe one day, if I work at it,
someone will say to someone else,
seeing me walking down the street,

'Just look at him, or if you're lucky,

talk to him - don't you admire his cool,
his here-and-now, and his at-one-ment...? '

Michael Shepherd

! A Thankyou For A Comment

What is a poem without a reader?

What is a reader without a heart?

What is a heart without another heart to meet it,
greet it?

What are two hearts without what they share?

What is sharing without sharing everything?

What is everything without poets?

What is a poet without a reader...

How beautiful a circle is.

How still its centre.

Michael Shepherd

! A Thankyou To Margaret

Some thankyou's are best private;
some deserve a public airing,
in case they touch someone else who's suffered:

I wrote a poem about my mother's restless, painful death;
and you, who had just lost your husband
but whose deathbed was a memorable day
as he with cancer and you his wife
had the most beautiful, memorable hours of conversation,
about two rich lives lived together -

you, struck by the contrast, wrote to me
in sympathy. And so, my pain is eased
in sharing in your beautiful sad joy..
and you, I hope, may be the happier for this -
I wonder, do you know what good this brought?

thank you, Margaret.

Michael Shepherd

! A Thought From Isaac Of Nineveh

Isn't it extraordinary – when
you come to think of it – that
the One whom atheists deny
(for then they would have to acknowledge
One greater than themselves...)
knew, knows, about humility...?

I mean, how could He?

Suppose, He hadn't sent
such men as Jesus Christ
to show us that humility
was, is, godly, and indeed,
a path to know that One?

Would we then be treating
the humble as the self-victimising
scum of the earth? And we, assured in being
proud and arrogant?

What else could that One
know of contraries and opposites,
paradox and contradiction,
unless He (or She, or It)
knows all; knows us
better than we know ourselves?

Michael Shepherd

! A Thousand Poems

yeah yeah, nothing for you to boast about –
'100 good ones would be quite enough...
no, make that 20 – who's got time for more,
even if they were masterpieces...'

So perhaps, merely a little quiet satisfaction
in a personal kinda way: I guess
retirement years hang heavily for some,
recalling days of authority, command;
others find them richer, busier than ever; or
do just the same jobs as they did so well, except
they don't get paid for it...

or you can put all your ego in one basket –
try to do the one thing well; after a life
of unfinished jobs and hasty jobs,
and jobs you dreamed of and yet never did...

or, there's poetry: if speech is actually the Word
that set the cosmos on its merry way, that
sings the praise of gods or human enterprise, or
draws attention to the sunlight on a wall;
melts the heart; reveals, relates
the physical and the metaphysical;
raises the spirits, lights the mind... then,
poetry's no bad thing
to sieve, to pour a lifetime into;

and if, as the statistics state,
400 of those 1,000 poems get a reading, averaging
two people each, around the world and every day –
then perhaps, a little quiet pride, a hope
that something useful has been tried
in these last years on earth...

a small gift to the fleeting soul,
the ferryman's so solemn toll
to help it on its way; a fee
to offer; if that were, shall be,

what's appropriate..

Michael Shepherd

! A Tribute To Poemhunter's Popularity

' Dear

Greetings to you, i hope this mail finds you well & healthy and i hope we can established a relationship since we are meeting for the first time, i have gone through a profile that speaks good of you and it interests me to contact you for an assistance to help me transfer the Sum of 6.5 Million USA dollars my father deposited in a bank here in Cote d'Ivoire before he was assasinated.i like honesty, trust, love, truth, caring, & respect, i have all this qulities in me and i believe you have all this qualities too, that is why i decided to contact you for this transaction, i will like you to contact me through my private mail box(rita_benson204@) so that we can know ourselves better.

Thanks and hoping to hear from you soonest.

Rita Benson '

Michael Shepherd

! A Tribute To President Bush From Europe

Mr President,

You are all

that makes America

grate

Michael Shepherd

! A Tribute To Ramana Maharshi

Movement, beautiful movement
comes out of stillness;
dancers know this;

sound, beautiful sound,
comes out of silence;
musicians, singers, know this;

what then, of stillness and silence?

Be still for a while;
be silent for a while;
and you will know
all you need to know

and the question, who am I?
is answered
in stillness, in silence,
in the riches of yourself;
in the treasure of yourself.

Michael Shepherd

! A Word In Your Era

I'm miss-spelling this message to try to shove
it past that spamblock that bans risky words like vole;

and to tell you, my darling, my angel, my beaut
that I love every inch of you from your head to your foto

Michael Shepherd

! Abbot John Of Forde At Prayer

All the wonders under heaven and earth
would take more than a lifetime to enumerate –

why then, to be surprised, that One
can speak to such as me,
not in my outer ear, but straight
into my inner ear – nay, right into my soul
his gnosis whispers as it were myself
that spoke it... whispers
such sweet things,
that though they blessedly inform my later words
- as these to you – yet they tremble
in their truth, upon the very edge of words;

whispers such new things to me,
though such things, old to Him,
old, but present; thus, they're ever new...

for this, I'd waited; waited in the stillness of my heart;
now listened as it were to all
my life explained to me; not, not in judgment,
but in the sweetest grace of friendly intimacy;

and then, when I can no longer hold
Him to me, dare to ask for further news of my true self,
He's gone...

At first, it was the sweetest pain, His going;
and then one day, I learned as from myself
the way to share with Him, his return journey –
which for Him must be – as must have been – joy beyond all joy;
returning to His Father... so I accompanied Him
with gratitude and praise...

and then I learned, when I accompanied Him
to that place where all inner and all outer meet,
a further, private, holy thing – His Father's love
for Him... which aforesaid had been but words
that I believed to be beyond man's mind...

the whisper in my thought, now thunder in the world;
silent thunder in the mind, flashing lightning in the soul;

yet in the silent church, I by the altar there, sounded
near as altar candle's peaceful flame:

I knew that what men call a mystery,
is daylight truth as visible as mountains or as streams:
that what men read as words, dance off the page
in holy silence, to the heart: the Holy Trinity
was, is now to me, as necessary and inevitable,
as Man and God; as living, now, as God and Man;
as living, now, as Grace.

So John of Forde records for us, by grace of grace itself.

[John of Forde, c.1145 – 1214, is a newly translated witness
to the undivided Church in an age when spirituality,
scholarship, and poetry of speech came together at their height.]

Michael Shepherd

! Alle Thyngen Af Thu Syngen

Today, all things sing of you;
you sing in all things.

you show yourself -
today - in all things;
all things show you.

you are here
in all things – today –
all things are you.

Dare we say – today –
You made them?

Better to be silent,
eyes shining.

Alle thyngen af Thu syngen,
Goddess-sonne yeboren ys;
Alleluya, belles beswyngen,
alle menne, synge inne blysse!

Michael Shepherd

! An Ancient Japanese Saying

Persons in cities
driving 4x4s
should smile a lot
but not bow

Michael Shepherd

! An Ardent Wish For Others

How ardently, now, I wish for others
what I –alas too late – wish -
would have wished - for my own self,
and maybe, for my parents too:

some time in life – it would depend on you –
but not too late, too late –

to sit down together -
each parent, each child, individually –
and maybe with a few days 'thinking time' beforehand -
and say – you could take this in turns –

'Ask me all the questions
which you never, until now, thought to ask...
ask me all the questions
which you never liked or dared to ask...
and I shall answer you...'

and if it goes well (as I pray it will)
you might even incorporate this
into a yearly family occasion:
done with humour and with love;

this is what I wish for you
as ardently as I would have
wished it for myself;
for this is my regret,
for myself; and perhaps, for them..

Michael Shepherd

! An Exploration Of The Subtleties Of The English Language In Second Childhood

If I don't
go and
go
when I need to
go

I still
go
anyway

without
going there

Michael Shepherd

! An Old Armenian Limerick

I once had a friend called Djirdjirian;
His Christian name was Haig - though Armenian;
(The British had a fine Post-
al Office on the coast) :
So two friendly Djirs for Djirdjirian!

Michael Shepherd

! An Unofficial Report On Poemhunter

'So tell me, Michael...'

the voice is slow and measured,
that of one used to public speaking,
his words so significant that the audience
must hear every one...

James, the high-flying lecturer on
the humanities and beyond,
writes books, poems, travels, mixes
with the great and good...

'So tell me, Michael, is there any
great poetry being written on
your website? ...'

James looks me in the eye,
as one who's used to hearing, impartially,
all the evidence, then making up
his finely balanced mind...

Inside myself, I inspect
this utterance for undertones...
a hint of patronising sneer? ...

Well, thanks for asking, James, I say
(no harm in a touch of gentle irony...) ,
you have to understand -
this is the muddy, churned grass roots
of poetry - you might not even
recognise it as such -

it's the First Aid box, the 'where does it hurt? ',
the surgery, the remedial therapy,
the further diagnosis required,
of poetry and the human heart;

it's where the kid who's made
his or her first poem,
brings it like a child's first drawing
home to be admired...

where the first unforgettable time
the world or God has let you down;
the first time you've been dumped on;
the first time that a friend's betrayed you,
or shifted their allegiance – these yelps
need to be both distanced and recorded
in some words of black and white;
wounds to have their scabs
constantly picked at; or statements
to be transcended, even, later, laughed over;

where teenagers declare their total loneliness,
threaten that uncaring world with suicide; or
dare to hint at family abuse;

or simply sketch their life as drama,
themselves at centre-stage,
the first daring thrill
of self-invention...
first explorations, line by non-sequential line,
of rock star lyrics and the rapping boast...

or, exhilarated, throw words together
in poems that - well - only look like poems...
build defensive-aggressive barriers
to claim a feistiness; and
over which to shoot at imagined enemies..

and at some point, settle in belief – or not –
that rhyme and structure are the thing
that gives poetic status to a verse..

and later, when they're no longer centre-stage
(though some may never – or do we ever –
quite get past that point.. or merely, just learn
to hide it more...?) write poetry..

and that thrill when you've put
two words together for the first time
in your life, to make a new thing...
as if two words have married and brought forth a child...
and then you're hooked on poetry...

this is the hospital for the human soul;
this is open-heart surgery before
the term was used; this is where
we show a lifetime's films
from our internal camera; learn
to no longer pick our scars in the vain hope
that new scar tissue will perform miracles...

this is where we meet the world
as if for the first time; where we discover wonder;
discover words that previously were imprisoned, even dead,
in books of scripture – forgiveness and compassion,
mercy, justice, grace...begin to live
as human beings should live,
in the fullness of ourselves..

and, as the mind reveals itself as servant,
brings unsuspected skills, until one day
we say with tentative pride, to our best friend,
I don't just write poetry, I feel that I'm a poet..
and laugh a little at our daring to declare
ourselves as shoulder to shoulder with the great...

So, James, I say straight-faced (it's up to him
to see the irony in this...) I doubt
there's much to detain you in this Poemhunter...
but you might glance at it, sometime...

Michael Shepherd

! And Meanwhile Love

Waking in the dream-tossed night, I knew you harmed
a thousand miles away in suffering's dark storm;

so only love

pain comes no easier when it comes again,
the closing and the parting, pain

so simply love

I would it did not come to you,
but come it does, makes true untrue

and meanwhile love

the salt sea breaks on fate's dark reef,
the tears are salt, bring no relief

so only love

all things may pass as summer rain;
I cannot promise aught of pain

but meanwhile love

my heart beats fast, your heart's repair
not mine to give; I here, you there;

so only love

there seems no sense when innocence
lacks reason as its last defence

yet always, somewhere, love

(for both of you)

Michael Shepherd

! Angels

Angels..

do you believe in angels?

do angels believe in you?

which question, the more sensible?

suppose angels

to know greatly more than us..

suppose, that's why they're there...

suppose, they know space is not fully real:

enter it knowingly, to deliver us

a holy message, wearing whiteness, light,

which would announce them

truthful, good of all good, and beautiful..

suppose, they know time is not fully real:

enter it knowingly, to deliver us

a message that's eternal, phrased

in terms of human life, direct, immediate;

suppose them, to be untroubled

by human frailty: knowing all

they need to know; messengers

of love beyond all love;

rejoicing in the heavenly joy

of living under perfect law..

suppose... suppose...

that all this living metaphor,

so recognisable to human mind,

lives in each human heart..

Michael Shepherd

! Anger

Epictetus the stoic philosopher said
that anyone who angers you becomes your master
by disturbing you;

Well, that's me -

full of righteous and unrighteous anger;

on the other hand,
God gets pretty hot in the O.T. -

Are there different rules?
After all, we both know we're right.

And don't ask me what 'religion' I am, OK?
Or I could get really angry...

Michael Shepherd

! Anna - The Story Of A Love

The Indians say
that the eater is the eaten.

We caught each other's eye
across a crowded room...
she with her mates,
but blushed in my direction...
and when I looked at her,
she glowed
and I glowed.

She too was ripe for passion.
We couldn't be kept apart;
later in the privacy of my room
my lips sought her unsullied bloom,
the irresistible downiness of her young skin
and soon that soft skin
was moist with passion
as we consumed each other,
and were subsumed in unity.

Now I have died two deaths from love:
first consumed by desire, then
consumed by pleasure.

What a peach she was.

Hey, seize the moment -
there's another in the bowl.

Michael Shepherd

! Another Cliché, Er, Bites The Dust

Every few months, a shot rings out
in the desert of the public mind;
another cliché (reading its local newssheet,
chewed cigar in mouth, string tie,
six-gun handy, sheriff's badge
worn shamelessly..) .. thup..
bites the studio dust...

Last year 'bout this time,
we buried WMD.. or
'wepmastruc' in Bushspeak...
seems it had lived quite long enough,
demented in the Sunset Home...

This week, we're invited to the wake
after the private burial of
War On Terror; RIP (for some) :

Seems it's made life too heroic
for this captive audience:
a pre-Christian world,
neatly divided into forces of evil,
forces of good: you'n-me'n-Johnny Wayne'n-
the Mayor of Carmel 'gainst
the bad guys.. but...
some guy up in the projection room
lost the last reel... now we'll never know
about that happy ending (fade in music) ..

seems the old guy saw life just too black and white
(I'm talking metaphorically, OK?)
and life just ain't that simple any more... pardner..
the old West is dead...so ride off into the sunset,
ole 'War on Terror'...as the credits roll -
the bad guy now lives down the street from you;
a quiet family, always greet you as they pass..

but don't worry, ours is a lively language
here in Spinville; we'll think of something else,

like, say, 'Neighbour Threat'...
just fill in this form, would you,
and don't forget the
'Confidential Neighbour Information' page?

Michael Shepherd

! Another Gem From Jon Haidt

Look inward to God,
Look outward to God,

but for God's sake, stop trying
to make the world conform to your will...

Michael Shepherd

! Another Rant And A Wicked Suggestion

Spent one hour plus on the phone
trying to book a routine visit
from the power company;
innumerable options,
given seven further phone numbers;
it was booked; they never turned up;
round the circuit again...

Suggestion: get a numbered invoice pad printed,
charge everyone who does this to you
'For professional attention: x hours @ \$/£ xxx = \$/£ xxx'...

Bet some of them pay you...

Have fun.

Michael Shepherd

! Are Persons People?

and he says

you don't write poetry to please people, you know
that's with a comma after people
you write poems to please you
with shock lines like I still treasure
our first condom oh my love
to show that you're cool and hip

but she says why write poems at all
if they don't please people
men have such egos I suppose
it's because they can't have babies

but who are people anyway, how
many persons make a people or
how few persons and are they
a random mix or is there like
a recipe, some of this lot some of that

he says people who know about these things
like poetry but how do you know
which are the people who know
I'm not sure I know he knows for a start

and she says well ordinary people
so what then do you slide up
to a bus queue when there's no
bus in sight and say look you're
ordinary people I've been looking for you
yeah watch them give you a nasty look
and skedaddle pretending they remembered
they were due some place else

I'm beginning to wonder if people really exist
I mean as such but I'll have to stop there
my PC says it's run out of virtual memory
that's another thing I don't understand
maybe people are just a virtual memory too
I'm beginning to wonder if anyone knows

what *people* should think about poetry
maybe they should just write it throw it away
see who picks it up and not never nohow talk about
other *people's* poetry

Michael Shepherd

! Armenian Americans - American Armenians

Oh dear Armenians - you whom
Mother America took to her bosom,
helped so many of you to become
rich and powerful...

if the Turks acknowledge the ethnic cleansing
as we call it now, of so many years ago,
when so many erred -

will that assuage your grief? will that
soothe your soul? Must you ask this
of an America not without its own blemishes
in ethnic cleansing, over a longer term...

when the guilty men have long since met their God;
met His justice and his mercy; who - if some
faiths are to be believed - have been reborn
to live out the fruits of their good deeds and their bad...

yes, it is wrong for Turks to bring injustice to today
and say, we'll only help you if you dropp this call
for 'apology, admission' - from whom to whom?

equally wrong, to demand this of the Turks
who today are blameless of their past...
will admission help them too?

Should Adam forever apologise to Eve,
forever, Eve to Adam, and the serpent, thus, to both?

Koha - you the beautiful, who shone behind
the counter there at Macy's - may we look
into each others' eyes, and drink the future's love?

Michael Shepherd

! Artist As Verb

Perhaps the world is more grammatical
than grammar: reveals itself, a little coded –
as codes tempt, when grammar hides
under the guise of schoolmaster:

the artist, say, as verb:
as the verb, to be:
luring the mighty subject
beyond all thought, to become
an object we can all enjoy:

the sculptor, deep within his isness,
praying with his chisel
so that Krishna cannot but consent;
entering this stone;

the poet, listening to
the Word behind all words,
charming the spirit of all things
to make all objects sacred in our eyes;

the musician, listening to the silence,
as through his being, pass
worlds of knowledge beyond all words..

we, as heaven's verb,
watching as subject, object,
make themselves a mirror for each other.
Grammar could be love.

Michael Shepherd

! Autumn In The Northern Hemisphere, Spring In The South..

It's autumn here: the leaves fall brown,
the nights are cold and frosty,
the days are shorter and shorter,
there's snow on the way...

is autumn asking you to be sad?
Go take a walk: fill your lungs with air –
isn't that good? Don't you feel the air
singing of everything that nature needs
to keep things going the whole year round?

Listen as you walk
to all that goes on in silence;
secret movements pretending to be stillness:
the trees are making plans for Spring,
the plants, the flowers too; the earth
is bubbling secretly with thoughts of Spring..

If on an autumn walk
a Persian poet met a Japanese poet
they might write
a Persian haiku:

This autumn evening
my mind is full of endings;
trees smile as they plan.

Michael Shepherd

! B L I S S

When asked 'What is it like? '
he'd only say,
'There is no 'there'; no 'like'; no 'not';
no 'other'; no 'away'..

Michael Shepherd

! Backward Boys

Saturday evening, the week's hired film, click-click, click-click
while we chewed fruit gums and shouted FOCUS!
from time to time when the reel changed;
and after The White Hell of Pitz Palu
or The Lost Horizon, and Mickey in black and white
and Corky the Cat; after the hired films
and the occasional black potato growing on the screen
when the celluloid caught fire,
the home movies run backwards:
and the world was a magic kingdom -
things jumped from nowhere into your hands
like the world's top ball player;
while you ate, the plate filled instead of emptied;
and the happy smiles-for-the-camera
became inane dissociated grins
as if you knew you were being totally idiotic
but had no control...

Suppose
that life, on Saturday evening, did just that for real:
Saturday's trashy film would take on the solemn
inevitability of Greek tragedy;
shoplifting would be an act of humble charity
as one slipped the goods- blink-back onto the counter;
and we the older would look so eagerly forward
to childishness and irresponsibility
(as we alas will; but then more agile and more loved with it) :
like teenagers, go to bed alert and wake up tired...
and in the bathroom - no, let's not go there...

and then at midnight, Cinderella Time would revert to real time.
Boing..oing..oing..

But under the covers as we blissed off to sleep,
a great big, wrinkled, toothy grin...

Michael Shepherd

! Beauty Of The Shining Self

The life of a 'minor poet', an amateur,
of, say, fifty, a hundred years, ago,
and long before that:

a lifetime's love of poetry;
and one's personal contribution,
after 25 years, let's say, might be
a 'slim volume' of verse,
distillation of that lifetime,
printed elegantly at one's own expense
in 200 copies, maybe,
a few sent to literary journals
for, perhaps, a few lines of review; and
some letters of appreciative response
from friends to whom one sent the poems;
'the quintessence of a beautiful soul', wrote one.

today – when 'beauty' is no longer thought a virtue
in many areas of art – there's something
more important, so some think –
a poem on the internet as here
can produce a written response
so unexpected, so beautifully expressed,
that it leaves no doubt of what the sages say:

that there are two aspects of that which we call 'beauty':
the fine, yet temporary, one which may be studied, learnt –
a lifetime, say, curating or collecting Chinese ceramics
of the finest period, when making or owning such a pot
was like a spiritual act of devotion –

and that beauty which is eternal – that of the human self,
shining in all its glory from a human being so roused,
beauty that melts one's heart and brings one to one's knees
all inwardly; known, reflected; entirely of itself;

and which can be found from time to time
blazing from the screen here, from persons known or unknown,
within a 'Comments' box...

a beauty, surely, greater by far than any poem,
revealing all the riches of the human heart
without any inhibition;
and yet, given cause to blaze out thus
by this form of words called poetry.

Michael Shepherd

! Being Human Has Its Side Effects (Read The Small Print)

Where are the great myths of our age –
hiding truth within their all too human stories?
In their absence, scientific research
has wondrous tales yet to tell...

Jon, the renowned professor of psychology
and not averse to self-examination and experiment,
took Paxil – Prozac's cousin – for eight
adventurous weeks.

In week five – 'the world changed'...
his heavy work load, his insecurities
as an untenured professor,
vanished like magic; changes which he'd wished
to make for himself for years,
happened overnight – he loosened up,
he lightened up, he accepted his mistakes
and did not dwell on them –
who would not want to be a Prof like he?

But... a side effect: names began to elude him –
'Hi!' and 'Hi there!' were all his students got
out on campus, in the morning classroom ...
and along with that, the subterfuges –
how can you ask a student whom you've known for years
to give their opinion... er, point, smile,
hope they're watching.. yes, you...

and facts too started to recede –
just out of reach on the top shelf of
the mind's rich library, memory's repository...

Greek tragedy would have a word,
a scene, a moral, for it:
the Fates had claimed their own...
Nemesis had struck; Icarus' wings had melted,
Prometheus' insult to the gods avenged...

or in our scientific terms, a brain on Paxil, Prozac,
has more serotonin in certain synapses,
so the neurons fire more often...

The celebrated young Professor
stopped taking the pills; five weeks later,
the memory returned; as did the worries
(security of tenure threatened even more
by Professors who can't even remember
what they profess to profess...) .

Mnemosyne, goddess of memory,
bestowed one gift alone on Prof:
he remembered just how he had been those weeks;
as certain Greeks, it's said,
remembered like a dream
the Golden Age which they never
might recapture, but only tell of
in myths and suchlike tales
of truth and goodness; beauty too..

Michael Shepherd

! Being Philosophic About It All

reviewing one's life
in the light of eternity and
rebirth theory and
the lostcounteenth beer

I'll say this...
I'll say this...

one could say –
no listen I'm being serious –
was I fated to live this life
or did I earn it
or - was I fated to earn it,
ha?

but I'll shay thish –
maybe I didn't deserve better
BUT (dramatic pause, points finger)
I didn't deserve worsh...

sub specie whatsit aeternitatis
strawnery how theesh Latin tags shtick
shub shpecie aeternitatish...

hurry up please it's time

Michael Shepherd

! Being Today

Today is that day
not on the calendar,
as National Olfactory Day,
but far more exciting than that:
the day when scent, fragrance, smell,
awoke on the warm sunlit air from a winter's sleep
and out of nowhere easily spoken of
produced a whole new world.

The first shock was the hedge two doors down
which yesterday was a green hedge with white bits
but today a burst of fragrance, a Hallelujah Chorus
transcribed to be played with or on or in the nose.

The restaurant two blocks up
unleashed from its kitchen
garlic that burst out like a bunch of singing nudists into the street
cavorting shamelessly and shouting to the world
every Mediterranean memory
of romantic meals and much else
that one thought private.

Then subtle smells that made one into a cat or dog
pursuing trails not on the street map
and making beaten tracks into voyages of discovery:
the baker's became a European trip of fresh morning bread
with another hundred freeze-dried memories unloosed;

And all down the street,
other people's lunches opened their front doors
and said 'Come and join us! We're having roast beef today
with all the trimmings, and we've enough smell
to feed the five thousand! '

and a hundred gardens one thought dormant
leaned on the front gate
and exchanged the time of year with a childlike innocence
that couldn't be told to come inside this minute or else,
and presented nosegays to strangers

without asking for a contribution to a cause.

A day for bringing past happinesses out from the store cupboard
and giving them a shake and leaving them on the line
until the sunlight moves off
and the air leaves them cooler and even fresher;

and wondering whom one will be tomorrow,
if one can feel like this today.

Michael Shepherd

! Benediction

Read this poem only aloud
read it as slowly and with such solemn dignity

as if it were the whole great human race
declaring itself to be truly great

read it as if it were
as indeed it is

not words but a great sounding bell
and you are that great bell

so large a bell so low its boom
that it is more vibration than a sound

struck in a temple courtyard
by a robed monk so full of love

that he merges into love itself
every time he sounds the bell

and as its sound now travels up
into the clear mountain air

the goatherds and the goats hear in its sound
the meaning of their life

and in the fields the workers raise themselves
and know what blessing is

and in the valley the silence after each stroke
becomes more real

as the echo fades
and the air knows itself

this poem is the sound of the human heart
listening to itself beyond all words

hearing praise and gratitude and love
knowing themselves in stillness for what they are

this poem is what is beyond all words
smiling sorrowing as it seeks for words

as it vibrates out into the silence
the wonder of the unspoken

the magic of all that's yet unmanifest
the thoughts yet to be thought

hear in this bell the sound that tells to all
that there is enough love

in one single human heart
to nourish the whole world

hear this bell sounding aloud
sound out eternal in your soul

* * *

[work in progress]

Michael Shepherd

! Bird's Nest

Here in the ivy,
cupped, a light,
an aery, faery thing;

no artist could make better,
no mother could do more;

so much intelligence,
so much love;

every threaded fibre
a flight of love.

Is it fulfilled, or waiting,
or plundered of its life?

too precious to destroy,
this cradle of intelligence.

Michael Shepherd

! By The Grace Of [autofill]

My knees, my mind, my whole soul aches
and yes a drowsy numbness steals
around my kneecaps – it's been
a self-assembly afternoon.

I'm not made for self-assembly:
unwrap the components, lay
it on the carpet, they advised;
and then? The postures of
Islamic prayer, cross-legged Hindu,
Christian missionary position, none
seemed to work for more than
a few seconds at a time.

It proved an allegorical point though:
I'm a sorry kit of self-assembly in myself:
impatience, rage, resentment – they
never said it was self-assembly, either...

by now every nation in the world
must be swearing as it sweats
over self-assembly, to its own One God
which however, has a different name
from the One God of others, and it seems,
plays by different rules..

how ironic it must seem to Him, or Her, or It –
a world united in the jihad of self-assembly,
divided in its allegiance to the One God
whose Unique Selling Point, you'd think,
was that of ultimate unity.. even before
we get down to justice, mercy, goodness, all that stuff.

I wonder if in this age of internet-speak
it might aid the unity of nations and
the deity they pray to (yes, He/She/It might like it too?) if
we would offer up our concerted prayers
for simplified but easy-follow instructions
in our human self-assembly kit

to [Autofill].. the God
of a Thousand Names, yet
only one Creation.

Michael Shepherd

! Cat Skills

So the diminishing tribe
of wild cats
got together and agreed hey times is gettin' tough
we need a strategy.
Urgently; ideally
a subject race
with superior paws
while we wait for evolution
to do its thing. How about
using easily-fooled, sentimental
old Two-legs?
They got great hands,
sexy bastards.

Right guys,
we need to be smaller than wild -
-the smaller, the more sentimental Two-legs gets; and
catch them young, they're yours for life...;

and we need just enough variety too
because Two-legs like to think they're all unique and different
and they can impose the image of their uniqueness
on their own pussy
and love us almost as much
as they love themselves - for their kids,
as much as life itself...

just enough character, in short,
to make us prized, but not enough character
to get us into war, or divorce, or corporate fraud...

The Egyptian wild cat proposed
that being seen as sacred to temples
would enhance status;
but other cool cats pointed out
that temples might get neglected in time;
better far to be a god(dess) of the hearth
than the temple. Agreed nem con.

And that took care of all the smaller details like evolution,
the rearing of cows,
and tin-openers. Bingo!

That's funny. The cat just jumped on the keyboard
and scratched me.

Michael Shepherd

! Charity, Caring, Loving-Kindness

Translators live a life
of great blessing, and of frustration:
they live uniquely in the mind
of the great ones they translate – and yet
are destined never fully to reveal this
in their native language, to their fellows,
countrymen and women;
must leave it to the reader, to restore to life.

We too, translators –
words into deeds, deeds into experience,
experience then taught in words...so -

charity, care, or loving-kindness?

maybe we are old, and we uncared for;
maybe we are young, and we uncared for..

but, caring care – this is so beautiful;
to receive; even just to watch; or best, to give...
and too good not to know...

so, we might follow that wonderful advice:
'What you think you lack – give that! '
and bestow all our 'agape', our 'charitas' –
the word which taxed - along with 'faith' and 'hope' -
the translators of the Bible...
that care that cares not to be care-worn...

we, to translate word to deed,
love, to loving-kindness;
love, to boundless care.

(for Mary N., too, who knows this)

Michael Shepherd

! Childhood

At the height of sun-pressed summer
the tar on the seaside pavement
stuck to the Start-Rite sandals
with a sound like half-dried glue.
Gg-luck, went each step. Bliss.
Life needed nothing else.

Because we have not yet lived our life
we do not know - to grasp, or hoard -
that this - to live in the present with every sense,
without a thought, without a care -
is a totality of happiness
we may yearn for later

but may remember
properly
without sentiment,
without regret;
and thus,

forever.

Michael Shepherd

! Childhood Circles Around

The sharp, irregular knock of wooden
brush's shoulder against skirting-board,
punctuated with the lighter tap
of brush on pan, the contents neatly
tapped back into its metal or plastic maw;
the knocks, sometimes gentle
with the happiness of home and heart;
sometimes, sharper, as if they carry
unspoken messages of time too short,
and tempers too..

not today the Hoovering intake of that continuous
indrawn mechanical breath that so disturbs
domestic pets; that brings unease to the couch potato,
a guilt just short of offer to assist...

these unexpected memories stirred
of simpler times and childhood's unappreciated
securities, then taken so for granted..
how sweet, nostalgia's evocations of the so selective heart...

fact is, there comes a time when wisdom's word
is that it's now the time of life when one would be advised
to risk no longer, the pythonic entanglements,
the tempted fate, Miltonic fall,
domestic heaven turned disjointed hell,
of vacuuming the stairs...

* [and a Betjemanesque coda for Dan Tyler:]

Time now to cease unequal fight;
Nor trip on cord - Satanic the machine;
Hoover no longer to dust-free Jerusalem
In England's suburbs, leafy, green...

Michael Shepherd

! Christmas Butterfly

Perhaps it had arrived undercover
between the rich dark green leaves
of the organic cabbage which from
the huge holes in its tough outer leaves
had brought it up so lively – perhaps
reared in some protected warmth, mimicking
the months when `small cabbage whites'
are supposed to live – July to September.
Or had it flown in or been shipped in
from some warmer clime?

Christmas Day – was that the kitchen ceiling light
about to go? No, it was a butterfly,
frantically circling round and round
the low-energy bulb, not hot enough
to make an Icarus of its daring; always
clockwise round the bulb, I thought;
palest green to grey to white; frenzied; delicate..

At night, the light switched off, it rested somewhere;
then at evening, resumed its mad dance,
ceaseless lover, love unconsummated...
paid no attention to its cabbage home
there in the vegetable rack; only the light, the light...

Butterflies do not hear; it did not heed
my cries increasing in despair –
nothing like a butterfly net to hand;
I tried to bring it lower with a gentle spray
so that I could catch it; too wild its Maenad dance,
too high, too frenzied..

Two, three days passed; so much strength,
determination, endurance, in such a tiny thing;
no longer garden's scourge; now a holy thing,
in which I saw myself; even wished to love;
we became of equal size, in the eyes of God...
as were we not always, from Creation's birth?

The fourth morning, I caught it in a cut-glass tumbler
against the window pane – the open window
had not tempted it – myself now talking to its unhearing,
as I did my father on his way to death...

it settled in the glass, still moist inside
with orange juice; did you know,
butterflies taste with their feet...
they so quick to land and then take off...
such discrimination in those tiny feet,
that tiny brain, those tiny,
heroic muscles, devoted to its life and love...

It flew across the cold and winter garden
at such speed, I chose to see it joy or gratitude..
and then, was quiet for a time.

*

Tiny thing,
holy thing,
as near to God
as angel's wing.

Michael Shepherd

! City Of The Mindful Heart. For Kv.

The inhabitants are rightly proud –
let's take the guided tour...

they show you first (they've never been inside,
themselves.. though they know someone who has...)
the Palace, it's still called,
the seat of government... throughout
its sometimes turbulent, sometimes complacent rule,
it's stood for that central place where golden hearts
seek unity in national multiplicity;
and seek to care for multiplicity...

not far away, that great domed building,
it's been temple, church, mosque in its time,
been desecrated, restored, so many times;
and truth to tell, while it's the symbol
of the nation, there are many more
who are proud of it, than have entered it...
here too, a quiet place to find
the unity in multiplicity...

what will they show you next? Depends...
The lively Central Market, vivid in that multiplicity?
The great Museum and Library, where
The nation's treasures (and some plunder
from the glory years of empires won and lost)
gleam like golden giants to our pygmy eyes?
Or perhaps the huge, round, stone Arena
where in former years, men fought to death
(some say it's coming back..): celebrated
battles won; fireworks, clowns and circuses –
whatever brought the greatest crowds;
here – appalled, delighted, bored - you'll bring
the children anyway – you'll see what 'popular'
means, this very day...

Traffic regulations, ever tighter, now control your tour;
a glimpse of lakes and parks perhaps;
city dwellers recovering their humanity;

a place to be themselves, and know it.

Unless you ask – guidebook carefully perused
before your trip – they'll miss out that quiet
'residential area' full of blue plaques (no time to read) ,
where peacefully, behind closed doors,
individuals adventure far into the mind;
fantasise; invent; look deep into the heart;
their passports are well stamped; and yet
there are no frontiers here.

So now, you've done the guided tour;
seen everything – and yet seen nothing;
you're a tourist in a foreign city; and
this is a working city; proud of its past,
shaping its future, it exists, and always has,
only in the present; but stay awhile,
you'll find it irresistible..

This is the city of the mind;
this is the place of poetry; it's all around;
Kenneth, you've just written
a comprehensive guidebook to this place;
called it 'On the Nature of Poetry';
an art, you say, which has for 4000 years,
'distilled the spoken thoughts of mankind';
a finely-carved new monument,
set by the lake, the park;
the distant view of snowy mountain;
how thoughtful to include a fountain;
how appropriate. (The guided tour
sets out from Place de Métaphore..)

(Kenneth Verity, Shephard-Walwyn, £25)

Michael Shepherd

! Clichés I Have Loved

'My life has been one long...
cliché! ...' she sobbed.

He put his sunburned
muscular forearm flecked
with golden hairs
around her shaking shoulders.

She lifted her tear-brimmed,
reddening eyes to meet
his steady gaze.

'Oh my darling..'
she breathed.

And they fell into
a passionate
cliché..

I've said it before and
I'll say it again.
One man's cliché is
another woman's love-byte.

John Ciardi said,
The craft of poetry
is not easy.
It is better than easy.
It is joyously difficult.

Michael Shepherd

! Cradled In A Crescent Moon

to be born, cradled in
an earthly view of crescent moon:
a lighted small part
of that hidden yet complete,
awaiting a future light
from somewhere as a sun;

where does that first newborn smile
come from? what does it know?

Michael Shepherd

! Cutting Edge

Like a sharp knife
cutting through a bitter lemon
into red lips dripping

the hairdresser takes my pleasantries,
chops them with a cruel hand,
throws them back in pieces in my face

snip snip into blond hair, brown hair, black, grey, white,
what heroic restraint, condemned
to a lifetime's cutting, and not
to plunge the scissors into a spinal cord...

this little girl who cut her finger with
her mother's scissors perhaps
to try to explain how they cut her heart
her love that would grow like hair

how can I know the heart
of this woman who cuts my hair
so expertly.. snip, snip..

Michael Shepherd

! D E A T H

Well we don't know do we?

You asked me to write something
about it and I said,
I have nothing to say...
maybe that's a better place to start.

So should we keep a curtained silence
about it? Stuff cottonwool in that wound
that never quite heals, once made?

Or run down the street, knocking bang bang at all the doors,
shouting tell me about death... and
before that stranger knocks at your own door
and the face is strangely familiar, as if
you've been expecting someone, but
weren't sure what they'd look like...

One thing is certain, in its breezy way:
you'll be the one who knows least about it
when it happens; but hopefully
the one who knows most about it
after it's happened...

We could be rather Irish about it,
say, it's a crying pity you'll be missing
the wake... but look at it this way,
the funeral won't cost you a penny...

I'm told that the other day,
a friend of a friend said
whoopee I'm going on holiday...
I guess that would have made for
a rather merrier funeral

as we say now, no dear not a funeral,
a celebration of her life...

but there's still that moment

of awful mediocrity, when
the coffin begins to move, and it's half,
this is it, and half, we're doing this
with discreet good taste, so
you don't have to notice it... ha...

Then, some like to know beforehand what
they hope just might be known,
visit comfy mediums to ask about
those loved ones who've just passed over, is it, dear? ...

they make it sound like a well-run care home:
it's really very nice here, you'll like it...
they sound as if they're still wearing
the woollie that you knitted, and it's tea cups chinking
and a chat about old times.

For the truly religious, of course,
it's glory day, and so it should:
they've made the will, cleaned the house,
given away all that they've collected over the years,
said goodbyes; mopped all the tears;
the bags are packed and waiting in the hall,
their conscience clear. This is the moment
when what it's all about, is what it's all about..
envy them – their soul is clean, shriven was the old word for it,
their lifetime has been but a preparation,
a walk from one pure spring of grace
to a glorious river full of grace..

so here's a suggestion: in your mind,
bring together all you've loved in all your life –
teddy bear, dolls, kittens, puppies, horses,
maybe even parents... best friends, lovers,
strangers who were unexpectedly kind to you,
friends you hope you'll never lose,
places that you were forever happy in,
times of happiness that you'll never forget,
and those strange moments when
you knew you knew something just so great,
but didn't know exactly what it was you knew...
those moments when time stood still, and

didn't seem to matter any more, because
the where and when that you were in, was forever..

then add to this, all you've been, should be
grateful for; all the things you would have praised
more loudly; everyone, but everyone, you love; see
the world as full of wonders unexplained;
see glory everywhere, and yourself
the centre of all that...

stay there.. then what is Death – apart
from what will surely be – compared
to all that glory which is your true self..
go on, admit it... me, I see it shine in you..
what shines in your eternally young eyes
is something that can never die...

Maybe we'll talk of this some more,
now that we've tried to talk about it...

you asked me; this is the best that I can do;
you asked me; this, with all my love, for you..

[A poem written by request]

Michael Shepherd

! Dancing The Invisible Line

Some like to sit on fences, admire the view in safety;
some are born hurdlers; .

draw a line, and some minds shrink back;
others can't wait to compete, first over wins...

poets, said the sage, should always
walk on the edge of madness...

ah, remember when you were a child,
walking down the path one foot within,
one foot beyond?

'a line of poetry'...every line, a line,
one foot beyond, one foot within –

prose, verse; rhymed, unrhymed;
metered, unmetered; actual, fantasy;

elevated, jokey; personal, impersonal;
tragic, comic; a road taken, or not taken..

oh, so many lines
that others painted on the road –

dance down that road,
one foot beyond, one foot within..

Michael Shepherd

! Dasgupta Asks...

What have you gained
if you have not gained yourself,
yourself the immortal,
yourself the infinite ?

What have you gained
if you have never tasted in your life
the deep longing to be free,
the deep longing to be liberated?

The spirit of the saints of all the ages
whispers in my ears -

what have you gained
if you have never tasted
the joys of self-surrender?

If your heart has not longed
to make of you a flute
in the hands of Krishna,
master musician of the universe?

And if you have not been able
to sweeten all your miseries
with a touch of God?

(versified from a lecture in Evanston, US, in 1926)

Michael Shepherd

! Dear Poemhunter Correspondent

Thank you for your last message;
it was good of you to write
and at such length..

I'd just like to say first
as a preamble
well a short preamble
let's say a presprint that's pre-sprint

and as you must know by now,
I tend to be rather fussy and academic
about punctuation
though I'd like to say
that from my point of view
this arises from a love of punctuation
which is to me as
those pauses which lovers share
between remarks –
those pauses when their silent minds
rejoice in that unity of selves and
rejoice in the completeness
of their own self
as reflected in the lover – as
Plato and Shankara and others not yet known to me alas
agree

so, that said,
and I hope you're
still with me on this,
I'd like to mention what
may be a small point to you...
well, this is it:

when you rounded off your very
self-revealing and self-analytical
study of yourself in depth:

Love Sally

I was drawn to wonder
if the absent comma
was an oversight..
which can so easily happen
in these hurried times

or perhaps a Freudian slip
which we might discuss at length

or a deep wish, which
might have implications
for our formal relationship
which we would also need to discuss at length

or simply a command

I look forward to your reply
to what I hope you appreciate
is a sensitive and well-meaning
question which might forward
our discussion of your poetry in depth?

PS there's no need
to reply at length to this
possibly trivial matter
on this occasion..

Michael Shepherd

! Dear Will Shakespeare,

Dear Will,

How are things out there?
just thought you'd like to know,
that you're eleventh on the Top Poets list
as of today (though I should mention
that the hittership is 75% from
the New World that you just foresaw
before you 'closed your book'; not
that that's relevant - they speak an
English, isn't that great, which is nearer
to your own sound than the strangled
glottal stops of Cheapside Thames-side these sorry days) ...

So to the list: and so you'll understand
that no offence is meant, etcetera...
top dog today is Sheldon Silverstein -
the sort of oddball who lives down the street
just where the sidewalk ends,
whom your children hang around with all the time -
they loved his poetry when they were kids,
and still love him now they're all grown-up
for what he brought to their childhood - I bet
you wrote some poems like that for your kids
but never got them published? So I know
that though my fellow poets sniff,
you'll grant him - love?

The second is a curious case -
you may know him as Nuftali Basoalto,
we know him now as Pablo Neruda -
and though he wrote in Spanish
(they didn't conquer England but
did rather well on America's southern shores)
you'll recognise him even in translation
as a fellow poet, worldwide in his heart...

The third is Maya Angelou - now, no-one
wrote more deeply about women than you did,

and of the human spirit:
so though our fellow poets and critics sniff once more,
she is Woman in Splendour,
Woman as Survivor - so,
remembering your Mistress Quickly and her merry mates,
you'll recognise her instantly for what she is?
majesty - thy name is woman...

The fourth is Langston Hughes - a bit of history here:
the human spirit under great duress,
unvanquished - and if this may oft confine
the poet's worldwide scope, may yet sing loud
the human heart and speak
to generations yet unborn
of spirit tested, hope undimmed
and tears.. and tears...and love.

Emily Dickinson, the fifth - I guess
you may well need to read her twice -
her punctuation's not so - breathless -
as she may seem; neglected in her day,
she speaks out of obscurity to the human heart;
she's earned her place, wouldn't you say?

Robert Frost, the sixth - you may find him
as austere as his wintry and keen-fingered name;
like frost, he touches all the countryside;
secure as Jonson, shall we say, in poetry's ear?

Seventh and ninth - let's put them back together -
frail Sylvia Plath and gaunt Ted Hughes, the star-crossed,
storm-tossed, heart-locked, lovelost lovers -
oh, you who know what passion's spent,
what hearts are wrung, for poetry's salt tears,
admire, despair, their planetary pact
eternal writ among the unrhymed stars...

Which leaves just wild Bukowski, raven Poe
to speak as Marlowe, Webster most of all,
as do your own black tragedies,
of those dark places of the human soul
from which emerges all that's truly clear and bright -

and then yourself...

and there is much to say
of Whitman, Sharpe, Palutsky, Dahl,
all widely read, and following on your heels;
in whom, as you, the heart's as great as this great world itself;
and darkest night smiled on by clearest day;
statistics, poets say, have much, have nothing, yet to answer for -

and so, eternal Will - I wish you God's good day!

Michael Shepherd

! Death Visits In The Garden, In The Night

'The dead man was a six-foot ex-heavyweight,
funding his unpaid youth club work
by working as security in a night-club;
shot for gently warning
a smoker in the garden; no witnesses
have come forward... the dead man's brother
was a probation officer; now, from despair,
a crime prevention officer...'

Committees meet, look serious, nod...
are the crime figures up or down this year?

but the ones who could enlighten us
just how it is, are the inarticulate...

'I worshipped my Dad, always so sharp-dressed,
gold watch, rings, bracelet, all that stuff...
but we didn't see enough of him...
he had several ladies.. he'd appear,
unannounced, every few weeks with
lots of presents for us, stay a night or two,
always on the phones... then he had business
out of town... and there'd be another baby bro or sis...
Mum said Dad said condoms
take the pleasure out of it...
she worked all hours, Mum, to keep us all together..
black women are so strong...

'You got to carry a blade when young,
just for self-defence, know what I mean?
The first scum that I shot,
I was real scared, man, real scared...
but there weren't no 'witnesses' –
know what I mean? '

There's 'unprovoked attack', and there's defence,
and there's that grim grey nomansland
of 'respeck' – where the fierce, bruised ego,
which looks always for status, is

challenged by a single silent glance...

'Yeah, I got my posse and my patch,
like to dress sharp, gotta lady or two,
want my kids to make something of themselves...
but I got an anger burning inside of me...
life owes me, maan – knowhamean..? '

The dead man was a six-foot heavyweight,
funding his unpaid youth club work
by working as security in a night-club;
shot for gently warning
a smoker in the garden; no witnesses
have come forward... the dead man's brother
was a probation officer, now, from despair,
a crime prevention officer...

This poem is for both of you.

Michael Shepherd

! Do Dolphins Leap Into Dolphin Heaven?

Be a dolphin. Feel yourself
at home in the beloved water
in which you were fathered, mothered,
fed, grow up, and swim with all your friends...

and then one day, you see them disappear from view –
a powerful twist of tail... their body's gone...
gone where? ... you find that air, which
your nostrils have already breathed, is more...
a lighter, unsupported world
in which all dolphins leap
to celebrate their joy
in being – just as they are...

and, perhaps, fall back into
familiar water, with now greater joy...

who knows, what dolphins think –
or how they think, their instincts water-pure?
and what is air to them...
and whether air is where
they are on equal terms with those strange creatures,
human beings – yet with whom
they have a wonderful affinity;
even in protecting them
when danger threatens men
in dolphins' safe, free element..

The early Christians, seeing dolphins play
around the shores of Greece and Italy
and Palestine and Egypt, saw a parallel:
in that men, when lost to human thought
beyond all thought, leap into an element
of joy and freedom and a world above
as air to dolphin's water; their spirits leapt,
bringing back to earth a memory
never then forgotten, of what lay in store...

and scratched upon dark, taper-flickering walls

of catacombs and prisons, a dolphin leaping;
' My body's here; my spirit's leaping there
where joy and freedom never disappear...'

Michael Shepherd

! Dogged By Comparisons

Behind the gym on the non-stop route out of town
and the housing estate and the light industrial
awaiting a so-called 'developer'
there's this park – correction, Dogshit Central;

once, I guess, it was a 'common'; now,
even 'civic amenity area' is too good for it;

at the far end, an occasional gardener clips a hedge,
prunes the few rose bushes once a year;
this end, it's all railings and rough grass
and dogs.

Not dogs and people; dogs. At weekends,
dogs and people, yes; balls and sticks are thrown,
exercise taken, tails wagged;
humans are human once again..

weekdays, how convenient
to combine the dog-walkies with
the shopping; leave them there for an hour or so,
they'll be safe, make their own entertainment..

so – no balls, no sticks, no masters – what do they do?
Today, there's five of them in a merry pack,
tongues out, tails flying, bounding around half-turning,
eager for more joy, more joy,
using twice the energy they'd use for rabbit-stalking...
celebrating their dogness, and pure being, celebrating life itself...

Now gather their five owners in a posse...
a sorry bunch of humans,
uncomfortable in the company of their kind,
at best, living the wild life through their dogs,
at worst, not fit to own a dog...

don't you wonder that dogs
don't lose their sanity, their joy,
their faithfulness, their loyalty,

having to look after the spiritual welfare
of this two-legged and unnatural,
inferior and drearier
branch of evolution, the human race?
They who bury their hopes and fears
to dig them up again tomorrow,
to chew them over in regret and guilt...

Michael Shepherd

! Don'T You Wish Your Soul Was Larger? (Advt.)

You were born with a little pink soul.
That didn't seem to matter for your first ten years or so.

Then you started to compare it with what
other boys had swinging for them...

and of course, how girls were different,
but managed in their own private way...

then you discovered girls, bigtime. Well, for you, smalltime...
They didn't mind the modest size of your soul, at first;

then they started giggling together, and
favoured some other guy like crazy

since it got around that he had a huge swinging soul
and knew just how to use it.

Now you've got a partner, and she doesn't say anything
because she knows you're very sensitive about this

but secretly, she wishes you had a larger soul...
and there's your very handsome neighbour

who advertises by the way he dresses, carries himself
that he's well-endowed in that department...

watch out; she may feel that she deserves
spiritual satisfaction from that guy

who sure spreads it around, from what
her girlfriends tell her...

Now I'm here to tell you –
There's a cure. Several cures in fact.

There's using weights for it.. that's
sometimes called hatha-yoga in Indian circles.

There's the vacuum system – empty
your mind; that's called jnana-yoga.

There's the traditional method –
play with it a lot, get the bloodstream on your side...

love it and all it stands for, that's
called bhakti-yoga.

Or there's patches – like, say,
Church once a week...

A personal soul-massager can be expensive;
depends if you can keep up the urge to work;

But now, there's tablets – easy, discreet,
available at any bookstore, or by post.

So which method would you prefer?
You surely can't doubt your need by now – for

every boot-up brings reminders on the net
of just how tiny is your wee pink soul (how do they know...?)

Let's give your soul a friendly name – say, Richard –
Ricky, Dicky, Rick, or Dick...

If you don't believe this e-mail from a stranger,
ask your partner if she wouldn't prefer

the deep and stirring, long and oh so frequent,
confident strutting you with your huge swinging soul..

or ask your soulmate: we've called him Dick:
wouldn't he like to be a monster size?

be the talk of the neighbourhood,
get that special glance from all the hottest chicks?

And remember – in a few more years of this spamming,
and what is monster size now, will be standard issue then...

And by the way, we do a special junior version for your kids
but present law doesn't allow us to advertise this...

(The Junior Patch comes in three styles: skin-colour; disguised
as Band-Aid; or with our bold and trendy logo - best ask Junior first...)

give your kids a bigger start in life...
it's what all parents want...

Try our seven-day introductory course today -
you'll be amazed, insatiable...and so will she...

We'd quote you at this point, the glowing testimonies
from satisfied and greater souls, hymning loud Our praise...

but I guess you know just how they'd read..

Michael Shepherd

! Dumped

Thanks, I'll have a white wine. Small.

You 'wanted to talk'.

He's dumping me. I'll live.

because you 'like to live an honest life'.

What life.

but you 'hope we'll be friends'.

Friends of who?

so shall we share the bill?

Probably.

Michael Shepherd

! E V O L U T I O N

evolution is no rogue elephant –
crashing blindly through the forests of ignorance
and the rain-forests of mercy, alike –
trampling temples, churches, mosques
in some apparent iconoclasm –
scattering and shattering equipment
in the laboratories of men -
seeking a wise mahout who will tame
and understand its wildness,
or a Darwin who will zoo it,
watch it tenderly, take notes...

no, evolution is a precious golden glimpse
into the mind of – name That as you will –
Paramatman, Jehovah, Jupiter, or God,
Allah, The Creator, World Soul, Intelligent Designer...

who works in subtlety, bound by His own rules..
who works at differing speeds
in our so wonderful human entities...:

to change our body physical, it takes
many many generations to 'evolve' –
to grow –let's say, to take example
at our finger-ends as we work at our computers –
finger-nails fromclaws...

and yet, to evolve in mind, researchers say
- the rearguard in this baggage train,
studying the evidence from the teeming brain –
to evolve the mind may take
one human being just a lifetime,
then pass this capability to a willing child...

and yet again, to evolve
in spirit, being, higher consciousness –
a few years' work, or months, or days,
and, zap! the favoured ones –
Saint Paul, Eckhart Tolle, dare I instance –

transcend their former level in the twinkling
of Evolution's eye, and tell the world
what worlds lie waiting in man's inner man...

evolution whispers its golden secret in our inner ear:
there, where hope and possibility meet and kiss,
we live; on the edge of greatness,
magnificent, glorious; what a piece of work is Man!

Michael Shepherd

! Ecstatitude

sometimes it gets me that way

despite the past
despite the future

yeah

despite myself
despite other people

wow

and not knowing exactly
what that word means

is exactly
what it means

ecstatitude

Michael Shepherd

! Electric Haiku

First brown leaves falling,
crisp air now the sun's set,
another light bulb gone.

They last for years,
go as the leaves fall;
perhaps they too feel old.

Michael Shepherd

! Enlightenment Haiku-Ish

put aside questions;

learn of yourself, how to behave;

the answers will be known.

Michael Shepherd

! E-Ssential Rap Gospel 'Tude

Jeezuz him say, man, love all thy fellow rappers
jes like I love dat MaryMag an' all dem hoes 'n slappers...

Michael Shepherd

! Evcharistos! And Not Only...

here is the world of not only:
lifting its face, lifting its hands,
beyond not, beyond only, to
not only, but.. to That!

not only for some, but for all.
Be sitting in your chair, or
kneeling before an altar or a statue, or
touching head to ground, or
cross-legged, the sitar and the vina
quietening to silence, the incense
filling the lungs and heart;

or walking through the forest, in the hills; seeing,
not only this, or this, but... that...

Eucharist, Communion, Advaita –
Thanksgiving, coming together as one,
'not two'... do all these mean the same,
mean, not only?

not only you, but all of us;
not only worshipping, or working;
not only body or spirit;
not only earth or heaven;

but there, where work is worship; worship, work;
where activity is rest;
where Body is Spirit; Spirit, Body;
earth is heaven, and heaven's on earth;

where sound and silence meet;
where stillness meets activity;
where body and spirit know each other;

take, if you wish, this sip of wine, this crumb of bread,
this handful of water, this flower,
in the memory of centuries and millions,
lifting, too, their faces and their hands;

looking beyond not only, finding, that;
or put your hands together,
as all things come together;

say the word, a word,
give a name to it, to That;
or listen to the sound beyond all names;
the sound that's in the silence;
the life that's in the stillness;

or stay with eucharist, communion, advaita, jihad,
sacrifice, surrender, prayer, praise;
they are your guardians and your friends,
smiling as they run toward you, greeting;
calling out to you,
not only... but...

Michael Shepherd

! Even Green Bears Like Anecdotes About Them

Which college student would turn down even
a few dollars? A notice goes, up, Dr. Wegner
wants some volunteers for half-an-hour, most,
in the Cognitive Research lab...

so when it's my turn in the queue,
I go in and he says, now go in there
for fifteen minutes, only one instruction,
don't think about a green bear...

so, money for old rope, with bear attached,
I go in there, check every few minutes that
I haven't thought about some idiotic green bear...

come out, he's sitting there with all his smug
students and assistants, looking just as if
I were some green bear, about to amuse them hugely...

so to shut their silly faces up, I don't wait, but say,
if you're going to ask me did I think about
that green bear no I didn't once I checked
every few minutes to see if I'd thought about it no...

and they all laughed...ticked the boxes, wrote
in their don't- I- love-my-Prof little notebooks with
their smug little smiles to each other...
now I go to sleep
thinking of feeding them one by one
to that green bear, wow they taste good...

I mean, who in their right mind
ever thinks of some green bear...

Michael Shepherd

! Evening Contentment: A Meal, A Temple

and as the thick heat of the day lifts off,
the city comes alive.

What is architecture without shadow?
At the wrong but necessary time,
midday in high summer, when
the overhead sun has stolen into siesta
all meaning, even beauty,
from the very temples themselves,
we had been clambering around the Acropolis,
which seemed to promise so much from afar,
an ideal world; now up close, we couldn't find it,
trying perhaps too hard; that tiny temple by the entrance
offered more; the korae in the museum
smiled an understanding of all this;
knew all about us. This is what awe means.

Now, in the cooling air of evening, the tourists,
showered, in their fresh cottons,
meet and converge with their Athenian hosts
at an unpretentious family restaurant
at the foot of the Acropolis hill.
The Parthenon, resting from its busy anthill day,
is floodlit in all its glory, yet
aloof; as if its subtle geometries
hold it inviolable between two worlds; Plato in stone.

A hundred Olympian athlete's paces from the restaurant at its foot,
almost as if generations of this family have measured it,
the scent of cooking garlic welcomes us –
guests even before we have arrived;
then the simple tables, the evocative bouzouki music
whose recording we will buy and in time forget,
and then one day, find again with an exquisite pain;

this is the climax of the Mediterranean day;
three thousand years of culture are the unspoken,
almost unnoticed, stage set for our evening hours tonight, with
the indefinable sense that the sea, blue into wine,

is not far away. There's a friendly chatter, men and women,
in the kitchen. This is what an open-air restaurant
should be about: they give us food and wine;
we give them back, our happiness.

As we scrape our metal chairs on the concrete floor
in a convivial circle – the sky dusted with stars over
the Parthenon now at an awkward, unromantic, steep
angle to us, but we know it's there –
and settle, foot-weary but refreshed,
you can sense that each of us is relishing
the sense of the fresh, cool air
between the fresh-laundered cotton
and the no longer sticky skin;
have we earned this with our guide-booked day?

Then, three or so enchanted hours –
no great need to speak; silent acknowledgement
that we have come all this way to find
a sheer contentment in just being ourselves
in company, around a table, drinking a little wine,
eating simple food;

time.. time does not stand still,
though that's the first idea that comes to mind;
rather, time has surrendered to us
its own unimportance; we steal a glance
at each other's quiet glow
as sunwarmed faces find some inner sun.

Some Greek grammar not yet learned
is teaching us the living meaning, limitless contentment;
the infinite infinitive of the verb, to be. The air
is gentle as it cools; our bodies warm with food and wine
and boundless love; we are, oh can it be,
perfection in some temple of ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

! F A T H E R

I gave my father seven years
of love unconditional

then in my eighth year
my father decided
to mould me

in my eighth year
I saw through my father
beyond the love

the love had not gone; simply
there is not time for love
when the battle is to find yourself

my eighth year was fatal; that's fatal
meaning in the hands of fate..

forgive me, father, for
I knew not what I knew.

Michael Shepherd

! Faves And Yuks

and some say
oh that's my favourite ever poem
my aunt my uncle my teacher read it
to me when I was twelve
and the more I read it
the more true it is and now
I'm older I can say it off by heart
as if the poem knows my heart

and some say
that poem yuk I really really hate it
the more people said to me
that's a great poem
the more I hated it
now if I see it
in an anthology
I skip the page quickly
I really really hate it

and I wonder if
the more people read a poem
do they take a bit of its power into themselves
so it no longer has quite that surprise it had

or the more people read that poem
the more they add to it
so it has the power
to surprise more people

or do poems
like a rest from time to time
like that old toy in
your grandparents' attic
which so surprised you

that Jack-in-a-box
with a face like
Pushkin
or Langston Hughes

Michael Shepherd

! From Kahlil Gibran On Friendship

Your friend is one who answers to your needs:
the field you sow with love, and reap with thanks;
you seek him for your peace, to hear his heart;
and when he's silent - still his heart you hear:

because, with words or not, you share his joy;
in presence or in absence he is there;
and stronger love may in his absence show:
the beauty of a love that asks for naught.

So tell your friend of all that ebbs and flows,
your best and worst of what fate deals to you:
no thought too great nor light for open minds
who share their pleasures, and their laughter too.

For in the dew of sweet and passing thoughts
each morning's fresh, for close and constant hearts.

Michael Shepherd

! Funnyossities

Where silliness borders on the realm of possibility –
that's the blissful land where children play;
inventing for themselves, or helped
by those never-quite-grown-ups
who spend their working week
chortle-gurgle-wham-ouch-eeuucchh! -`****? '-
EEEKK! -AAaarrgghh! ! ! ,
illustrating Kidz Komix and such
in that blissful land

and there were books called 'Funnyossities'
(they'd be nothing now)
the pages chopped laterally in three:
heads in the top section, every possible caricature,
bodies of every size, shape, dress, the middle section;
then legs of all sorts (lots of hairy ones, of course)
occupied the lower section;

and you turned them over, this way, that way,
to make the most ludicrous combinations...
sometimes just absurd, sometimes surreally possible...

I'm there on the page you're turning now:
a wizened face, eyes popping;
from my mortar-board, it seems, a schoolmaster enraged
to apoplexy and beyond;
the body of a languid, greenery-yellery poet, wilting like
a stick of celery long past its celery-buy date...
the legs like ancient hairy sticks beneath the woeful shorts...

feel free to chortle, or to turn the page;
it could be worse.

Michael Shepherd

! G A T E W A Y T I M E O U T

O radiant Muse of Poetry!
To Thee I.....

(sorry, gateway timeout...)

O Thou Unreachable Server of the Universe,
Uncontactable Administrator of our lives,
Gateway to our destiny on Earth
from our log-in to our timeout,
hear, we beseech....

(sorry, gateway timeout...)

Michael Shepherd

! G*d Unnamed

So many are reluctant, in their speech,
to make referral to the name of God;
as if to speak thus is to overreach
what may by human mind be understood.

Yet is it not the given power of mind
to do this very thing, and boldly seek
always the greater picture, there to find
the greater causes, and of them to speak?

Our consciousness is greater than the Sun;
it shines beyond the shadows of the mind;
in universal thoughts that look to One
a richer life this greater love may find.

Thus unnamed unity may head our quest;
for Goodness, Truth and Beauty there still rest..

Michael Shepherd

! God And Michelangelo Paint A Ceiling

'And now, ladies and gentlemen,
above you – ladies, it's easier with
the mirror from your purse...
Monsieur, Signor, Mein Herr...
we've come to
The Big Moment...'

the moment for which
tourists gather; temples fill;
saints and monks fall to their knees;
contemplatives fall silent;
even angels hold their breath;
all Creation for a moment, still;

look around, the beauty of it all:
the earth so warm and fresh
under the morning sun;
rivers sparkle among greenest trees
full of breeze and birdsong;
does this perfection lack?

One thing. The one, which may in time
unite all this; destroy all this.

It cannot be the Lord God Himself, seen
walking in the garden in the cool of the evening,
in this paradise which is Himself;
even God must keep His, God's, own rules;
no, it must be His representative upon His earth,
made in His image - but according to Earth's scope..

The tourists gawp, or are struck humble
with some unexpected thought. Stay too long like this,
craned neck, and older visitors may faint...

God – who for a moment, must resemble Man
in order to achieve this earthly moment –
stretches out His finger... His reflection,
this mindless, aimless, half-awake and muscle-conscious hulk,

is moved to imitate the action; reflecting,
as do the lady tourists' hand mirrors
faintly dusted, scented, with face powder;
(a surreptitious dab; it's hot in here with all the lights..)

But painters, even with God's aid,
cannot paint a spark like that.

That over-muscled body will soon trim down
when he must chase his breakfast
through the jungle.. life's not going to be all
milk and honey, manna and ambrosia
from now on..

but how many years and eras in God's mind
must pass before that hulk, who's known
as Adam by his madam, evolves
in God's good time, to ask
'Who am I, Lord? '...
the question echoing down the passage of the years
so seldom asked, so silent answered;

the answer when it comes,
comes as by reflection,
comes like a spark to mind.

Michael Shepherd

! God Is In The Banana Skin...

God, say those who learn of Him,
Is eager to be our teacher...

who would love to sit quietly beside us,
like the mother which He also is,
singing the meaning of the simplest words,
the words that we'll most need..

but if we're the scourge of the classroom...
He'll not hesitate to use full physical correction – though
He will start small, in hope we take the hint..

but if we still resist, He's not beyond
thrashing us within an inch of our sad life,
until we're on our knees and begging to be taught...

and if our pride still needs to take a fall,
to restore our humane self –

then God is in
the banana skin..

He's ruthless in His love...
there is no depth to which He'll rise
to lower heaven to earthly eyes...

and since He is all women too,
the arts of flirtation are fully in His power...
He'll not answer letters; not turn up on time;
not be taken your advantage of...
change His appearance; or be seen
accompanying some other to the scene...
then send, out of the blue, a Valentine
that knocks you off your feet of clay..
proposes setting a marriage day...

Yes, God is in the banana skin;
God the teacher is ruthless in his love;
God, they say, made time, so that

we could exercise freewill
in taking our time
to find that our need
is really much the same as His...

Michael Shepherd

! God! You'Re Like, Sooo Banal...

Imagine - if you'll
pardon that phrase addressed
to poets, of all people -

imagine, if we judged peoples' lives
like we do their poems...

your parents separate when you're just seven?
oh that's such a contrived, unoriginal theme...
it's been done, and better...

you've fallen in love for the first time?
that's so banal, so cliched; can you imagine
anyone wants to share that?

you've been dumped for
the first time in your life by
the one you've given your life to?
that's pathetic - can't you think
of something more.. creative?

your family washed away in the tsunami?
oh puh-lease - that's so -
so - Hollywood - what do you want
to be remembered for - Special Effects?

you're disabled? Can't you think
of something more - personal?
we've all been there one way
or the other, do you have
anything new to contribute?

you love your family? so what?
life isn't a Hallmark card

so

reviewing your life,
I find it trite, banal, cliché-ridden,

unreflected on, randomly commenced,
shapeless, lacking in clear theme
or sense of direction, unedited,
unrevised, poorly punctuated, lacking in any
metaphorical significance, veering uncertainly
between real, surreal, and fantasy
and lacking music, that's either
melody or harmony or
rhythm with 'em, and
far, far too much repetition and
and if you think you're aiming at
poetic tragi-comedy I can tell you it
reads more like farcical melodrama
and in all honesty
I couldn't recommend it for general release
even in a niche market, I mean, who'd
want to buy it even in paperback? and
I had hoped in my patronising way that
you could have done better
(though secretly pleased that
you haven't) - for God's sake, couldn't you
have left us something to remember
better than this? Just, done better...?

No, me neither

(dedicated to all those who've got the Tshirt...)

Michael Shepherd

! Godlike

So you're scrolling fast
down a page of
yeah yeah
those old Greek guys
did they spend their time
dreaming up quotes?

there goes
Democritus (460 - 370BC)
(though of course he didn't know
it was BC did he...?)
saying
'It is godlike
ever
to think
on something beautiful and
on something new.'

and just for a moment
your mind stops mid-scroll:
what was he wearing
that day, was it warm,
was he wearing the standard toga
in off-white or Persil white,
sandals I guess,
writing with some kinda
Greek reed-pen on some kinda
tablet thing
what he had mulled over, polished
fit for posterity
if there would be a posterity

or had he just had
this beautiful, new thought
come to him in his
beautiful, bright mind,
the sun shining on
the Acropolis up there,
the scent of herbs from

the sides of the hills,
still green and wooded,
feeling himself yes godlike
and maybe saying
a grateful thankyou
to the Muse
in Greek of course.

Michael Shepherd

! God's Notebook 1: Material Under Declassification

...so the next week
I thought, why not bring
these rather fine elements together

start at the bottom, earth, water...
I gave it a provisional name,
Material Under Declassification

or MUD for short; left it around.
Not much happened.
Then children discovered it, loved it.

Not much progress. So
I added fire. Easy-peasy; hot country
I'd chosen for the lab. Time later
for those colder Northern hearts.

Yes. Had wait a fair mantime; but
it passed like no time at all.
'They' discovered bricks.

Things really started to move.
Or rather, rest in bijou residences.

Labourers, have you noticed,
get bored. Especially
with no one passing to whistle at.
I didn't invent the hajib, any more
than I invented figleaf bikinis
and shame - they did.

So - bored labourer in brickyard
takes out half-baked brick (like him...)
and papyrus root (yeah, yeah,
that comes later...) and writes
rude words on brick.
About his employer natch.
'Ph*** U Pharoah'

Yes, it's all going nicely.
Everything's good.
Oops. meant to write, good..

Michael Shepherd

! Good V. Evil - Watch The Rematch In The Comfort Of Your Own Home!

But hold on a minute –
who set this league up?

Is it a fair game? Are the teams
equally matched? Have they
both got wealthy sponsors?
Can they both afford those
international mercenaries?
Is it - excuse the metaphor -
a level playing field? ...

Some say it's the oldest
religion in the world, with
the largest number of current
devotees.. even those of us
who say we're agnostic, atheist, or
never got the voting paper,
secretly keep its shrine, deep
in our hearts...

Saint Augustine (who once was a devout
adherent, some say never quite
threw it off, called it 'original sin',
'the taint of Adam' – that sort of thing)
blamed the Manicheans; they said
they got it from Mazda, who heard it
from a friend – or was it an enemy? ...

Basically, I/you/we/they believe
there are two equal forces battling it out
out there. Which side do you support?
Well, our side of course... out there on
the terraces, we're all united in this..
though sometimes we have a little quiet fun
being the baddies, under an assumed name...

Some say, an impartial god looks on

as they battle it out; some say,
that's how it ought to be.. make Mankind
in your image, see where freewill takes them...
if it doesn't work out, wipe out,
change the rules and start again...

Some say, no god looks on; it's a fight
to the finish, was you lookin at me, scum..? ..
it's hate, hate, makes the world go round...

It fills the sports terraces, now that
that wimpy old idea, fair play, but ref's decision
is final, it's only a game, may the best team win,
is dead and buried...

Politicians find it very handy; when
they've finished rubbishing each other,
grabbed a headline and a soundbite, then
they mix good v. evil with
that other useful device: ancient primitive survival
means that we respond more quickly
to threats, than to opportunities...
it's great for manipulating people;

so there's an axis of evil out there – those guys
we used to support, welcomed their
extended families into East Side apartments,
took their oil money eagerly on Fifth Avenue –
now they're a threat, we're putting
emergency measures in place...
sorry about that, but
we're here for your protection...
no gray areas any more,
we're the good guys, John Wayne
played us in the film...
it's how the West was won
by the apple-cheeked against the bad apples;
or formerly, before political correctness intervened,
from those other dark-skinned guys, who
I guess we'll have to rename...
the battle-lines are clearcut... aren't they? ...

so as we file out from the briefing,
take care out there... and if it gets
all too much, there's counselling and
the confessional...just in case you thought
the battle was inside yourself...

take the day off; go watch TV; and if
we lose the match, sack the manager,
or boo the ref... switch channels,
there's an old Western on...
feel good about yourself..

boy, we'd sure miss
those old Manicheans; life would be just so dull
without a bit of drama...oh...
have a nice Thanksgiving Day..

Michael Shepherd

! Goody Or Baddy? A Varifocal View

Turning over the pages
of the national newspaper
half-alert, this morning,

shock-horror! A full-page photo of,
can it be? Jade Goody, the motormouth
invited back to Big Brother for
obvious reasons, who's caused
world-wide repercussions for abusing
an equally cunningly chosen Muslim
of compassionate intelligence..so, controversy;
a troublesome flea in the charmpit of
the body politic..

oh, no - it's a model who just looks like her,
advertising at huge expense,
Specsavers' 'Varifocal' glasses...

ah! that's the word we need –

varifocal...

and aren't we all? sometimes we focus
on the short-range, sometimes on the long;
Jade; TV producers; media; politicians;
motormouths the lot of us; one day
we hate the Muslims or the Christians next door,
and their perpetual cooking smells of curry
or of vinegared fish-and-chips;
next day we are on our varicultural best behaviour,
almost, but not quite, inviting them to eat with us;
it's called freedom of speech, integration, democracy..

Even as I speak, varifocal editors of varifocal media
are preparing balanced feature articles by
varifocal feature writers entitled
'Jade Goody – true voice of Britain? '
and we'll pour the milk on our breakfast fodder
and slip on our varifocals with the other hand.

Michael Shepherd

! Gratitude Dawning

Alarm clock. The sun rises.
The buses, railways, flights are running.
There's a bottle of milk on the doorstep.

Facts of life. Except when they're not there.
Who lives a life of continual gratitude for life?
Hey guys, the sun which disappeared last night
has turned up again today! Wow! Relief! Let's get down
on our knees, raise hands, voices... and
while we're about it, put your hands together for
all morning milkmen, where they still deliver milk...

Except – no milk this morning.
Shall you telephone – politely,
with a subtext of unpractised gratitude?

I only saw the current milkman once;
said to him, this is the first time I met you...
he said, well, you're not around at 4 ay em are you?

So you telephone. A foreignish voice from
the land of holy cows replies from
a script I guess, ...your previous milkman...
left the company... late...on his way...

Morning gratitude. The cow who gives you
the love for her calves, in liquid form;
yielding too, the butter for your toast;
the pig who gave her life for your bacon rasher;
the hen who parted with her offspring for you
to kill its life in sizzling frying pan...
they're all female, you've just noticed; how about
the oranges whose liquid praise of the morning sun you drink?
tomatoes, mushrooms, anybody?

maybe you should write a note to the dairy,
say, please convey to the milkman
who has now left the company for
pastures new, hur hur, and we hope

a creamy, frothing future,
our gratitude for services rendered
which we would not ourselves
be easily persuaded to take on...
yes, maybe you should.

Michael Shepherd

! Gun Nuts

The FBI has considerably extended
the list of those whose mental health
makes it unwise for them to purchase guns...

that means, I guess, those whose state
was discovered before they bought
their first, or second, or fourteenth gun..

but what of those whose mental health
is dangerously unbalanced, after
they buy their guns and use them?

who graduate enthusiastically
from air-rifles aimed at beer cans,
to planning how to gun down
their teachers or their fellow students?

then there are those who fight heroically
throughout a campaign; but return,
as veterans from Vietnam, to a ruined mental health?

or – let's be quite contentious here –
suppose a whole people, let's say Texans
or Republicans, or Afghans, or some extremist sect,
want to fight each other; and
an impartial expert called in by
the United Nations (uh?) declares
that neither side are fit in mental health
to buy, or to be issued, any guns? ...

Michael Shepherd

! Haiku - To A Poet

The sound of words

Silence

Two friends

Michael Shepherd

! Haiku After Rumi

How happy the meadow is!
How the trees tremble!
Flash! Thunder!

Michael Shepherd

! Haiku For David

This autumn evening
my haiku speaks of sadness
yet the bare trees smile

Michael Shepherd

! Haiku For Joyce

The sky is heavy with rain.
a poem still only half read
in the sunshine

Michael Shepherd

! Has Music Gone From Poetry?

Has music gone from poetry?
Words and music, still agree?
Dance and rhythm, song and laughter,
Do they echo, now, hereafter..?

Has singing gone from poetry?
Words that sing a listened tune?
Lullaby and melody,
Old rhymes that sleepy mothers croon?

Has rhythm gone from poetry?
Quick as a dance-step, slow as a glide?
Laughing now; now weeping; now shouting with glee –
Dancing round you, singing, can't catch me...

Has magic gone from poetry?
Spells that summon fairy Fates?
Incantations solemn spoken,
Heroes, giants, to danger woken?

Have light hearts gone from poetry?
Hearts that know the tears of life,
hearts that know the grief of strife,
yet sing and dance and laugh with glee?
Who loves, who loves not poetry?

Michael Shepherd

! Hertes Academie (A Metaphysical Exercise)

My mistress' bedde, my wylling scholeroom is,
where I do lerne my eager pupille's taske;
her scorns, her prayse, to me as equalle are;
her swete chastisement, alle thatte I may aske;

In her anatomie, I lerne newe worldes;
I am Columbus, sayling to strange shores,
fynde alle thynges newe; I am as one fresshe-taughte;
nought of our schyppe to speke of myne or yours;

Whanne infants, we are all shored safelie uppe
by parentes lue, upon us richlie pored;
but thenne, in'th torment of our growing yeares,
where mighte we lerne where alle thysse lue is stored?

Where is the hertes academie, to teche
thysse bloody, beating, untaughte, human place,
where hevenes Creator meetes thysse mortal coil,
whatte is its role and rule, whatte it muste face?

Too layte, too layte, to tayke a lyfe to lerne
thysse herte to growe, and swell, and gratelie strive;
where is the hertes academie, whanne younge,
to sooner teche oure hertes with lue to thrive?

Michael Shepherd

! Hickory, Dickory, Deconstructed Dock...

and the maker of the case
had given it rudimentary legs
with a little space between them and the floor
and though the case was of finest polished
hickory-wood, he'd not given much valued time
to the cheap wood of the interior shelf
below the shining weight swinging to and fro
on the pendulum..

you don't often catch a mouse climbing;
but the philosophy of all scavengers large and small
is 'you never know...' – the floor is the first place, but
the table top may hold hidden treasure
on its fertile plain; and though this strange
upright monster of furniture didn't seem
promising to a twitching whiskered nose,
you never know... Though the gentlemice
are the family's scavengers in chief, the ladymouse
can be desperate with all those little mouths to feed...

we'll never know whether it was a scrabble
up the rough side of that hickory-wood case, or
cunning deft paws thrust between the links of chain...
she gained the top shelf, where the strange mechanism
moved as discreetly as a mouse, above the ticking cogwheel...

and then, like some mighty god of fearsome justice and revenge, offended at this
presumption...this hubris,
to be punished, as Prometheus, as Icarus –
a whirring of the metal monster
shook the case and mouse; then – a sonic boom,
shattering Minnie's ears – but more, shattering
her tidy universe, at exactly one-o'clock in Green Witch time...

one tiny, traumatised ladymouse –
the childmice fed and put to bed -
snuggled close to her gentlespouse that night:
'what's it all about, Mickey? ' who
yawning, half-awake: 'Search me, kid...'

she, laying awake that night, filled with more curiosity
than it needs to kill a cat; filled with unmousey thought
(by which that godly evolution works its mysterious metamorphoses...)
wishing 'even if I were reborn as
the most timid human being, I'd like to know
what it's all about...' and too much cheese
tossed her sleep between harsh nightmare dreams...

* *

... she may work in your office, or the firm's up there
above the factory floor.. that tiny spinster of uncertain age,
large round eyes behind small round wire-rimmed glasses,
eyes which however seldom meet your gaze...
water-cooler gossip, calling her Miss Mouse,
idly wonders where she goes
and what she does, at end of day...
back, we guess, to an ailing widowed mother who
resents her daughter going out to work,
but knows the money must be earned...

then, mother put to bed, she reads (and yes,
Beatrix Potter's on the shelf above,
next to the clock her father made for her...) :
scared of mice, of course, yet
feeling a strange affinity; remembering
as daughters do, her beloved father
whose clockmaker's posture, back bent,
arms and hands ready for his intricate work,
she has inherited, as she holds her Beatrix Potter
cocoa mug between her delicate,
timid, pink, deft, humble yet
secret-strong, little paws...

Michael Shepherd

! Holy Questions Not Wholly Answered

When I asked them, why did You
need to send Him, they said
I was too young to ask such questions;
I should just be glad..

I wondered but did not say,
were You sorry that perhaps
it hadn't gone quite right
first time? ..

I wondered but did not say,
how could they be sure
he was the only son; might You - or we - not need
another Son, every now and then?

Later, I began to understand
the huge risk that You took
in giving us freewill; and saw
the mercy of Your sending sons
whenever we had strayed too far..

How I would love You more,
how I would love Him more,
if others would not claim
this Coming to be unique..and Ours...

then I would love You
for Your mercy, as
I loved You when I was a child:
as the father in all fathers;
I, the son who would be
every son.

Michael Shepherd

! Horse And Rider

To lean forward in the saddle,
the reins slackened for a while,

to lean forward towards its ear,
its ear concerned with more immediate things,

across the muscled, tendoned neck
so much more a neck than human neck

with the urge to whisper some unformulated words
arising beyond a language, in the heart,

concerning some so briefly,
so deeply now perceived

of some equality hidden in humility
holding horse and rider

in some ancient bond of trust,
perhaps of love.

Michael Shepherd

! How Brave This New World Shines! How Fine Its Words!

There were monkeys everywhere;
all with badges gently velcroed to their coats –
'Supervisor'; 'IT operative'; 'Catering';

in the corridors, those who chattered
seemed to have been taught broad vowels;
I swear they spoke pentameters iambic.

Down the corridor of this carefully designed space,
even an in-house cinema; today, I note, it's playing
the film of Borges's 'Libraries of Babel'
and an old Marx Brothers comedy.

The building is light and airy, beside it
the river flows sedately, as if it knows
it waters hallowed ground; swans glide
as if to speak of poetry in motion.

opposite, the Zen garden has been thoughtfully banked
to accommodate that Asian requirement,
a hundred tourists holding above their heads
a hundred mobiles: sapling forest of trivial fond record;

calm outside, subduing the tourist hordes;
inside, an air of suppressed excitement;
it seems that after many years,
the team had passed the major test –
or as their press release phrased it so quaintly,
'With proud-flying colours new apparition'd'...

I read on: 'Oh brave new world, that hath such creatures in't!
No longer Nature's child, but Nature's pen;
No longer aping man, but nurturing men! '

It seems that the Institute, programmed with all the data
that man and monkey together might accumulate,
were 'sailed upon a venture new embark'd':

a brand-new play by The Shakespeare Primate Trust,
'honouring his great, unblotted name'...

Michael Shepherd

! How Long?

How long
may a heart stay bruised
before it starts to bruise
itself?

How long
may a heart stay vulnerable
before it grows a strength?

How long
must a heart wait
for another love?

How long
it seems

How long?

Michael Shepherd

! Hypersyllabic Lyric With Catalexis (For Mary Oliver)

There's budding in the springtime;
fruiting in the fall;
flowering in the summertime;
but winter comes to all..

Michael Shepherd

! 'I Am A Part Of All That I Have Met'..

you're having one of those
tricky, subtle, unpleasant
'let's go for a drink' job interviews
in a quiet, expensive bar
that slick, smooth bosses go in for
and you feel it's all wrong way up –
you're being interviewed for life style,
presentable company wife etc.
and not the job; you'd like
the pay of course, that's why
you're here; but now where's this going,
out of left field – 'I am a part of
all that I have met' he says; is that
to remind you that it will always be
his company? Is it something he read
in the latest aspirational book, and
rather fancied it...? Sharply, you loathe
the whole business world that got you
where you are...

now, you're sitting out an excellent party
except that you've been on your feet all day
and now you're joined on the sofa by an attractive thirty-fivish
who's also gently cruising the room.. you know
instantly that she's, as you'd say to the boys
but not, well not yet, to her personally, up for it..
and you're wittily circling one another
in banter, taking stock of the priority
of your urges, and then she says,
looking you straight in the eye, as if
it's moving this chat onto another plane, 'I am
a part of all that I have met'.. and you try
to suppress the comeback line,
yes, lady, I'll bet you are...
pretentious flirty cow, says your inner jock...

Around 1666, when London burned
like a pile of sticks, Milton, blind poet,
said this. And of course, never saw the flames;

I wonder if he felt their distant warmth to chill his soul?
What made him say this, a statement almost heroic,
magnificent; a poet who also cared deeply for
freedom of expression... you've skipped
pages, chunks, of his 'Paradise Lost'...
and now, one single remark quoted,
and you simply want to meet him;
drag him out of history into the present time,
ask him about his life, try to know
what made him - sixtyish, blind,
having just written that sonnet on his blindness
which once made you weep when you were young,
say of his life, I am a part of all that I have met...

Michael Shepherd

! I Eager For You

today, O My Beloved,
I eager for you...
there was no such word
until today; today, there is..

to say, I'm eager for you
would be to say,
less than, I am...
when it's I am, and
which you are, O My Beloved,
that eagers...

nor do I recognise eagerness..
how can I, if it's not me?
no, today, it's an active word...
what else might I say?
to say I long, makes it sound
that I may never find you...

to say, I languish, makes me sound
so weak and hopeless...
to say, I yearn, makes it sound
as if I never knew You...

even the Hebrew word the psalmist used –
the deer that yearns for the waterbrook,
the hart that pants for cooling streams –
even that word's uncertain; some say
it's the way that a deer, feet slightly splayed
upon the sloping bank, stretches out its graceful neck
to the clear, pure, healing water...

some say, it's that slight sound the deer makes,
as it gently laps that lovely water...
the sound that quenching makes...
today I am that deer, tasting what's just out of reach...;
that feeling beyond all words possesses me –

the feeling that You who ever are inside me, Lord,

wish to proclaim You outside me –
today, O My Beloved,
I eager for to be myself; for You...

Michael Shepherd

! I Have A Fear - I May Be Wrong.

I have a fear - I may be wrong:

that all too many, put off all thoughts of 'God'
by those who claim to speak for Him,
may cease to look for, name, all wondrous things:
the good, and beautiful, and truthful; which give joy;
which you and I love as the best of life...
and name them, praise them, to our children's ears
as all the wonder that they are...

I have a fear - I may be wrong:
that even seeing this world as sweetshop of delights
we never look to see
some unity.

I have a fear - I may be wrong:
that we may miss the mind's pure joy
of stepping back to see
beyond what shows itself,
a greater and more glorious view...

I have a fear - I may be wrong:
that though we have a hazy view
of 'Creation' and 'Creator',
we do not seek to play Creation's part -
as species disappear; as world pollutes...

I have a fear -I may be wrong:
we know the words; but miss the song.

Michael Shepherd

! Ika

Ika,
I'd love to write a poem
I'd be proud to write a poem
for you which would be
about you because
you deserve a poem

which would be about
you of course but also deeply, deeply,
about the tragic, comic, farcical
ironies of skin colour, history, earnings,
empire, class, prejudice, sheer
human thoughtlessness and cruelty; and yet
the essential goodness
of mankind

and it would somehow
have to cover
your proud Jamaican family,
stalwart, respected
in the community and then

the way that Britain invited
its fine colonial soldiers,
airman, sailors, who had
fought and lived and died
for a land they had never known,
for an Empire shortly to break up,
to come to Britain and
continue the proud record
of colonial servicemen

supported by our web of aristocracy
which knew and served and loved its Empire
full of human beings, humanity -
so that you, now retired
from the services, are
a hospital orderly who is
on nodding terms with lords and ladies,

millionaires and nobodies
and friend to everybody, who has

suffered the irony of being
mugged by white guys
disguised as joggers
because you dress so smart...
I think you've never quite
recovered from this
wound they'd never guess at...

and all this human thoughtlessness
and more, you turn upside down
by shopping at Harrods food store
on a hospital orderly's pay;
while your nephews and nieces
educated in Jamaica and the States
are so magnificent, and well-off too...

there's so much I'd like to put down
on paper, because I'm so proud
to have you as a friend, who
also represents
more recent human history
than a book of history
could contain; and yet
you've never lost your dignity
thank God

so

this is just to say,
you deserve a poem,
Ika,
and I'd be honoured
to write it but
I can't even begin
you know how it is

yes indeed you do

! Imagine Angels

imagine angels.

imagine a bolt of lightning
out of the blue so blue
striking a tree
a few feet away

imagine a thunderstorm
remaining overhead all night

imagine a summer dawn arising
as if for the first time on the earth

imagine cats and dogs whimpering
as the ground trembles
with the approaching earthquake

imagine the equation for space-time
there in the mind as you wake

imagine the death of children
imagine the birth of children

imagine the first love
of your lover

imagine a joy beyond detachment
imagine a detachment beyond joy

imagine angels

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 10

I said to My Beloved

You have given me all Your love;
I have given You all my love;
what more can I give to You?

My Beloved said

If you love Me, then show your love
by seeing, knowing, all
that happens to you in your short life
as gifts from Me..

all events, all acts, all thoughts,
all seeming accidents, all illnesses,
all that arises from your meetings with others,
all their words to you –
see them all as Me

I said to My Beloved,

O My Beloved, my love is great
yet my will is weak;
I love You as I love life itself -
help me in this!

My Beloved said

It will not be easy; for
this will be the measure of your love for Me...

My help is this:
every time you see Me in some passing moment,
in some passing event in your life
be it harsh, or seem unfair— yes,
especially in this, my fiercely loving love -
you will know My love for you
as you have never known My love
for you so great, so pure

I said to My Beloved

This hard and lovely thing, O My Beloved,
will be the measure of my love for You.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 12

I said to My Beloved

Tell me of Your nature

My Beloved said

I am like water

the spirit of water

the cause of water

the holiness of water

I flow

I bond

this is My nature

the nature of love

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 14

I will create you,
I shall name you;

I will show you happiness; then
I shall show you sorrow;

I will show you sorrow; then
I shall show you happiness;

and in the one, you shall know
the more about the other;

I will show you rest; and
I shall show you restlessness;

and in experiencing one,
you shall know more of the other;

I will show you all that is old; and
I shall surprise you with all that seems new;

I will show you the Unchanging and Eternal, and
I shall show you the changing and the impermanent;

and when you have tasted both of these
you will know more of Me;

I will have you taste the One;
I shall have you taste the many;

and when you have tasted both of these
you shall know more of Me;

I shall show you every opposite that you or I can name,
for I am, all opposites;

and when you have known all opposites
you will know Me beyond all opposites;

I will show you love, and
I shall show you lack of love;

and knowing these, you will become
all the more the loving; and

although you will forget my love for you,
I shall never cease to love myself in you; and

although you will deny your love for Me, or that I exist,
I shall never cease to love myself in you;

but as lovers do, I shall tease you; for
so lovers show each other their true heart;

and so, you will know, as lovers do,
that you are Me and I am you;

I will show to you My smile of love;
I shall speak to you My love's message.

And if you ask more of Me than all these,
I will show you glory upon glory;

and if you ask yet more of Me than this,
I shall brush you with an angel's wing

and pour out the honey of my love for you
and show you, dazzled by the world, how you are yet Myself.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 2

Still, silent, radiant in myself I sat,
all, in my knowledge; in my love, all things;

and yet I loved to play at love;
so made my worshipper, my lover.

Now my worshipper, my dearest one,
is become the mirror which we share

glancing, laughing with ourselves,
laughing with each other's self

in the mirror of the memory
which is the loving heart.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 20

I sang to My Beloved

O My Beloved –
how could I sing of the joy
of being closer to You
than Your breath...
than Your eyes...
than Your lips...

if Sorrow had not visited me? ...

In the middle of the darkest night
in the cold midwinter of the heart,
a stranger knocked upon my door:
it was Sorrow, wrapped in blackest cloak.

I greeted Sorrow; bade come in;
ate bread with Sorrow and drank wine with it;
then with a smile, sent Sorrow on its way.

Now the sun has risen,
the dawn is like a world made new
and I have woken fresh
as if I had already washed.

[this one comes with a smile for Allie, who occasioned it...]

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 21

Yesterday

I cried out in my anger

'Who are You, Lord? ...'

and the echo came back

like a winter shout against a cliff of stone..

'.....Lord.....'

Today

I whispered in my despair

'Lord, who are You? ...'

and the echo came back

like summer water over a pebble...

'.....You.....'

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 22

My dearest one: tell me,
why you always return to Me?

I said to My Beloved

In everything I do, I fail, fall short
of what I would offer from my heart to You;

You see this; and say nothing.

But then you hide behind my eyes;
and so I see with Your eyes,
where I have failed;

Seeing all this with Your eyes,
how can I not return to You,

O My Beloved?

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 23

I asked My Beloved

How may I know the secret
of being a perfect Sufi,
insan al-kamil,
a perfect Friend of God?

My Beloved said

You will never in your life be sure;
and that is just how it should be;
that way, you will be safe in Me;

instead, seek always where My secret might be found:
as you walk, look closely at all of nature;
every flower, every tree, every lake, every cloud,
every bird, every animal;
look closely at them, to see
if they hold My secret;

as you walk down the street,
look into the eyes of each human being
to see if they know My secret in their heart;

listen to every sound and every word
in case My secret hides within them;

or in the scent of roses, or in the taste of food;

go to sleep with this question on your lips,
wake with this question in your mind;

and though you will never find the answer,
one day the question shall cease to be a question
and become the song which you have always known.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 24

'O My Beloved,

Only when I am close to You
is the world in perfect order, and
contentment enfolds me in warm arms;
only then am I at peace;
only then is my heart at rest
and I am still within myself
and know that heart to be true constancy...'

O My Beloved,

You heard me speak this
from my heart, to You; and then
You smiled.

And in that smile I knew
all that I had written, to be but
the faintest, pale reflection
of Your love for me;
for me whose heart You made,
to be there as a mirror of Your love.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 25

I said to My Beloved
Tell me the measure of truth
My Beloved said
Tell me first what you know of truth

'One and one make two,
- as You and I'
My Beloved said
Tell me more of truth

'Love draws me to You
as the white moth to the candle's flame'
My Beloved said
Tell me more of truth

'Love makes You and me
into one single perfect love'
My Beloved said
This is the measure of truth
which is immeasurable:

the greater the truth
the less it can be measured;
the greater the truth
the deeper it may be experienced;

this is its measure: its experience.
Truth has no other measure,
for only love can measure truth.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 26

To My Beloved I said
'When I am away from you, O Beloved,
out in the market place of this world,
I remember that I have forgotten
one thing – but cannot remember
what it can be...'

My Beloved said
Is it yourself?
'It is of myself, yet
it is not myself..'
'Is it Myself? '
'It is of Yourself, yet
it is not Yourself..'

'Then it must be that one thing
which is most precious to you:
that for which your life was bought in the market place
at the price of a great jewel,
which is your paradise;
that which you love beyond all else,
but have not yet found;
that for which your whole life
should be exchanged;
find that one thing without delay,
and you will have no more questions,
only the joy of working at the work
for which you were born..'

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 27

'O My Beloved –

I lose myself in the world's distracting multiplicity,
yet cannot find the One in my restless mind –
I am in a desert place, a place of desolation... '

My Beloved said

see the reeds, gently swaying like swooning dervishes
on the river bank, their feet in the water –
a man could sit for hours and watch them –
are they not beautiful?

See now the reed-flute, so carefully crafted,
waiting there to sound out sadness, love and joy –
is it not beautiful?

See the musician – how his eyes shine
with the music in his soul!
Is he not beautiful?

Hear the music that he plays –
telling its stories of life and death, of heaven and earth –
is it not beautiful?

Now watch him as he plays
the music which is himself
on the flute made from the willing reed –
am I not the One you hear in this?

I am beautiful in My Oneness;
I am beautiful in My multiplicity;
Is there a greater miracle than this?

And you, the witness of all this in Me –
is there a greater miracle than yourself?

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 29

O Caliphs of the world
who have executed so many saints
for daring to say that 'I am God within myself' –

If you yourselves are not God within yourselves,
then who are you to pronounce punishment
upon any other man?

And now, every man who carries
a sword, a dagger, bomb or gun
would think himself a Caliph,
messenger of the Lord...

how wrong they are.

Yet Allah, the great, the merciful beyond our understanding,
allows them to live on after their victims' death - gives
a little time to know themselves
as the wheel of the potter, Destiny, turns for them,
before they return to Him
as clay to be reshaped in the Potter's hands
or dry and crumble into dust.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 3

My Beloved said

When, my dearest one, you were asleep,
sleeping in Myself, I came to you

and looked into your mirror
to see whom I might see

and when you wake,
then you will see My breath

still moist upon
that mirror.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 35 - Three Answers

I asked the passing strangers
in the fine street of the wise,
'Tell me about your Self itself'

The first man said to me
'It is like a rose garden
planted around a fountain –
it is always beautiful,
changing, yet unchanging;
it is the very centre
of my peace and rest...'

The second man said to me
'It is like a treasure house of riches –
full of more sparkling, deep-coloured jewels
than anyone's imagination
could ever begin to describe;
as beautiful as anything
in heaven or on earth...'

The third man said to me
'It is like a mine of gold and silver
where you only have to dig
and there is always more to find...'

To the first man I said
'You are indeed blest,
O noble sir... and must have earned yourself
this great honour...tell me,
do you invite every passing stranger
to walk and sit in that garden with you? '

He said
'Yes; I am a poet.'

To the second man I said
'You are indeed blest,
O noble sir... and must have earned yourself
this great honour... tell me,

do you invite every passing stranger
into your treasure house, saying,
take all you need -
to make rich their life, too? '

He said

'Yes; I am a poet.'

To the third man I said

'You are indeed blest,
O noble sir... and must have earned yourself
this great honour... tell me,
do you invite every passing stranger
to come and dig whenever he so needs? '

He said

'Yes; I am a poet.'

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 36 - The Rose Told Me

In the garden,
I look at a rose and wonder

Is this rose
laughing with God?
Is it God's smile, and message, to the earth?
Does it tell
Of God's goodness, truth, and beauty?
Of God's stillness? Peace? and silence?

Or if you gazed at it long enough
and carefully enough,
perhaps with a laugh or smile,
in stillness, peace, and silence,
would it tell you everything
that God would have you know?

* * *

For even if you are
a cynic, locked into your own mind
by your own key
and say, oh, it's just
savage, ruthless nature, competing
with all the other flowers, for the bees –
for nothing but its own selfish ends -
you must admit
that Whoever allowed, invented, made, decreed
the laws for the construction of
such complex, simple beauty (which a bee may never know?)
is pretty cool.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi 36 - The Rose Told Me

'If all men already knew my message, saw my smile
then there would be no need for me to speak; or to exist.

If all men already knew my message, saw my smile
then they would treat me like the grass; like the sand.

If all men already knew my message, saw my smile
I would be a noun bereft of any adjective
like grass; like sand.

If all men already knew My message, saw My smile
they would already be God.

If all men already knew My message, saw My smile
none of them, or all of them, would be poets.'

I Am glorious unity;
I Am glorious multiplicity;
Enjoy Me.

[for Ghada, with thanks..]

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 41 - Prayer

In the street outside the window
a beautiful young maiden passes;
only her eyes, looking straight ahead, demurely down,
are to be seen of her, above her veil, below her headscarf; and yet –
around her, as we draw our breath, transfixed –
around her, all the air is radiant with the light of love...

and in the following days, for hours each day,
we, love-smitten, wait in hope to catch her
as she passes; and the more we see her passing,
the more we seek to snare her attention;
hoping for the day when, as she passes,
her lovely eyes may glance so briefly, glance this way...

and on that day, the day of days
which we have waited for, for weeks and months -
then, it is no longer all we want:
how to ensnare her gaze? so that, one day,
our burning ears and lips may draw one single word from her...

*

Wise men say in the ancient tongue, the word,
to pray, meant, to incline, to listen – and, to snare...

and so for every one of us, our whole life is prayer:
from the first moment to the last,
from the first time when the baby's eyes
meet those of loving parents, until
the last moment when our eyes turn upward...

we bow in adoration of the Beloved,
of whom we are not worthy; yet...
then listen for the first word breathed
by child; by parent; lover; ruler; God...

And, lover and beloved both alike,
set snares to catch our Beloved to ourselves...
that Beloved who is outside us, yet within...

that sleeping beauty who is our very self.

and, since prayer is love, our Beloved
sets snares for us also, to test our love;
this is the lovely game of love...
God plays it too with us:
to test our faith, to test our trust, to test our love...

Prayer, O Beloved, is pure love.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 42 - How Far Is Far From God?

Why, O dearest to Myself,
do you try to hard to run away from God?

Your body cannot run away from Him,
for He who made your body, runs with you..

Your spirit, your soul, cannot run away from Him,
for He is your very spirit, your very soul..

Only your mind can run away from Him;

and then his brothers, soul and body,
weep for him, wait for his return,
in stillness and in silence - which they know
by nightfall, he will be unable to resist..

Why do you try so hard to run away from God?
When did He ever run away from you?

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 43 - The Poet

And they often said,
'O poet, as you call yourself –
why are all your verses
to your divine Beloved, full
of 'as' and 'like'? ' –

'Her lips are like red rubies, or as strawberries'...
'Her neck, as slender as that of a running young gazelle'...
'Her smile is like sun after rain'...

'Why do you tempt us with these earthly things? '

The poet said

'Like' and 'as' are the keys to heaven, no less:
there is no language spoken yet by men
equal to the language of Her presence –

my truest poetry is spoken in the moment when
I look upon her beauty, but stunned to silence –
but how then to praise her, tell of her
to those who never saw her beauty yet? ...

and so, I take those things most familiar,
most dear to the senses of all mortal men,
saying, is this not beautiful? And yet, beyond all this
her beauty, which yet comprehends all sense,
all mind, all spirit, all love, all lovers, is her love...

and even when I do not say those words,
but, silent, let an image come of her:
'A gazelle ran wide-eyed through my dream; and I awoke
with the taste of strawberries on my lips...'

then, I know myself to be blest by her,
and yet, the image but a teasing veil;

this is her immortal gift to poets –
to know their mortal failure, yet

to sing to men: I saw her but in passing...yet...
now, I am possessed of her, and sworn
the Beloved's servant all my loving life...

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 45 - The Lily

In the gardens of the world
as the world and seasons turn,
in a thousand thousand gardens,
in a million fields and valleys,
the lilies grow.

the lilies of the field – proud
yet modest in the grass, proud
that Jesus spoke of them;

lilies of the valley – proud
yet modest as their scent
sings and calls, amongst all
the heady scents of nature,
the scent so close
to the wild cyclamen
in the hillside grass;

the regal lily, sharing with the rose
the Caliph's and the Sultan's gardens,
listening all their lives as lilies do
to the plashing fountain in the fragrant courtyard;
laughing quietly as the kohl-eyed beauties
round the Caliph in the evening garden
vie behind their silken veils
with perfumes mixed and strange..

each day, one lily in the bed
reaches its perfection, glows,
exults in its day of unique status,
as every lily has its day..

What honour then, can God bestow
upon his creatures, so magnificent,
so thunderous in their praise of Him
for those with ears to hear?

His most precious gift, which even men
rarely earn with all a lifetime serving Him –

a glimpse of His perfection..

And the regal lily, full of the humility
of the lily, Mary's flower,
bows its slender neck
yields all its beauty, bowing low,
folds its curled petals, as Mary
submitting to the will of God;

and we, walking in the garden,
glance and say 'Behold,
that lily which, but yesterday, was perfect,
is fading now already...' and in our heart
passes, is discarded, the evening chill
of knowing ourselves to be that lily..
pride, humility, the gifted glimpse of God's perfection,
barely acknowledged as they pass..

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 47 - A Confession Of Love Withheld

Now with surprise and sadness, I have realised-
I do not love you as much as I thought...

When you are beside me
in the bed when I awake
I whisper with my waking breath
to your open or your sleeping eyes,
'I love you'...and in that,
I find myself...

But when you are far away
my first involuntary waking thought
is not of you, or love, or God
Who guided me through the night,
Who taught me to enjoy
His great invention, sleep...
but of myself...
myself and world as two
and I am lost to myself...

and know, I have not yet
surrendered all my mind and will
to God...

O My Beloved
how can I love you fully, as God loves, when
I do not yet see God
in every waking moment
in myself?

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 5

Yesterday, my dearest one,
you who are so dear to Me,
you walked so slowly through the public park
carrying your sorrow with you

and as you walked, you cast a glance
at that red rose whose scent waylaid you on your path,
wondering if its beauty
might somehow lift your sorrow from you.

Walk in the park again today,
you who are so dear to Me,
I shall be waiting in the rose,
waiting in the rose's beauty

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 50 - One Thing

Oh the pleasure, the happiness,
the delight, the joy, the bliss,
of doing just one thing above all!

When I was a child, I did many things;
that's right for children – there's the world,
go play in it; ask, what's a horizon? but what
lies beyond? and why can't I see angels
if angels can see me? ...

When I was a young man, I did many things;
that's right for young men – which one will I love?
which one will love me? And when we've together found our love,
oh what then? and oh what then?

But now I'm older, there seems less time
for many things; they will look after themselves
without my help... so, what delight
to give oneself to just one thing...
one thing at a time; and then
one thing...

and it seems, it doesn't matter what;
roses need an expert to collaborate
in dreaming up new beauty from an older stock;
dogs need exercise, and a two-legs to look up to;
grandchildren are born to love grandparents
in a special way..

and, duties done, and hearts served well,
one thing...it might be poetry,
in which to say, look, all this
I've received: here's recognition,
acknowledgement, and gratitude...

and the other things, like sleeping, eating,
become day by day like living in someone else's poem;
someone else committed to one thing...

and then one day, perhaps,
life's curtain twitches; and some great being
looks in the window, the very moment you look out;
and 'one thing', in the most natural way,
becomes...

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 51: Beyond Artifice

Because I am a poet
and you are a poet

I would like to talk to you today
of how when My Beloved
smiles at me with that open smile
that asks nothing but the freedom
to express itself

then I can only think of
that white rose which this morning
took my breath away with its
innocent whiteness, its pure whiteness
with just a hint of a blush as if
it astonishes even itself

or I could speak of the white rose
which reminds me of
the smile of My Beloved

but in truth, the likeness
of these two becomes one
not in my poem but
in myself as I gaze with wonder
at white rose; receive
the smile of My Beloved which asks nothing;

and God, looking at me looking,
God who is all three of us

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 6

My Beloved said

O my dearest one
what may I give to you,
ask of me what you may

I said to My Beloved,

O my dearest one,
give me whatever
may bring You closer to me
bring me closer to You

My Beloved said

Tell me O my dearest one
that I may give you that
which brings Me closer to you

I said to My Beloved

Send me pain and suffering
for when I cry out to You
then I am closest to you
O my dearest one

My Beloved said

I shall send you what you ask,
O my dearest one

It is called the world

and we two shall be one in it
and know it as our dream of love

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 62 - Religion

The witness said
this is what I saw

no other witnesses were present at the time,
none of the jury were there of course,
the judge was not there

some of the jury said
if he says so I believe him,
some of the jury said
how do I know that's the truth

they listened,
his eyes shone;
their hearts listened,
their eyes shone;

yes they said,
that's true

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 63 - One

bee,
said the flower

flower,
said the bee

rain,
said the seed

seed,
said the rain

earth,
said the sky

sky,
said the earth

man,
said the creator

creator,
said the man

do they know
they all speak the same language?

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 64 - Language

It's a misty morning,
clings gently to the skin,
it's pleasant like this,
let's walk

oh here's an apple tree,
you can touch the mist on the apple's skin

ah, it must be a whole orchard,
how the mist makes it such an adventure

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 64 - One

bee,
said the flower

flower,
said the bee

rain,
said the seed

seed,
said the rain

earth,
said the sky

sky,
said the earth

man,
said the creator

creator,
said the man

do they know
they all speak the same language?

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 65 - The Housefly

So small,
such a tiny eye,
yet sees, has seen, so much

to be a housefly
in the house of the Lord,
a house without walls, without ceiling,
without floor?

I wonder.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 66 - The Dervish As A Doorway Turning

When the music calls to the soul's hunger
the matzub begins to turn like a shy maiden;
then faster, faster; centrifugal force
will throw him out of kilter, off the dance floor,
if a single thought
takes the balance of his mind..

then, faster – faster – the centre grows stiller, stronger;
while the mind strengthens its own emptiness,
the emptiness that is so full of surrender;

into that great space enters
what the one at the centre of all things
wills;

the blessing,
not to know that, until one knows..

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 67 - To Rumi

I'm not too proud to say
please write a new poem through me
and I promise not to claim that
I wrote it myself...

or if that's too much to ask,
just a line somewhere, that I'll watch
as it writes itself and know
that you, not I, write it

or if that's too much to ask,
open an old book at
a page that smells just faintly
of attar of roses, and know that
Rumi read this page too

or sitting quietly waiting for a poem,
or after a poem, and there'll be
a slight breeze for a moment
carrying the memory of a rose
from an old Persian species
mixed with the faintest scent of wild herbs
after desert rain

or if that's too much to ask,
just the occasional memory
that you lived, and wrote,
and a poem comes to mind
as if you're reading it first to a friend

and I'll smile and look at
the rose in the blue and white vase over there,
neither of us caring about time
while your book lies open by the window,
the breeze turning the pages gently
as if it knew which poem to choose

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 7

'My Beloved,
what can I give you of myself,
that I have not given? '

My Beloved said

'O my dearest one,
in all places, at all times,
remember Me.'

'O My Beloved,
how can I not do that? '

* * *

In tears, I returned to My Beloved
and said

'O my dearest one,
a week has passed, and the world
pressed hard upon me...

'The next day, I remembered You
three times each hour;
the second day, I remembered You
but once an hour;
on the third day, I remembered You
in some hours, once; some twice;
some not at all... and so it went...

But O My Beloved,
each morning as I woke
I remembered through my tears
how I had forgotten You...'

My Beloved said

'In the remembering of the forgetting
there was a feast of sweetest honey for Me,

hiding like a new young bride
laughing with her bridegroom,
laughing with her eyes on Him,
in the silken tent of love.'

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 70 - Grace

Like a fine cloth for the table:
its strength, its appropriateness,
the twist and spring of its fibers,
the love and care of its making,
(and how eagerly it launders!)
all reveal themselves even while
you're unfolding it, shaking it out;

while you're laying it with a graceful gesture
like a magician whisking away the magic cloth
to reveal a transformation... like
a bullfighter dramatically spreading before the bull
the blood-coloured illusion of a prey...
like a mother quietly prepares a meal...
like the morning or the evening mist
rolling over the edge of a mountain plateau...
like a gentle rain in Spring falling as mercy itself...

it gives up the air trapped under it as you laid it down,
like the heart's lungs surrendering to peace
with a grateful sigh;
and as you smoothe it out on the table
it murmurs love to your hand;
and as you stand back,
it shines; awaits whatever may come to it,
waits as if it had always been
just where it is now
grace

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 71 - In Praise Of Metaphor

It's not a playground where
you run around shouting
without noticing whether
there's a listener

or a playgroup where
there's paper, paste, scissors,
all over the place,
thoughts pasted on thoughts,
without noticing anyone else

no, it's some specific calling,
saying, see that far-off other?
we're related; see us as together,
your surprise may tell you
about that vastness –

maybe, awe, wonder, beauty,
wisdom, truth...goodness...

so treat me, metaphor,
as if god's priest:
respectfully, sparingly, carefully;
as you would look at twins,
each sleeping, but holding hands;

love requires that

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 73 - Whose Duality?

I saw you, and became empty;

then I saw you, and became full;

then I saw you...

why should I choose
when you made both?

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 76 - Poetry

But is it an activity for
grown men and women?

A kind of stocktaking:
sit quietly, begin to feel grateful
for something, maybe your family,
your life even;

remember how your grandmother
said, count your blessings
and you at the age when
you couldn't wait to find them first
and then maybe remember them, maybe not.

The list grows; a feeling that
you should give something back.

It seems a small gift; just words
on paper. So you wrap it
more carefully than other gifts,
write the name of the recipient
carefully, watching the ink
make a thin river like a vein
along the paper.

Can you still remember
how to spell the name?

The address seems
sometimes very far away; sometimes
very close.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 77 - Fullness

When I arose from prayer this morning
and the dew had made the whole world new,

I was full of fullness;

full of observation as
an angel, as a bee; and yet
no need to observe anything,
save that which called to me;

full of rest, which rests behind
all the day's activities;

full of alertness, as an eagle
glides on the warming morning air
and watches for what wills;

the mind as clear as morning sky
waiting for what will pass across it;

full of a goodness which awaits
to know what might be asked of it;

full of truth, which waits for a question
to be asked, the heart to move,
eager ears to listen;

full of a beauty beyond all words,
yet to be praised in words;

full of poetry, which awaits
to be spoken when the moment
calls for words.

When I arose from prayer this morning
the Lord's mercy had made the whole world new.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 8

O My Beloved

when I first cast eyes on You,

if You had looked as I expected

I would have greeted you as an old friend

whom I had waited for,

knowing I would recognise You from afar;

but instead, you appear to me

so unexpectedly, in so many new disguises -

as a baby; in the face of a passing stranger,

as a new flower; waiting in the shade of a tree -

that, taken by surprise, I see only You

before I see all else.

This is Your greatest gift to me,

beyond all old, beyond all new,

O My Beloved.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 80 - Meditation

To the Lord, my Beloved, I said,
my Beloved: often I pray to You,
but more often, I confess,
it is to ask from You;
less often, to thank You or to praise You...

teach me, then, about meditation,
which men say to be a way
to be near You,
even beyond thanks or praise...

the Lord, my Beloved, said,
O you whom I love dearly as Myself,
whose praise and thanks are dear to Me
in ways that only I may know...
such is My nature, and is that of yours,
that only meditation may teach you meditation...

but this is all I ask of you:
that twice a day – and best,
at dawn and dusk, which are
the times I can be known to walk
in My garden of the world,
in the stillness of the morning,
in the stillness of the evening,
when My nature wakes or sleeps in peace...

that twice a day, you spend some time
saying – as if it were only once, and always once –
My name for you; your name for Me;
this will be our time of love;
this will be My test of your true love for Me:

and if at any time, your thoughts
stray away from Me, wandering in
the byways of the world –
that will not diminish My eternal love for you;
it will only mean, that you have forgotten
for the time not being, My love for you –

but if you truly love Me, then you will return
as a straying son returns,
and if you truly love Me,
you will then, know My love's increase..

this will be our daily time together,
you and I; that is all I ask of you;

yet if, in all the other hours of the day,
I seem to you to stay
so much the nearer to you, close to you –
then that is but the mark of My love for you,
O you whom I love dearly as Myself;

so, together, let us speak each other's name,
as lovers always shall.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 9

O My Beloved

I looked for You
everywhere, and in all things;

I looked for You
in all that lives, in all that moves;

I looked for You
in bodies, minds, and hearts;

I looked for You
in beauty, goodness, truth;

You had been in all these things
but had moved on..

I could not find You in the seen;
then found You in the seeing,

O My Beloved

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi 30 - Sufi Haiku

No then, no soon, no here, no there
in this fountain
merrily splashing, enjoying itself

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi 4

In the war-torn city, O My dearest one,
I hear a voice,

louder than the gunfire,
louder than the bombs

calling to Me; it is
a man who kneels in prayer

he does not name his nationality,
he does not name his faith,
he does not name Me as his god

how clear his voice is
as he calls to me

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi 49 - The Mind

O Mind, where are you this morning?
I really need your help...

God bestowed on you His most precious gift –
He gave you the ticket to roam
the length and breadth and height of all His lovely Creation
- as much as any mind can know what's there
behind what's there –

you use this ticket all the time,
but have you ever thanked Him?

When it's time for you to come home
because you're needed there
you send a message saying,
I'm busy here – I'll be back later –

and then, what happens?
You dream up ideas of 'me' and 'mine',
and then like a dog, bury a juicy bone
because you don't trust your Master
to feed you every day...

My body was made by God, and
fed by Him every day, but
it's always here at home; and
it would love you to be home...

My soul was made by God, and
fed by Him every day, but
it's always here at home; and
it would love you to be home...

O Mind, you were made by God and
fed by Him every day, and
given this freedom pass by Him;
why can't you be here at home when you're needed?

You're supposed to be my servant;

Did I not train you properly?
loved you perhaps too much?

I have urgent errands every day for you;
when you've done them, I'm happy
to let you off the leash, laughing, barking,
leaping, panting, your tail wagging like mad
at the fun of being you...

Please, Mind, be a good dog..
we'll love each other all the more..
I promise...

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi 53: Immersed In Poetry

Weary with the day,
it called to me

as if someone said, here...
I've run you a hot bath –
jump in!

I jumped in;
the waters settled round.

This is exactly what I need..
there must be truth here.

No need to read a book
and seek for truth..

This is so good, that
I do not need to ask, what is goodness..

Now I know what beauty is
without looking for it.

I felt cleansed of all
that was not myself; stepped out the bath.

As I dried myself, I knew that
I had found myself again;

sighed with pure contentment; and
laid the poem gently down.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi 57: Grace

But what is grace?

By grace we were as we were.
By grace we are as we are.
By grace we shall be as we will be.

That's grace.

But what is grace?

Grace is what it does.
Catch it as it acts; smiles; passes.
That too is grace.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi,52: Where?

I looked deep into my past, but
could see nothing that told me
more about God.

Only a name. Only a word.

I looked deep into my future, but
could see nothing that held out
hope of knowing God.

Only a name. Only a word.

I stayed in the present moment
and there was nowhere and nothing
that God was not.

In every name. In every word.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 55: Patience

Patience

turns mulberry leaves into silk
through the silkworm

Patience

turns water into wine
through the grape vine

Patience

turns a man into a beloved teacher
through stillness

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 56: The Possibility Of Happiness

If a wise man can be happy,
then happiness must be possible.

If a simple man can be happy,
then happiness is possible.

If a happy man can be wise,
then wisdom is possible.

If a wise man can be simple,
then happiness is possible.

How light the clouds,
how blue the sky, today!

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 60: Eachness

allness smiles
on eachness

you're not surprised?

if I were allness
I might want to keep it to myself

but this allness is smiling

it must see itself in eachness

now that's really something

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 61: P R A I S E

Observation, acknowledgement,
gratitude, praise, a friendship –
call it what you will -
language is generous;

maybe it starts with, every birthday,
a fleeting touch of all this;

it could spread, every morning
an acknowledgement that love
wakes each morning with you
in the bed, in the air,
in the sunlight;

you could become as a Buddhist
and each breath would be
like that; the Compassionate One
saying, yes, that's how it is, this moment;

then there's the heartbeat –
each time the heart pumps again,
the Lord renews His faith in you,
says yes, I can still see Myself
there, just keep going...

the Lord smiles at you; and
maybe you smile back;

that's friendship.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 74: Bliss

and they asked him, master,
tell us about bliss...

and he smiled as if
within himself, he heard the
angels laughing at the blameless
comedy of human life

bliss, he said, is where you find it...

as, when one day, you're so hungry
that a meal fit for gods and kings
is a loaf of warm, fresh-baked bread;
a jug of wine that doesn't ask a label;
maybe a piece of local cheese, why not,

the meal which in olden times,
was called 'short commons' in some tongues,
that every innkeeper would offer free
to the weary, dust-stained traveller
as one would offer to one's god
in thanks for life and sustenance...
saying, there's a shady tree out there,
go and sit beneath it in the cool...

A loaf of bread, a jug of wine... and Thou..

Thou who appearest in so many forms
always beside me;

Thou who made the bread, its daily freshness
as if the morning made it from the desert dew;

who made the wine's slow miracle;
who made the jug – the metaphoric clay of life
made moist with love, fired hard by love...

who made the tree which shades you as you eat;
who, the meal finished, waits for your gratitude

so as to know that all He made, is good...

and who then offers - as silently as sand beneath your feet,
as silently as cool air moves around the tree's light shade,
as silently as ripening figs blush on the branch above you,
as silently as roses live their scented life,

as still as morning dawns, or evening shades -
Himself, as bliss; where for a moment as you sit,
there is no thing in all His world
to be desired; for All is here..

there in the heart, the sweetest taste of His
so intricate and jewelled simplicity.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Spirit Of Shabistari - 1

When I was young, I dreamed all day of travel

When I was old enough, I spent all day travelling

When I had travelled much, I called myself a traveller

Now I sit here, still and silent on the cushions
while the roses release their perfume,
the peacock cries upon the wall,
and in the courtyard, the fountain plays;

and all my travel has returned to me,
all my travelling is within me,
travel, travelling and traveller are one;
and my mind travels to places I had never imagined
and I sense the world turning on its axis,
travelling around my self.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Steps Of Rumi 81: Grace

You see the word 'grace'.
It's just a word. You don't use it,
don't really know how to
think of it; whether it's real,
what it does, whether you'd notice it
somewhere.

That's OK. So,
are you missing anything?
Make it quick, I'm busy...

Right. Think of appetite.
That feeling in the stomach
that it's high time. Mm, maybe
something's going on in the kitchen;
smells good.

Everything on the table looks
good enough to eat...
this pear: so perfectly ripe, the juice
running down your wrist yet
even more of it contained.
It's almost too good to eat..

quick, stop the camera right there:
subliminally, one single frame: grace.

Animal appetite,
observed by human,
divinely created.

Remember it. Grace.
In some languages, the same
word for the gift of it, and
for thanks. Gracias, amigo..
Deo gratia.. that's gifts
from God, not of God.
Or, thanks to God.
Does that matter, when it's matter?

Possibly.

Beautiful, isn't it?

Graceful.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Steps Of Rumi 82: Ignorance, Obstructions, Devils

Ignorance? Don't worry. It's light..

Divine light. Frozen. Waiting for the day when -
isn't that a little lightening on the eastern horizon?
Do you see it? Now I look, it's definitely there..
it's growing as I look...
this could be the beginning...

Obstructions? Don't worry. They're light...

Divine light. Hidden. You see them, and -
now you see them, now you take a good look at them,
suddenly you can see round them, over them, above them...
oh, they weren't obstructions... they were
signposts, here's a big black nothing
standing as a sentinel across the path...

Devils? Don't worry. They're God...

It's God saying, how strong are you,
are you ready to see me yet, or
will the brightness be too much for you?
No problem - take your time...
invent something - ignorance, obstructions, devils -
... feel a hero to overcome it all...
I'll wait... I've all the time in the world...

They, those devils, don't like you to know, of course -
it's fun playing with people; but
it's no fun knowing you are bound
finally to lose... God has to give them
a reason to work hard, to enjoy themselves... like you?

Don't worry. It's all light..
have a bright day...

! In The Steps Of Rumi 83: Watch And Pray..

Sages of the east say,
the first cry of the new-born baby
and the last breath of the dying
together make up the divine Name..

in the meantime...
remember, and listen..

sages of the west say,
birds fly, fishes swim, and man prays..

remember what it was
you should be praying for;
listen for the answer...

maybe a sage will pass tomorrow;
maybe you'll be at the window.

Sages like questions;
never enough.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Steps Of Rumi 84: Crucifixion

When love is crucified every day,
why waste time
arguing about religion?

Michael Shepherd

! In The Steps Of Rumi 85: War

War?

Far harder than the battles of men
is the battle to surrender
to that which was there
before all battles.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Steps Of Rumi 86: The Mirror

This mirror.
She has stood in front of it for many minutes;
this; that;
finally asked the mirror silently
its opinion.
The mirror agreed with the perfection
that she saw in herself now, in front of it..

Now she leaves the room.
The mirror has nothing to reflect.
While it's reflecting nothing,
steal up to it from the side,
admire it. Maybe praise it
by polishing it. Wonder, how it is
that it has an in front of it,
yet no behind it.

Wonder how it is
that it never lies,
always tells the truth,
yet agrees with all we see in it..

Wonder too, how it brings
all who stand in front of it, to silence..
bestows this rare blessing upon all,
which is beyond the ability of men,
of books..

Somewhere where ideas emerge
from nowhere into somewhere,
then roam anywhere and everywhere,
mind and mirror were given a secret which they share.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Steps Of Rumi 87: A Windy Day

Isn't it a windy day?
The wind gets everywhere,
loves especially to have fun,
enjoys rattling loose doors as if it would come in,
to become a quiet household pet,
or just disappear up the chimney
to meet itself again...

loves corners especially,
piles its toys up in them;
loves robes, veils, laughs, exposing
forbidden body parts;
sweeps the streets clean of plastic bags
then just for fun, blows them around again;

loves especially, laundry on the line –
fills out men's shirts into dancing fat men;
would wind like to laugh at man?

then from fun play, can get serious –
tests whether that corrugated iron roof
to your makeshift shed is really secure..
later, you may be glad it did...

then from serious to boisterous:
takes on the sea itself, which
likes a bit of fun, but then
gets angry when provoked too much...

then when it's gone, it's gone
back to wherever wind comes from...

before it goes, let's wrap up, take
a laughing walk and tussle with it;
come back, cheeks glowing,
eyes sparkling, laughing,
light-hearted... what did we meet out there?

some say, that wind is really fire,

which stirs our blood like that;
that fire brings life; that life brings spirit;
that spirit is but love; and love,
the breath of gods, of God;
the wind blows where it will.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Steps Of Rumi 88: Metaphor

Simile – what looks like something else –
that’s a fun game for the senses,
for the mind: oh look Dad,
there’s a scarecrow in that field
that looks just like a man, does it
really scare crows?

Oh look Dad, there’s a beggar in the street
who looks just like a scarecrow,
I wonder if the same crows
see him too?

But metaphor – ah, that’s something else:
explanations don’t quite explain it:
you see something; it brings to mind
something very different; maybe
you just forget it, pass on; maybe
you’re a poet, and you think,
that other thing casts a subtle light
on this first thing, I’ll see if others
find the same.. and, sometimes they do,
sometimes they don’t...

Metaphor brings the whole universe,
world upon world, to the mind:
you could write a poem full of metaphor
as long as the circumference of the world,
and when you’d written it out, you’d find yourself
right here again just where you were.. but
what a lot you’d seen on the way...

We’re so used to some metaphors
because by now, they’re shared,
written into language (lucky the people
who inherit languages such as these,
they’re born into poetry...) :

take ‘bread’: you walk past the baker’s shop
in the early morning when the air is clear –

or better, go in to buy your breakfast rolls:
the smell couldn't be more wonderful,
more promising.. the bread's so delicious,
and best eaten today..

ah yes, 'daily bread' – that becomes a metaphor
for all that each and every day brings –
waking up, new thoughts, new experiences,
all that brings life to life..
that covers so many subtle things...
where does it all come from?
that's for you to say...

Sometimes it seems that the whole world
is a metaphor for something...
for what? For its own unity,
for its very creation,
for that which we call God,
for our very self?
that's for you to say...

Metaphor. When you meet it,
does it make you think of
English class, another boring
poem, another boring question
to answer as you chew your pen –
'What does the poet mean when
he speaks of, lies like oyster shells
to be penknifed for their pearls? '...

or - does it fill your heart with joy
as if someone had given you
a golden key to a secret garden
which is all you ever hoped for;
more than you could ever imagine...
and yet you recognise
it's all really just yourself? ...

In the corner of your room
there's a little girl curled up
in a large armchair, reading a book.
Don't disturb her.

The book she reads with all her self today,
may never read again, doesn't need to -
is a metaphor for
all she needs to know today
about the world, about herself;

she finishes the book,
closes it thoughtfully,
looks up at you;
she knows herself
a little more today.

Michael Shepherd

! In The Steps Of Rumi: 86: Here, Maybe Now..

Maybe there really is 'somewhere else'.
Maybe there isn't.

Travel agents tell me there is.
They even suggest that I'll be someone different
while I'm there...

but suppose I was? Would I
remember to come back?

Or stay there, be someone else..
until I'm sure, I stay here
and practise just being here.
It sounds simpler that way.

Then when I'm expert in being here,
and go somewhere,
I'll still be 'here' there..

Really? You think that sounds dull?
But I'm happy to be me, here...
Maybe I'll be happy being 'here' there, too..

And when I'm expert at being here,
then I might try being now..

no past to worry about,
no future to worry about;

It sounds simpler that way.
I'll let you know.

*

[to Rumi and to Ronberge: poets of the light heart,
the light touch.]

Michael Shepherd

! Islamofascists And Christofascists (And Israelofascists Too?)

Well, you'd expect them to hate each other,
since it's the nature of the beast
and deep down they hate
all human beings, and hate themselves...
those who would impose their 'righteousness'
upon their fellow men...

but the God who's mercifully beyond all names
must look down in stunned incomprehension
when the faithful make division in their faith...
Catholics and Protestants, Sunnis and Shias...

for perhaps this is the greatest crime of all
against God: and if so, the Popes and Archbishops
should have said to their faithful a century ago,
love those who love Me, whatever path they take...
or My penalty shall be, that – plague on both your houses
in My house of many mansions – both your so-called 'faiths'
which are but faith in your own human judgments rather than
your faith in Me – both shall be henceforth declared
apostate, infidel – oh ye who lack real Faith...

or if God could, would, should not interfere
as His inexorable laws work their justice out
and the 'faithful' slaughter one another
in a new Massacre of the Ignorants –

if not God Himself, then some latter Solomon
who might say the same; or devise
some sharper stirring of what's left
of reason in those warring idiots –

something on an unreasonable par
with his threatened halving of that disputed babe,
such as, if you haven't sworn brotherly love
on every holy book and holy shrine
within a month, I'll toss this coin

with Allah's name, or Jehovah, or Fid. Def. upon it ...

and declare one party forever infidel
within my holy realm...

how obvious all this seems, to those of us
born free from ancient hates: they, bound
to man's so foolish, idiot pride.. and the great betrayal
ever threatening, the treason of the clerics...

Michael Shepherd

! 'It's Joost Not Furr! ...'

From my extended family,
the indignant cry rings out –
'It's joost not FURR! '...

Whingers all? Ah – but listen
to the sound behind those words...
this is not the 'Yokshire' voice,
standing square on the earth
as if it always owned it...

this is the sound of centuries –
two at least - of men's sense of injustice:
forced off the herding on the lovely hills,
the fresh cleansing air, or
the market gardens of Lytham and the coastal plain,

down to the water-valleys and the foggy, smoky air
of the mills; the cotton dust into wheezing lungs
shortening their lives as they listen bed-bound
to the clatter of the morning clogs:
the single early steps to set up the mills,
the rush, then the single hurried latecomers...

or the starving Irish, seeking work a bare potato's throw
from the ships they came in, to the Mersey docks...

But listen again to that whinge, confident,
in its sense of injustice: hear the 'good news'
brought by Nonconformist preachers,
Wesleyans and Methodists and Baptists too,
and all the shades of freethinking men and women,
in tiny 'tin tabernacles' as they were called,
out on the moors beyond town boundaries;
bringing the good news of a God
who was classless; beyond the reach
of ruling class or politics; a liberal God,
who dwelt in our joyful inner tabernacle...
and who was, it seems, on good terms
with the local 'poor' lodge as it was called,

of non-religious, and non-political Freemasonry:
bestowing a benevolent, right-thinking and all-seeing eye
on those proud 'working class' who understood
the virtue of good deeds for the poor,
by the poor...setting up the Co-operatives
to sell unadulterated food at decent prices;
in the room above the first one in Toad Lane,
attending evening class – now washed and tidy –
to, as they so proudly said, 'better themselves'...

and on Saturday, before the endless prayerful Sunday,
attending, first, the classless 'Rugby' football,
playing in the 'Hornets' or some such team,
or later, 'Soshie' as they called it,
abbreviating 'Association' football...

cleansed on Sunday for the soul's new week
while wives cleaned the house on Monday, washing day..
and in enlightened families, were free on Tuesday evening
to attend the same classes that their proud husbands loved...

towns who wore a badge of national pride
that after Robert Owen and John Bright and t'Co-op,
pioneers of a just society of work,
'Scott of th'Ob' had gone on from
the local paper to become the great editor
of the Manchester Guardian, voice
of liberal Britain..

I generalise... but listen to that sound
behind the voice of Lancashire upraised –

'It's joost not FURR! ...'

Michael Shepherd

! It's Time For A Little Timelessness

I said to the stone,
What time is it?
The stone was silent.

I said to the eagle,
What day is it?
The eagle looked fiercely at me,
Then turned its head away.

I said to the oak tree,
How long were you there?
Silently, the oak tree grew.

I said to the worm,
How long will you take?
The worm continued on its way.

I said to the river,
What takes you so long?
The river ran as ever.

I said to the sun,
Shall we meet here tomorrow?
Shining, the sun gave no sign.

I said to the milk,
When was I born?
Flowing, the milk had no answer.

I said to the earth,
When will you expect me?
The earth held its peace.

And Pooh Bear looked at me very seriously
and said,
'It's always time for something..'

Michael Shepherd

! Jewels Of The Beach

Plash...keesh... plash...keesh

the waves throw themselves
onto the pebbly beach,
but as if they regret their own angry generosity,
pull back a sieved undertow of finer pebbles
mixed with rough toe-grating sand;
their generosity the swathe of larger pebbles
which gleam like jewels, before the salt-water
dries them into centuries of scratched, scoured surface,
dull as familiarity.

That swathe of jewels – magic to a child;
but now I'm older, yields a mental miracle
of nature ceaselessly at work:

green bottle-glass pebble – rounded to a smooth, safe shape
for the child to spot and pick up –
that's easy to trace: from fishermen's magic globes, the net-floats,
or bottles thrown carelessly overboard
on some romantic cruise..

white chalk – that's easy too: final shape
whose roundness may resist at last the restless sea
chewing away at Dover's so emotive cliffs;
just the right size for a tiny fist
to write on concrete; it could write but scratch
that slate or blackboard with its ABC.

a gorgeous mottled red: as if from pillar
of some exotic Eastern temple; a closer look
suggests some mighty compression of the earth
that's left a substance just about halfway
between soft Devon clay and harder granite;

and here a softer red; shaped from some brick
the sea has stolen from some poor defence;
but that will write too, stir a first artistic effort
setting off the white; but leave a trace of itself

on that small, tight fist;

now the shades of green – the hardest stone,
serpentine, which glows when wet or waxed:
how long did this stone take
to shape – and then to roll on ocean floor
from distant shore and ancient mountain range?

a whole range of semi-transparent yellow-browns,
agate and suchlike, best when wet; their structure
easily breaks down, too small for fun;

but here's a slatey grey, veined with white, as if
some modern sculptor had seen its possible potential,
smoothed it with a loving hand; nature,
says the aesthete, meeting art..

the occasional alabaster sparkler just survives;
so dull now, that you'll need to smash it first;
but here's the pride of all this sea-tossed mile of treasure trove:
a ravishing, smooth, moon-white marble, maiden aristocrat;
how long, how far, to roll and sieve this
like some ageless prospector sieving for gold or diamond?
what Greek palace tipped by an earthquake
into a blue Aegean sea? Into the crummy pocket of the shorts
that one goes, to line up with its kinsfolk
on the window-sill..

a sea-shore (you can hear it in the word itself..) ,
a beach, a child with blowing hair and eager eyes;
these two spell happiness; live nature's most compatible.

Michael Shepherd

! John Of Forde, His Exculpation

What I say and what I write
may seem to you – may seem to me –
as foolishness and folly; for
I talk of boundless things, and of infinity;

which by their nature, are beyond
the human mind, the human pen;
should I then not and never speak of such?

Or are these boundless things
just what mankind should talk about –
seeking the laws of atoms, or of space, only
to find the boundlessness yet further off
than men of yesteryear believed?

and if I talk and write – beside those things
invisible as once the surface of the Moon –
then, of the boundlessness of love - which is yet bound
into Creation's very substance – and
those other boundless things which seem to us
to be Creation's - even the Creator's - very nature...

then my exculpation is but simply this:
the motive force for what I write,
the theme of what I write, which is
my boundless love for you, for all,
demands, must win, forgiveness
from Boundlessness itself...

there is no more, there is no less
than love, which is true boundlessness.

[adapted from Sermon 43 of John of Forde, 1145-1214]

Michael Shepherd

! John Of Forde, His Witness

John of Forde

Kneeling there, the candles living flame
in the darkened abbey, brother monks
still and silent at the golden altar rail,
kneeling there, clearing that inner space
into which may enter what God wills –

sometimes He takes me unawares;
murmurs like a gentle thunder
some clear message beyond words
yet winging into crystal sentences,
and that, a treasure-house of joy...

why do I call it sweet, this moment
savoured, indescribable? Because
there is no other word... why do I say,
ah, He has called me to the marriage feast..?

How else to tell you how, at that,
everything becomes delight,
everything becomes a glory?

and the glory is delight;
delight, in truth, the glory.

[adapted from Sermon 43 of Abbot John of Forde Abbey, c.1145-1214]

Michael Shepherd

! Joy Enjoyed With Or Without Hope...

Joy
gets a bad press
from poets and divines –

it's fleeting, can't
be trusted, brings
a downside;

better far they say
is bliss: quiet, indifferent,
that is, beyond all differences
that sadden; divisions
that steal our perfect,
timeless, spaceless I guess
unity

this poem looks
with joyful hope
or hopeful joy
well joy and hope
or would joy or hope be enough,
Paul,

to a future bliss
which when found
has no past or future but
only the perfect present
of the perfect present.

[another one with acknowledgements to Eckhart Tolle and 'The Power of Now'...]

Michael Shepherd

! Just Another Rant

There are things which we all know
but pretend we don't
as we watch them with amusement wriggling publicly
out of their public bonds..

1) You can always buy your way
to 'honours' – but not, ha, to 'honour':
not with a cheque by return of post, of course;
just by more subtle 'charity' of the sort
which inevitably involves
large sums of money gratefully received
by the genuinely honourable. But of course
you'll be the only one who confuses
honours with honour.

2) The buck – with honourable exceptions –
never 'stops here' – it stops
at the guy one below 'here':
you're in charge – so, you don't say
'Go kill Thomas á Becket' etc.. you say
'Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?' into the air,
kinda rhetorical question.. and, surprise,
there's a scrum of posse at the gun cabinet..

3) There are certain countries and no I won't
where bribes – often to those who don't need them –
are like thank-you letters – you don't have to,
but everyone expects it.. and don't be surprised
if you're off their seasonal greetings card list next year..

just one suggestion: that if blackmailed trade-wise
by a foreign country to break your own code of honour
and you stand up and say 'It would not be
in Britain's interest in terms of
commercial and diplomatic good relations
and employment in skilled industry
to pursue this matter through the courts'
you should have your British passport and nationality
taken away; after all, you've already forfeited it

in the court of honour..

OK that feels better. How was it for you?

Michael Shepherd

! Lakshmi In Her Silken Veil

Lakshmi, in her silken veil
of modesty, walks unrecognised,
free as birds are free, around our world...

veiled in stillness; her lovely arms
bestowing, secretly, invisibly
her wealth;

her step so light, her being so, so still...
she passes you every day;
has never forgotten you;

so if you think she has neglected you –
consider, instead, her reasons:
she may be holding back to teach
(do you hear her laugh so lightly?)
pure grace, pure gratitude,
tomorrow, or the next day...
humility, she teaches, is the greatest wealth..

so disguised, she walks so freely through our life:
she loves to walk in markets, and the scents
and colours, tastes, of her wealth;

she loves to walk in fields, in Spring,
her arms as gentle, careful, generous,
as a sower casts the seed;

she walks in hospitals, loving care
distributed without a holding back;

she walks in schools, sits with the pupils,
bathing in the wealth of knowledge
that flows from spring to river to the ocean;
sometimes watches hand in hand
with her sister Saraswati;

she loves princes and their consorts
decked with jewels that all can wonder at;

she does not like dark treasure hoards
or locks, or keys; or those who think
her wealth is somehow, theirs...

and where she walks, a trail of golden dust
dances in the air; if you do not see her,
go to the temple where she loves to rest
among her own; for if you thank her there,
you'll see her everywhere; say nothing,
smile; share her modesty, her generosity,
that only her own devotees understand:
those who love her wealth, but never for themselves...

this, this, is her beauty.

Michael Shepherd

! Laying Down The Psalms

The book sags open on my lap
as I cease reading, stare into blind space,
gaze into a history that answers not;
lost in the troubles of an ancient people
whose hearts are not, yet could be mine..

I need to talk to the Psalmist: now:
for I cannot carry all this burden;
for despite the burning poetry of faith,
my ears, my mind, my heart
find neither mercy nor sweet justice
running to you, arms outstretched, ...

this God of sin, of wrath and retribution
whom you seek to appease, to praise,
to beg support of, against those enemies
who will never let you live in peace,
who afflict your soul, steal the sacred tents you pitch
beside sweet waters and the grazing flock...

this God who seems to have a personal interest
in putting your nation through tests, more tests,
like twisted cloths slapped on flat wet stones
beside the black river of sadness by women without hope –

this God to whom you raise despairing hands,
cry prayers, shout to the skies, list grievances –

can this God be – as wise Greeks say He is –
a god who ever lives, sleeps, wakes,
within your very heart – not in some vague
somewhere way out there...

or as the wise Hindus say He is –
the very same within you as He is 'out there'? ...

and so, is all your raw outpouring of the human heart
an artifice, formality, figure of a poet's speech...
you, knowing all too well that by this means

you call upon those vast reserves of human spirit
deep, deep inside your very self; from where,
eternal springs of healing mercy
pour like rushing waterfalls of love,
like the tender-guarded flock of sheep
who graze the grass of peace..
who never fails to hear, closer, so much closer
than the skies whose very fabric now you rend
with cries that sound so fruitless...
closer, close; for He's your very self? ...

-and of necessity, shares that same inner self
with all the woes which your own 'unripe deeds',
as Aramaic calls what we call 'sin' –
have brought upon yourself; brought down
the heavens all about your ears...

Is all this a metaphor for faith
put to the ultimate test to win
the crown, the seat on the right hand? ...

tell me, Psalmist, that this might be true; to salve
the hearts of your tormented, God-impassioned people
for whom history has yet in store
more tests than any mouth would want to tell?

Michael Shepherd

! Leaf

It was one of so many; an army
of greenness; anonymous footsoldier
in the cause of nature's greater good.
It was tree.

First, as summer lingered into autumn,
it laid down its arms; the days of empire-building
over; no longer did it need
to fight in serried ranks for space.

Then next, laid down the need to breathe;
lingered strong upon the branch
as old soldiers do, before they fade away;
boasted now, beyond loyalty, all pride.

Now, its fire of life turned to new arts
in pensioned, eased retirement; learned
a new palette of colours,
yellows, reds, browns; how to shade
from one to another; how to take
the breath away with contrast.

Then, as it relinquished hold
on water, took up further skills;
learned precious, porcelain fragility;
discovered sculpture,
curled like a dancer's sway,
found arabesques and curves of beauty
beyond the finest human artistry.

Finally, submitted to relinquish even earth.
A last curling fall at a moment's puff of wind
all beyond its knowing
brought it onto the gatepost,
level with my eyes, just as I passed the gate;

displayed like some ballerina in the last pose
of some tragic, swan-necked dance, that time
could indeed stand still: so that even beauty

held her breath and waited...

in that moment outside time,
told me all unspoken things:
thoughts that rest too deep for tears;
there where tears meet joy.

Michael Shepherd

! Life Can Be So Surreal

When he first clapped eyes on her
you could have heard the clapping
in the next ballroom.

Then his eyes danced.
They disengaged themselves gracefully
as from a group of friends,
cut and coiled their stalks
as if some umbilical cord,
and danced.

They danced at eye-height, which seemed
appropriate, considering;
you'd have thought they'd danced together
all their lives, they danced so well together.

They danced the quickstep first, then
the foxtrot; then a sparkling jive. At
the end, they bowed to her, respectfully,
yet in a way as if they knew the score,
had an eye or two to the future.

Then, quite simply, they returned,
picked up where they had left off.
No hint of what had gone on, except perhaps
a whiter shade of white around their irises,
and still clearly lit up from their first fill of her;
for she was, we all agreed, an eyeful.

Michael Shepherd

! Love And Understanding

Who today would praise
consciousness itself,
which brings new life and thought
every morning, opening
our minds a little more,
making the light seem brighter,
everything more vivid,
life itself more worth living?

This morning, I read the words
'Love itself is understanding'...

and in the mind, doors blew open,
windows rattled, a wind
that smelled of spring and grass and rain
blew through the mind

and the word love
blew off the dusty shelf
along with the cobweb
but lay unbroken on the floor
waiting to be washed and put back
next to understanding

and the silliest, biggest gift of all
is to know for the first time
what you've always known

and which nearly two thousand years ago
Gregory the Great
also recognised for the first time,
maybe felt the same way, as if
he was entrusted with the key
to a large house on a windy day.

Michael Shepherd

! Love Is Difficult: Isaac Of Nineveh

Love is difficult
until it's easy..

How to write of this,
unless, until, we're like him.. old and wise and
blind with reading and austerity,
speaking of what he'd become;
so that we, enfolded in his love,
become a little, that of which he writes?

On his painful, joyful, great adventure
to become the world,
seen as Creation sees it,
his heart so loved the mind,
his mind so loved the heart; that
these two walked together,
climbed hard mountains,
washed in cool, fresh streams;
were compassionate of each other's failings;
rejoiced in each other's purity.
Call this what you know of it.

First, he sought the body's freedom
to be the tool of what was asked of it;
call this what you know of it.

Then, he sought what the unconscious mind
threw up from depths yet still not deep enough:
'logismoi' was the name some gave:
those seeds of action which he learned to listen to
to know whether they brought light,
or that darkness which is hard, agitated, cold,
these all at once..
call this what you know of it.

Then, love was easy: nothing was profane,
nothing sacred; he, sanctified,
sanctified the world around him;
his soul, when you were near him,

seemed to exhale a subtle, joyful fragrance
which changed the air around him;
embraced you in unspoken prayer
for all the world in mind: even devils,
serpents, sin, were thus embraced;
is this purity, compassion?
Call this, what you know of it.

All things then revealed to him
the secret of their being;
the visible, teaching the invisible;
the manifest teaching the unmanifest.

It's said that Isaac was described
as 'priest of all the world,
celebrating at the altar of his heart';
call this, what you know of it.

For love is difficult
until it's easy.

*

{Saint Isaac of Nineveh was born c.625 AD/CE
at what is now Qatar on the shores
of the Persian Gulf; especially beloved
in 19th century Russia.}

Michael Shepherd

! Love You

Dearest T...,
Great to hear from you!
I'm glad the hospital didn't confiscate
your mobile and your laptop
this time...

but – what can I say?
I'm sorry to hear that
your break-up with the new bf
was so violent – well, at least
you're highly trained in law h h h...

but I'm glad to hear
that you changed your mind
when you got to Zurich...
I'd like to know more of that;
but won't ask just now..

and I'm touched that the two poems
on the riches of the self
were the first poems that you read
when you came back into the ward...
should I be glad, you silly girl,
that they 'made your mascara run'...?

Oh dearest T - whom I love, as the self in all;
who's stretched the love of parents, friends,
beyond all reason, to that place where only love
is left... to do what love can, may, might, do...

you'll go on testing the – let's say –
Absolute's – God's – love for you
with tests that only someone so loving,
so intelligent, so aware, so stubborn for the truth
could devise, as self-destruction...

until the day, when you'll accept
within that sober, loving self we know so well,
that you, yourself, are but that absolute, that self, that love

which you have no need still to test; nor can;
until that day when, out of love,
your self tires of your tricks...

keep me in touch? for there are some of us
who know that love is boundless;
useless, T, to test our love for you;
and you're too bright (alas?) for me
to tell you yet again
the consolations of philosophy..

I'll simply write,
Look after yourself;

and look, then, at those words
as if I'd never seen or read them once before;
fall still; wish you, too, stillness;

there is no more for words.

Michael

Michael Shepherd

! Love's Light: The Philosopher At The Window

The eyes, it's said, are windows of the soul;
and when I see your eyes so sparkling bright,
I see there beauty, truth and goodness; all
as one; the radiance of an inner light.

But I who, standing, gaze though windows here:
what does my own soul see by its own light?
Is what is seen, seen through dark glass, or clear?
Is others' radiance that of my own sight?

Strange fact: the outward play's less bright, less clear
than what I see to shine in others' eyes;
there seems less love in me, from me; less dear
the loving, than the love I see and prize!

These windows teach clear lessons to my soul:
first see my own self's light, to see the whole.

Michael Shepherd

! Love's Perfection

Oh I am so fortunate.
In the past and in the present.

We fell in love, and loved
and it was total
and unexpected
and revelatory
and unique, of course
and consuming
and falling in love with the whole world too
and with life itself
and a compass
and the possibility of a map
and lacked nothing
and was everything.

And it was so perfect
that now
when I see your double around the town
who looks just like you
and was you

there is no need for nostalgia
or regrets
or how-it-might-have-been-if
or even self-congratulation
because it was so complete
and completed.

I am so fortunate.
I would like to think
(for we talk, easily, but never of the past)
that it is the same for you

for that way, completeness is doubled
and something, perhaps
given to the world.

We are so fortunate.

Michael Shepherd

! Lyric 5: Staggered Assonance

the singing in the living, listening heart
tells love in whispers; and the heart is always
listening; for that heart is always bliss; all
hearts in all ways, blest by ceaseless love;
the blaze of bliss in life is our soul's singing;
this peace, our life as winging gift that's blest;
its light brings love, sings peace, and brims the heart.

(An experiment in assonance without rhyme: the assonances are in a staggered sequence through the lines)

Michael Shepherd

! Mariah Carey's Hideous Secret

Now promise you won't tell anyone
(though what's the fun of having a secret
if you can't tell anyone? ...)

Mariah Carey
was never a member of the
Mickey Mouse Club
when young, er, younger...

to which

some will say, wow, don't you know a lot.
some will say, who's Mariah Carey?
or, who the chic black rock chick cares...
or, smartipantsly, well you could guess couldn't you.
or just, cool -
...and go on with what they're doing.
or, didn't know you had pub quizzes at your local.
or, good for her.
or dead straight like, I didn't know it was still running,
I remember I was a member of...etc.

or something Village Jewish and TV-scripwriterly like
and were you still dressed when she whispered that?

while LA insiders say, silly girl,
all the big agents say
sign up for Mickey whatever your age
before you audition for Disney Corp's
music side

or it's something deadpan and very NY so you don't know whether
it's a joke or not, like
is product placement in poetry a growing market?

or give you that look that they've perfected
for sad losers and say
get a life man
it's a poetry site and you spend your time
on that Minnie-quiz ha ha

how long did it take you to get that one right anyway
when you don't even know the names of the other three

Michael Shepherd

! Mary Mary Magdalene

Mary Mary Magdalene,
what do all those stories mean?
Mary, Mary, is it true,
Jesus had a thing for you?

Mary, Mary – He lay with you?
Mary, Mary, tell me true
Mary, Mary, red hair wild,
did He leave you great with child?

Mary, was your love so steady,
that you had had His kids already?
Mary, Mary, at the Cross,
did it feel a gain or loss?

Mary, Mary – on that third day,
what was it like with the stone rolled away?
Mary, Mary, running there with love,
what did you think when He rose above?

Mary, Mary – what was it like, after?
Were there tears or joyful laughter?
Mary, Mary – the kids you had –
did they turn out like their Dad?

Mary, Mary, whore redeemed,
did it work out like you dreamed?
Mary, Mary – your afterlife –
was it mostly love, or mostly strife?

Mary, Mary, were you worshipped or despised
As Mary's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Christ?
Mary, Mary, did you stay,
or feel you had to take the kids away?

Mary, Mary, with so much love,
did you, too, rise to heaven above?
Mary, Mary, in the sky,
all we ask are the reasons why...

Mary, Mary Magdalene,
What is really true? What does it really mean?

Michael Shepherd

! Massive Love Poem

I want everyone to know

yeah?

how much I loved you

yawn

and how much I miss you

y a w n...

which makes this, poetry

yy aa ww nn....

and me a poet

y a w...w...w...w...w...n

Michael Shepherd

! Maya

'And what of the gopis? '
then I asked you -
'Had they forgotten that they too,
were Krishna? Or did they think
it was more fun
to pretend that they were not? '

And you looked long at me
and smiled; and drew your silken veil
across your lovely face.

Michael Shepherd

! Maybe This Is What Bliss Is

Those days when an invisible armchair
relaxes you into a mood
that's an exquisite, savoured blend
of innocence and experience,
which might even be thought to be
wisdom
except you don't even need to think it
since you're simultaneously 7 and 70
and thus invulnerable

days when I wish the house had a verandah
where in the evenings I could sit:

'I'm here, I'm watching it all go by,
you can stop and chat
or wave and I'll nod;
I'm here; I'm at home.'

Michael Shepherd

! Meeting Mister Blake The Poet In The Strand

'This is Mister Blake, my dear,
he sees visions..'

and he looked down at me, this man
who saw, what did that mean,
saw visions? His eyes were just so blue,
so blue, that they were limitless
and I flew up and into them
like a sky and wings

and the voices sang forever
as if there were no repetition
and angels with blue eyes
looked at me out of everywhere
seeing every thing

and Mister Blake the poet raised his hat to me,
smiled the gift of always,
and walked on his way
down the Strand
as if one and all things
had never parted company.

Michael Shepherd

! Memorial To A Minor Poet

as poems go

his went

Michael Shepherd

! Metamorphosis

and with good fortune
the experience grows itself
into a poem; so that
the poem then may seed itself
into a new experience;

like two young lovers
one the poem's beginning
the other the poem's end,

looking, looking, in a crowd of thousands,
seeing each other, running toward –

the crowd so alien
then so soon, love.

Michael Shepherd

! Metaphysical Prayer

Come to me as nameless, Lord –
and I to Thee!

come to me – I care not – as
the Brahman, Krishna, Buddha,
Adonai, Christ, Mohammed, Reason –
clothed, adored, despised,
in any of the names and forms
by which men know Thee or profess to know,
in the name of Whom they fight each other,
and thus deny Thy very self –
or as a nameless stranger, none of these -

come to me nameless, Lord –
and I to Thee..

come as One clothed in majesty;
come as a ragged beggar at my gate;
come clothed in shining white as Love;
come as a tempter full of hate;

come in the dazzling beauty of the day,
come in the orchestra of sound,
come in the velvet silence of the night;
come to me in a crowded market-place,
come to me alone among the hills,

come to me as slow as years of torture,
come to me as quick as gunshot death –
come to me as the girl next door,
come to me as Magdalen or whore;
come to me as Satan – if Thou must -

come to me as years of reading, thinking, reasoning –
as the dust blown off an ancient book;
come to me as years of yearning patience,
hours each day of kneeling or cross-legged,
come to me as years of weary factory work,
or peeling vegetables all the day;

come to me as a long-awaited friend;
come to me blooded, fierce-eyed,
as enemy to be overcome;
come to me in anger; or in submissive patience;
come to me as tragedy, or comedy, or farce...

come to me disguised as one of these,
or as many; or as none;
or best of all, Lord,
come to me disguised as all of these...

come to me in illusion or in ignorance –
then come to me at last and joyfully,
in Thy duality – Thy final secret joke:
that not until we see in us some 'other',
may we know there is no 'other' here..

come to me, then, as distant Thou
to kneel to as the universe itself;
come to me, now, as friendly You,
who lived, and live, for ever in my heart;

come to me as one or many,
come as All in all;
come, beyond all comprehension - yet
clear as writing on a wall..

come to me, O nameless Thou –
and I, myself, to me...

Michael Shepherd

! Mind That Heart

Jane Austen's heroines –(ah, dearest Jane...)
knew a thing or two –
show a man you have a mind,
and you may catch his heart..

and men –
flowers, a poem, a compliment,
something of beauty
to show you have a heart,
may bring you to her mind..

so poetry:
meaning is beauty to the mind,
beauty is meaning to the heart.

Michael Shepherd

! Mind That Mind!

Boundless... yet, it can formulate
these things called words...
to help itself and us; to call
to our imagination, bounds,
and boundlessness, in thought...

out of sleep and dream, leaps
to our assistance as a faithful hound
eager for the hunt; in a puckish moment
offers us the world.. all that is
and all that's not (and it's
particularly strong on what is not...)

is it greater, then,
than its Creator? No, that can not be;
but greater than our image of
the Creator – ah! now there's the rub...

what is its shape, this shapeless thing?
as regular as a sphere – but of a geometry
beyond all spheres; its co-ordinates
beyond whatever is beyond...

yet almost as if it had (its centre
everywhere, its circumference just nowhere...)
imagined poles, joined yet held apart
by imaginary axis – so that it can hold
all opposites, all paradoxes;

so as you speak one thing, its opposite
like shadow, like uninvited echo,
haunts it as familiar ghost...
see it, hear it, and
you'll win a reputation for broad-mindedness
or scholarly indecisiveness...you will walk
with blissful universality..

this glorious facility, new-born to us every moment,
to be ecstatic in our boundlessness...

and all this, before
we've even rolled and staggered out of bed...

Michael Shepherd

! Miss Gertrude Stein Was As Light As A Bright

Gertrude Stein was on her dying bed;
(i.e. she was dying, not the bed) :
the doctor came in, Alice walking ahead;
'What's the answer, Doc? ' said Miss Stein;
that was what Miss Gertrude Stein said.

but the doctor merely shook his head;
standing there at the head of the bed,
side to sighed he shook his head.

Miss Stein was as bright as a bright bright ray
of light until her dying day
(i.e. she was dying, not the day)
and there to the doctor at the head of the bed
she said
'Then, what's the question? ...' – leaving
Alice laughing in her grieving

oh yes oh yes Miss Stein was bright,
she, did not rage at the dying of the light.

Michael Shepherd

! Moments Like Knife Cuts

They're too silly to be serious,
too serious to be silly...

those moments when your raw
adolescent ego (and how long it lasted...)
is hurt to the quick...

how you'd like to forget it,
it's so trivial... but you can't;
so then, you'd like to laugh at it;
maybe make a jokey verse about it...
but that doesn't work, either...
and, as if it mattered...

when I was forever desperate
for the approval of any stranger,
let alone a friend,
someone brought along to meet us
such a stranger whom we all admired,
all wished to be...

discreetly, we presented him
with what we hoped would find
some favour in his eyes...

the report on the two of us
came back: 'One has a mean mouth;
the other is a nonentity...'

the 'other one' reported this to me;
could not bear to speculate, I felt,
which, he, which, me...

fifty years ago,
it's still rattling around in the memory,
waiting to be erased,
or to be laughed out of court...

adolescence, once, is quite enough:

I'm still wondering, which one to choose
that would have hurt me more...

Michael Shepherd

! Monet And Impressionism

His last painting of waterlilies blurs and wavers;
I think he should have gone to Specsavers.

Michael Shepherd

! Monk (1)

and in the half-light of the abbey church,
candles flickering,
a kneeling stillness

for years of days
prayer
so that to be is to pray
to pray is to be and

to be is to love and
to love is to understand for

there are no questions
when silence holds all answers

candles flickering,
a kneeling stillness

Michael Shepherd

! Monty Python Does Poetry Criticism

This poem is no more.
It has ceased to be.
It's expired and gone to meet its maker.
This is a late poem...
Bereft of life, it rests in peace.
If you hadn't nailed it to the page,
it would be pushing up daisies.
It's rung down the curtain
and joined the choir invisible.
This is an ex-poem..

Michael Shepherd

! Mortal Thoughts In Advancing Age

I wouldn't recommend
adolescence

or old age
as permanent states

to linger in

Michael Shepherd

! Muslims And Christians

In the deepest deeps of the human heart,
what separates Christian and Muslim,
Islam and Christianity?

Absolutely nothing. How could it?

The God always close to us –
as close as His blood, our blood –
inside us, and outside us,
whom, when we forget,
then we must remember –

this, our God. In that holy place,
we cannot entertain
a thought of separation;

only when we seek duality, division,
a foe to fight a friend,
a friend to fight a foe,
do we name our friends, our fiends, our enemies.

Mohamed, the prophet of the Lord,
Jesus, son of God? Let those who will,
play with such terms;

and if men insult their holy name –
some in burning fury
take it as a personal insult
to the God who lives within them;
some smile, and say,
God is not mocked...
His justice and His mercy see
that retribution is His law of nature...

In the deepest deeps
of one single human heart, rests
enough love for the whole world, the whole Creation;
who can measure that?

! My Father's Plato

And that's not a claim to paternity –
it's the possessive case; though to what degree
my father possessed Plato, or Plato, him,
remains one of those unsolved mysteries
stored in that little room of sadness in the hearts
of children of that more formal, distanced age...

Like so many self-made men, he'd never read
a novel before he retired; and then
set out to educate himself
as would befit the father of a son
he planned – God unwilling, at first – to have,
whom he would provide with all the advantages
he'd never had... alas; alas for both of us...

He'd read of course, Smiles' 'Self-Help' – they all had;
moved on to Carlyle, Ruskin (briefly) , Emerson; wrote
in warm approval to George Bernard Shaw,
who responded with one of his printed pre-texted postcards...
then worked through those nicely-bound
sets of Hardy, Galsworthy, Dickens, Scott, and ,
offered cheaply by the Daily Mail or by Wills' Cigarettes...

then – Plato; or at least, his Republic;
a yellow bound, standard Everyman; but this one
- I discovered far too late in life -
fiercely underlined in summary pencil lines...

and that was really, all he needed; busy
with his hens and chicks, his toddler son (at last...) :
later, novels of another sort crept up on him; he lived
a – no, don't call it fantasy – a parallel life
in volume after volume of those yellow-covered
Wild West Club. (That's where he would have flourished,
aggressive boss of bosses, if he had not been stone-deaf...)

So what was he to Plato, or Plato said to him?
Are the underlinings an extension of that angry, abrupt man
meaning, that's my experience; so he's right...;

or was there stunned admiration; or
was there a humility I never saw
until efficiency turned to eccentricity,
eccentricity to dementia...

a humility, perhaps, that took him to another world
of ancient Greece, and glories, virtues, and ideals,
where Spartans from the wild wild East
rode roughshod over democracy, and
where a good man must be sought,
to run them out of town...?

One day, I'll have to face the mist of tears,
read those fierce underlinings made
as if by the muzzle of a Colt
guarding civilisation by the gully and the scrub,
the horses tethered, (Indians, always the third estate) :
seek in the underlinings to immortal thought,
the man I loved but never knew.

Michael Shepherd

! My Wake, My Funeral, My Celebration

Death

could be full of surprises.

I'm not Irish; but if you were to do
the full Irish thing - take my corpse out of the coffin,
dance wildly round the room with it one by one -
it'd make my day;

I'd remember it all my, death
and I bet you would too.

Though perhaps the tango would be a bit too far.

The funeral:

the not-too-many invitations should say
'Dress code: happy'. That I'd really like to see.
So I'll be standing at the lych-gate
like a reporter from the local rag
checking you in.

But if you don't attend - that's OK. I wouldn't like to die
a hypocrite; there'll be plenty of folk I shall be meeting
whose funeral I didn't attend, believing as I do
that funerals are for family and just those friends
who wouldn't miss it for the world.

Forget the flowers - I'd rather see flowers live until they die,
like me; not wither like day-brief memories,
as floral tributes flat on the slab like beached dolphins.

Sing the old favourites. And if you don't know the tunes or words,
I'm gently sorry for you - it's good to have them to remember, somewhere back
there in the mind.

And if you must have little speeches,
I think I'll just take a stroll round the graveyard during that bit;
praise only makes me regret more what I didn't do.

Then if you're so busy that you leave after the service,
that's OK - but I'd like to think the best were still to come -

the 'do' afterwards - ah, I'll join you for that:

make it a good one; no food is too good
for the living. I'd like to be the one
handing round the plates of goodies;
whose forearm you gently touch in passing
to murmur a brief word about being missed
which may be truly meant
or found to be true.

I'm not really conversant with this recent 'Celebration' thing
though it seems an excellent idea, so positive:

I'd like it, then, to be like that of my beloved friend, John:
where rather than just summon up memories and
share them with each other,
we seemed to be basking in the indescribable privilege
of his friendship
and his love;
which I guess in my case as in his would thus be truly
eternal.

Michael Shepherd

! Name This Teddy Bear

In the centre of the window at your local Kidz-r-Uz,
all winking fairy lights, glitter, sparkle and buy-me,
sits a bear. A Teddy Bear.

He's the soul of Patience
in any and all religions – one paw held out
to take you by the hand – that's, should you ask –
he's Faith, Hope, and Love:
he's Faith itself; he's beyond our grown-up limits,
he's Faith like children know – real Faith;
Faith that's beyond the breaking faith;
he's every hope that Christmas promises,
or Chanukah, or any other winter feast
when parents give their children tokens of their love...

he asks nothing of you, but to receive your love,
unconditionally.. a cuddly mirror of your love
in which you'll see and know that love;
to show you Love itself unblemished..

unlike all else in this changing world
inhabited by changeable human beings,
he wouldn't know how to let you down;
deny your faith; destroy your hope; reject your love;

he'll be a part of your life, for life;
and rightly so. Look closely at him:
is he the one for you?

He will be your first taste of life's nobility;
almost, you could say, divine;
he will sit for you as your steady self
in the temple of your heart;
give him the name that honours
honour itself – give him the Name
that this world means to you; a name
that none can take from him;
honour him as that.

! 'No Cell-Phones During Office Hours'

'The Rise and Function of the
Holy Man during Late Antiquity'
might sound as dry as desert sand,
or equally, excuse the pun, deserted...
but no, it holds a lively story:

the Christian world, gearing up
to tell the AD/CE world the bestest news;
the fervent, eager converts, wanting only
the time to cultivate their fledgling souls...
so where to retreat for this – the monasteries, of course..

wrong. The monasteries became compulsory
recruiting grounds for Church and for society:
a deacon needed for a distant land
to sort out heresies; an emissary
from this Christian nation's court to that;
monks dragged out into the world
to rule unwieldy bishoprics...
administer, endlessly administer...

so the totally devout had no option
but to set off and become solitaries, hermits
further and further into the desert..there,
became holier and holier; then, accidentally, perhaps,
miracles began to be spoken of, around them;
they, half embarrassed, half amused,
accepting this as God's strange requirement of them...

and then the wannabees and the true disciples
trekked after them; bedded down, built lodgings
for their devout B&B-ers, or
stayed to tend to the submissive saint;
consulted, questioned, hung around;
until finally, the patient but exhausted saint
took off for an even wilder place...
that's why there are so many
monasteries in the desert lands...

meanwhile, advice from their superiors,
concerned for them, then followed them:
black out your window embrasures; put up notices
at the gate: 'This is a silent zone between the hours
of 8 am and 8 pm'... (that should test their faith...): and
'No talking during Lent'...

and when they trekked out to be in that sacred presence
of the truly holy man, they naturally brought gifts;
(and you can guess, there were lines which could be lifted
from 'The Life of Brian' – 'I suppose a smallish miracle
would be too much to ask...? ')

It's said that when they excavate,
those lonely hermits' cells out in the desert are found
to be 'like well-furnished consulting suites'...

There's no joke like a holy joke...

Michael Shepherd

! No Comment

Factions
lead to

fictions
which lead to

frictions
which lead to

afflictions

Michael Shepherd

! No-One Comes Back From War.

no-one comes back from war

not the victors

not the vanquished

not the dead

not the living

just faces

with memories

no-one comes back from war

they come back

as someone else

to somewhere else

no-one comes back from war

why did they not tell us that

Michael Shepherd

! Not A-Mused

It's days when you've got lots to do -
the Muse, she puts a phone call through...

You're back at work, and short of time -
She's back again: some silly rhyme...

Michael Shepherd

! Not Quite Myself

A broken night; breakfast-table phrases
assembled for a touch of sympathy:

'don't ask...! '

'bit out of sorts...'

'haven't really got going yet...'

'not quite myself...'

a familiar unpleasantness, discomfort, restlessness, unease –
something's got it in for me, but what, and why?

but today it's worse than that..

so, run through the well-worn menu

of remedies: seek distraction,

play some music, read the paper,

connect the hands and mind - clean the gas-stove, ha...

express absorbing interest in the state of others...

or there are mental and spiritual consolations;

'these things will pass...

in two hours, you'll have forgotten...'

'these things are sent to try us..' yeah yeah...

(or if you're British, the dismissive joke,

precious personal illusion shattered...

no, dammit, this is just too much today,

let's play it out; just sit and watch it,

dive into this pool of misery,

see what we come up with..

on the surface, it's like some iron mask;

beyond that, the sense of body as factory,

producing unwelcome chemicals..

and down there in the depths,

monsters stirring; and the baffling sense

- sitting here, apparently unmoved –

that somewhere, disguised as yet as nowhere,

something unknown is resisting something else unknown...

what goes on, on days like this,

deep in the mind? Is it remedial,
dark things playing out their roles?
Will tomorrow bring some unsought sense of relief,
as of some knot of being, secretly resolved;
gratitude of a sort, yet none the wiser?
The mystics call it 'the dark night of the soul';
but even they cannot do more than say,
it's deeply personal; call them demons if you wish;
in there, there are battlegrounds – or training-grounds;
expect this; this is mortality..

while the voice of sergeant-majors, who do not deal
in introspection, when there are battles to be won (won?)
ring out on this parade-ground of stern discipline –
'snapaavit..'

ah well, there's always 'poetry'; thank God for that;
believe/pretend, this is for the public good;
that someone out there will say, yes, you've hit it..

now, will strong coffee or a morning's fast
ease this burden of mortality? while
on the doorstep, love, joy, praise, thankfulness,
sheer joie de vivre - there, you can even name them...
wait patiently to knock.

Michael Shepherd

! O L D F A R T H O O D

No, of course I don't...
I mean, who'd want to be
a mere two scornful words
in a stand-up comic's
patronising patter...

'The other day, at the ticket office,
there was this old fart in front of me...'

...just you wait, young man,
until your sciatica, arthritis and rheumatism
feel the cold and wet today; your
toupée (always good for a visual laugh)
has blown off, your dentures have
just cracked into a plastic cleft palate,
the battery's just gone in your hearing aid,
and you left your walking stick
by your seat in the bus or tube in panic
when you couldn't find that place
no longer there, where you used
to spend a penny...
and you're hoping to clear up
with that immigrant ticket clerk
(not the best job for him, surely?)
which of the wildly variant twelve fare systems would apply
to the ticket to visit your married daughter, where
you might or might not stay the night...

no of course I don't...
but the camera, which never lies,
has lost patience with me..
its expensive self-focus system
registers 'old fart' – quite possibly
uses some built-in stock image...

and even if some prestigious
occasion requires a photo credit
and one goes to a 'studio photographer'
of ever-increasing price,

hoping they'll catch some firmness
of a feature, some line of wise concern,
an eye betokening a life well lived,
some profile signifying gravitas...

but no...often now,
I see my face above some article
in an in-flight or a waiting-room magazine,
read it in self-congratulation or self-disdain,
think, I don't remember writing that...
then realise, it's by some other
identical old fart, grinning vacantly,
ingratiatingly, shapeless of any feature,
devoid of any mystery of shadow,
hoping that the editor
will remember these wise words of age..

but no... so here's
one old fart
issuing another...

Michael Shepherd

! Ode On A Wedgwood Urn

It's a gentle green in colour,
sits on the shelf, still, contained,
containing, and content;
around it, another world
is playing out its immortal role,
in constant movement which
somehow conveys to us, stillness,
peace; there's order in that world;

and yes, John, you could well call it,
unravish'd quietness: (you said, once,
in your romantic way, that
you were certain of nothing
but the holiness of the heart's affections,
and the truth of imagination;
here's the urn to prove it..)

erect yet relaxed in pose,
hair in a chignon, one hand
touching her neck, the other
holding a rolled scroll, resting
on what could be a reading desk;
she's elegant, attentive, sensing, observant,
yet full of sweetest silent thought;
she's said to be Euterpe,
goddess of lyric poetry;
I should respect her, even beg.

Another graceful figure, also
lightly draped, so that her body
is an open yet modest secret,
plays the lyre to some timeless tune of truth;
another leans upon a rough stone column,
absorbed in what another with up-pointing hand
is telling of what reigns above;
beautiful truth; truthful beauty..

a second lyre rests, unattended yet significant,
upon the ground; as if music's secret musing

remains always there, even when unplayed;
sweeter when heard to be unheard..

three dance together; their lightness,
grace, and ease are simultaneously
celebration and surrender; their breeze-played draperies
tell us how ethereal our holy bodies are,
caught in the breeze of time;
there's more to them than meets the eye;
but that's what eyes are for,
they say to us: to see, to know, they're there..

trees throw out leaves, as if
they hear the music, dance the dance,
know that upwards is what they grow towards..

there's an elegant brazier burning there; the scene
is evidently not complete without
the significance of the sacrificial fire;

gentle green upon the shelf,
contained, containing, and content,
it plays out its destiny of gods and goddesses,
muses, graces; unconcerned
whether I should wish to look at it,
admire it, perhaps ask questions of it;
even, live a little of its life...

Michael Shepherd

! Oh To Be In England...

[The names and some of the details of this report have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved - Ed.]

Yes I'm afraid so.

Mr Smith and Mrs Jones from down the road.

Five years now.

It's Mr Jones I feel sorry for.

Though from what I hear...

But it's Mrs Smith who really miffs me.

We're supposed to be friends, I thought.

Not a word, not a hint, these five years.

I really feel - betrayed.

Of course the men and the women here have a different take on this.

Well you'd expect it, considering.

(My Jack laughed like a drain when he read the details.

Went out early to buy the News of the Screws he calls it.)

I think the bastard's envious.

Not a word, not a hint.

Even the vicar's wife didn't know.

At least Catholics have confession.

Though of course their parish priests don't have wives...

I'm a historian. Was. The village well,

the parish pump, market day, after church, coffee mornings...

'Social cohesion in rural communities'.

I B.A.- ed on it.

Say what you like,

gossip keeps a community together.

Five years.

No, I'm not going round to see her.

I feel - betrayed...

Michael Shepherd

! Oh Yes It Was

no of course
I can't prove it

what sort of a
question is that?

it flew through too quickly
but right through me

leaving a memory
of something

and so I said to myself
that must have been an angel

well you have to try
to put it into words

Michael Shepherd

! Old Age And Senior Moments

I'm still sharp on memories, and appointments,
but don't remember names any more...
at least, not until 14 hours later when it's too late...

My good friend on the other hand
is sharp on names, and lots of them,
but can't remember events or appointments reliably...

Perhaps we should form a consortium,
have a permanently open line:

'You remember that friend you introduced me to
who we arranged to visit next Tuesday?
What's her name? '

'Jane Doe, of course -
have you met her? ...'

Expect us when you see us, Jane..
if we can remember who we are, or why...

Michael Shepherd

! Old Age Discovered

I guess I thought old age
would bring some answers.

But no - it's rich in questions;
and not all of them
about Me.

Michael Shepherd

! Old Age Remembered

I never thought it would happen to me...
so, I wouldn't have been reading this poem...

but now it seems it has. And now
I'm writing it. Or trying to. Big mistake?

So do I have
anything worth passing on?

You know, the Polonius Balonyus stuff:
If I were your age, boy,

this is what I'd be and do, yawn zzzz....
Let's think instead, of some more lively head

in Sunday supplement style –
'Old Age – Tragedy or Comedy? '

It's just so personal, and the only one
to really weigh it up is you. Or me.

I'm wiser, happier (on the happy days)
than ever in my life; but then, who cares?

Well, maybe one or two. On the other hand,
there are few illusions left;

would one have been glad
to have no illusions, at, say, twenty years of age?

Or, to be almost beyond pain, or pleasure,
or attachments of any sort -

this in some young man
taking his vows as monk,

would be a solemn commitment for a lifetime; but
when you're old – easier or harder then to bear?

then, short-term memory shorter, long-term memory longer -
that's wonderful - provided you have no regrets...

the memories come flooding back
of just how happy, happy childhood is...

barely remembered now, how adolescence
is the most painful time of life...

To cut a long life-story short –
the comedy's more comic; the tragedy's more tragic.

So I wonder how Shakespeare, having studied both
and then thrown his books away,

living a comfortable (or was it?) Stratford retirement -
a spot of bowls, a friendly pub,

grandchildren, his or of his relatives,
to keep him young or tire him out or both -

I wonder what passed through his worldspanned mind
as he passed passing time? As his time passed?

Michael Shepherd

! Old-Fashioned New Dedication

In all my mean and leaden days on earth
I did not glory; lived in dismal dearth;

To sing life's glory now I'll seek, these days;
to find a greater life through constant praise.

Michael Shepherd

! On A Wing And A Prayer

Icarus
has had a bad press
throughout history
as some sort of moral metaphor
for a man who challenged
Intelligent Design
and/or the gods
and failed, in a narrow-minded view

A young man's ambition
and perhaps devotion
drew him towards the heavens
why not
and science had not developed very far
so how was he to know
except by experiment

I'd like to think that as he dropped
out of a cloudless Greek sky
out of mythology
out of Breughel's painting
out of Auden's mindfulness

he was caught before the third and last bobbing up
by a bevy of compassionate mermaids
and returned gently to land
to live again perhaps under
an assumed name

while the mermaids sang to each other his story
across the seven seas
who whispered it to men
in the off-shore breeze
as a moral story telling how

heartfelt prayer always reaches heaven
there to be taken into account
but science is dodgy, make sure
you get it right and

it will be your servant

and when one day with heaven's consent
you build a better vehicle to 'conquer' space
though how untrue a phrase
perhaps Apollo would be
a safer name since Icarus Two
somehow doesn't have that ring about it.

Michael Shepherd

! On His Deafness

'Speak up - no need to shout -I'm not THAT deaf! '
- do I have real reason to complain,
if years of partial listening have brought
now partial hearing in their fateful train?

O Milton - isn't it curious: the blind
evoke our instant feelings of compassion -
while deafness calls some idiot state to mind,
evoking, far from pity - irritation?

Those saintly mystics would just praise their God
that He, to speed their simple saintliness,
brings outer deafness so that inner Word
in cloistered silence, bring a greater bliss...

So may I bear affliction in good part
and hope to hear the louder in the heart.

Michael Shepherd

! On Not Sending Christmas Cards

Dear Friends –
for friends you are, and friends
you will remain –

I'm not sending any cards this year –
so of course, I do not deserve to receive any,
by the human law of tit for tat...

So if you're sending me a card
because you sent me one last year
and think I'll notice if you don't -
don't bother.

If you're sending me a card
just because I sent you one last year-
I don't want it. Just don't bother..

If you're sending me a card
because we haven't seen each other all the year,
maybe we should arrange to meet? Or
maybe we simply haven't anything more
to say to each other?
Maybe we're happier leaving it that way?
Don't bother with a card..

If you're sending me a card
because - it's part of Christmas fun -
and open hearts, and memories -
then, bless us every one...

If you're sending me a card
because you never sent one before
and feel the urge – I'll be delighted;
and if you don't get one in return –
rest assured, that I'll remember, and
we'll probably soon meet;
and know: you have enrolled yourself
as my friend, anyway,
by that warming thought..

If you're sending me a card
because you have me so deep
implanted in your heart
that your love for me is beyond a printed word –
then that's the way that I reciprocate your love,
how could I not? Just don't expect mere words –

though there's a chance
a poem may wing its way one day
as whitest swans and downy doves
know in the air and space above
their heart's true home..

for, if ever, for however short a time
you were my friend, or I to you – you are that
always. Always. This
is what the heart is for.

Michael Shepherd

! On Rilke's Birthday,2007

and since then,
angels about their business
know we speak their name
more intensely; they, closer
to a human cry;

words too,
more proud to be themselves;
know themselves to be
closer to angels

and even Death hesitates,
hearing your name.

Michael Shepherd

! On The Break-Up Of Two E-Poets

There is no comment
submitted by members..

Better new kindling
than raking the embers

Michael Shepherd

! One Of Each

To say the least
about the most

and have it known -
that's poetry;

one tear, one laugh
may be enough

Michael Shepherd

! One-Word Poem: 'Hallowgoodbuymas'

One word...
poetry in notion;
reminds you of
your deepest fears;

thus inferred,
deep as the ocean,
full of the dampness of
disappointed tears...

too absurd;
devoid of emotion;
magic once; now far off
in succeeding years...

that season dedicated to
Mercator; from Halloween
to the New Year Sales
(invitation-only preview,
Christmas Eve...)

worshipped in the faith
that your Babe needs gifts,
so wise up, don't be
a dog in the Manger...

Hallowgoodbuymas...
says it all really...
except of course
what goes without saying.

Michael Shepherd

! Oooh Grandma, What A Big Ovophil You Are...

My granma, whose skills are legend,
taught me beside these skills
that only granmas know

her secret name she uses when she writes her poems.

It's 'anonym'.

You'll need Webster for that.

Michael Shepherd

! Orfeo

Orfeo shone.

He shone as music shines.

His shining, not the beauty of his radiant body;
it was the shining beauty of his humility.

And his humility – sometimes like gold,
sometimes like purest, deepest Maryblue -
the colour where the sky meets with infinity,
meets with eternity.

His humility, like hers, drew all things good:
and as you walked with him, all things were good:
the mountains, trees, and rocks and stones –
all things that do not move and cannot smile,
sang music to the heart, which smiled;

all moving things were drawn to him:
the wildest and most murderous beasts,
and beasts that look like men, or men like beasts;
some like vegetables that move...

all came to him, rubbed their heads against his legs,
licked his hands (were there the scars of wounds?) :
licked his feet (there too, the scars?) :

it was his fragrance that they recognised:
in the memory of these wildest beasts
deep in ancestral bones, the memory
of Adam's fragrance, when he named each beast.

That fragrance is humility: that draws
the music of all things in heaven and earth:
draws heavenly space, and mountain air,
and fire of Sun itself, and water sparkling
as it springs from rocks;
the fragrance of fresh-turned, rich earth;

Orfeo shines.

he shines – as music shines.

*

{ from the treatise on the humble man
by Isaac of Nineveh, c.620-680 AD/CE }

Michael Shepherd

! P O E T S

and the gift is not
the writing, but the knowing,
knowing poetry

poems come and go
but the knowing stays
and grows; ask them,
they know that knowing.

Michael Shepherd

! Pain

Pain. Pain in the body.
Pain in the mind.
Pain. Feel the pain.
Go to the centre of it.

In the centre, a flame.
A cool, warm, steady, white, white flame
so white, that
it is more light than white.

Cool as detachment.
Warm as love.
Bright as enlightenment;
burning the unnecessary.

The flame of healing,
as old as the world.
As old as olive trees and oil and sacred lamps,
as old as wisdom.
In the flame, an angel.
That is what the angel said.

Michael Shepherd

! 'Perceived Insults'

In the list of human indulgences,
'perceived insults' rank high in personal irresponsibility:
it's when you take offence on behalf of another
whom you hadn't spoken to, anyway, to ask them..

as for instance, insulting a teacher's intelligence
by suggesting that she has acted out of malice;
or insulting a small child by suggesting
that his name 'Mohammed'
given him by his parents,
is itself an insult to the Prophet;

what a luxury for the holier-than-thou,
the whited sepulcres, and those who use
perceived victimisation by other faiths
as a tool of their aggression...

well, you get the drift...

Michael Shepherd

! Poem As Baby

They emerge; and as they do,
your whole world is re-shaped;
you're stunned - as Adam must have been -
with the miracle of birth;

They come as miniature perfection –
who reads the small-print warning clause?
'These goods come without a life-time guarantee...'

But you don't pause to dream their own world for them –
except to count, in wonder, fingers, toes;
they come as answer to your whole life up to now;
right now, they laugh and cry as Love itself;

poems as babies in the heart and mind.

Michael Shepherd

! Poem For Danny And A Cliché For Jc

The poet sat by the babbling brook
whence all but he had fled;
the poet babbled on; the brook,
dried up and long since dead.

Michael Shepherd

! Poem For David

The thing is,
a poem 'means' what it means to each reader,

not your poetry teacher,
not the guys who call themselves critics,

it's democracy come at last to the toffee-nosed
haughty-cultural world of the arts

so don't ask me what this one means,
you tell me, OK? that's if it means anything

oh did I forget something
ah yes the poem

sorry I seem to have forgotten
what I was going to say

Michael Shepherd

! Poem For Jc And Ajs

Yesterday evening, it rained
cats and dogs. The night
was plaintive. And even after
we'd swept them all up and
found homes for them,
bandaged their paws, and
got them down from the trees
and chimney-stacks
there were still
poodles in the street.

Michael Shepherd

! Poem For Phillip

Sometimes there's <p>

</p> just a blank in the mind - no poem...

Michael Shepherd

! Poem Without A First Line

for no real poem has a first line
any more than a real book
has a first page

it comes out of a dark lost forest
or a bright unknowing cloud

or an unbearable pain
so unbearable that even
if you wrote the poem on a piece of paper
and threw the paper away
it would ease the pain

or a childhood so miserable
that only a complete change of life
could recognise one single beautiful thought

or an astonishing moment
when you knelt and prayed
for the first time in your life
to a god you did not know
with words you did not understand
for they were not even words

or the moment when all the horror of the world
faced all the love and beauty in the world
and both were so taken aback
that they could only embrace
and later, speak

or a nowhere and a nothing
so stark that only poetry

without a first line

Michael Shepherd

! Poem Without Words For Mike

and after so long, a new poem from you
and when I said how glad I was

you messaged back
'I am afraid that' - and stopped there

and in the silence then
the heart wrote a poem
whose words only the heart knows

Michael Shepherd

! Poet Takes Count In Last Round

Sometimes the last line
comes out of the blue -
one to the solar plexus,
an uppercut;
you never saw them coming;
you don't remember after that..

you're flat on the canvas,
knowing you've been put in place;
'Poet loses title-fight,
clean KO in the 12th...'

When it came to the punch,
the poem knew best - you, you were nowhere.

I'll say this - you know class
when you see it.

Michael Shepherd

! Poetry As Bread - In The Spirit Of Rumi 28

Poetry is like bread – daily bread,
like 'Irish' soda bread, best eaten on its day:

In the bakery of the heart and mind,
the baker's woken early before dawn,
refreshed and clear of purpose, full of the day's promise;
brings air to flour, moulds and shapes;
as the sun rises, so the bread.

Here it is, warm from the heart,
smell it – this is the smell of goodness, isn't it?
Touch it, both crisp and soft by turns;
taste its goodness, beauty, truth, its very being;
this is not yesterday's bread, with which you toy
while waiting between courses, your head's straying mind
in a thousand other places; this is here and now;
coming warm from the heart; eat it with your heart;

this is the heart's nourishment; tomorrow it may serve
tomorrow's mind; today, it is your daily bread,
your nourishment – this poem, warm from heart to heart.

And when you've eaten it - the bread has disappeared -
only your satisfaction remains, beyond all sense;
as these words, already staling on the page,
exposed to all the wanderings of the mind;
only the love that they were made with, still remains;
this, is your daily bread.

[from a metaphor in Rumi's writings]

Michael Shepherd

! 'Poetry Means...Uh...'

When I was very young,
Poetry
was written by
AA Milne.
and life was comfy.

When I was an adolescent,
Poetry
was written by
pansies for pansies about pansies.
though daffodils
were lifestyle and exam-inable.
and life was scary

When I was at college,
Poetry
was written by
a chap in a leather jacket
who glared at you angrily
on his no-gear pushbike
as he rode out to save the world.
and life was a cold war and still scary.

When I was middle-aged,
Poetry
was in the assured embrace
of the Arts Council and a chap at the BBC
and the world managed quite well without poets
but life was still scary.

Now
I am old enough
to swop lifestyle notes with Jenny Joseph,
Poetry
means that
a poem's 'text' may be
i h8 u
BUT
it's read right round the world

by lots of people. Like you.
and life is full of promise...

Now that deserves a Metaphor.

'A what? ' said Pooh.

Michael Shepherd

! Portrait In Profile Only

How clear a portrait of you
that he painted – that slight stoop
of backbone; life has been heavy on you, yet
has not worn you down; the shoulders say,
I'm weathering it; the hair drawn back, and
tidy; time's not for wasting on your hair;
your gaze, I guess, is straight ahead;
those lines around the corners tell us that;
you promised that you'd sit for him;
but when time's up, you know exactly
then what's next to do.. you're living here,
you're human; and we care...

and yet... and so... and yet...
I want to look into your eyes;
I want to know, what do you think of him,
the one who paints this poem about one
who may, may not, be you...
what do you think? Do you think this is you?
Does this surprise you, tell you
who you are, or who you might still be?
I'm greedy for the truth always –
Lady – wife, mother, aunt, good friend,
stranger from across the street,
paragraph in the novel of his life –
I'm holding back a world of love,
it only needs a glance from you..
tell me, why does his poem
only paint your sideview? Whose eyes were missing
when he wrote of you?

Michael Shepherd

! Portraits After Death; Rhyme After Time

and a poet I was reading yesterday
said, have you noticed
that portraits of people change
after they die?

and I've noticed that portraits
of Princess Diana
now look to me as if
she's a sad schemer

I don't like this at all.
I feel dirty, as if
I'd been manipulated
when all I want to do
is, to see the goodness and the beauty in her

It's the same with rhyme:
when I see rhyme
(hearing it doesn't worry me so much,
as if the time of reading it
heals it in some way) -

it seems like sad scheming
as when Robert Frost
has to take the road pre-planned
by language and the rhyming dictionary
and very obviously rhymes
future with suture

I don't like this at all, either:
It never used to worry me; now
I start to look cynically
at every poem that rhymes
in the convention of its times
(that rhyme was not planned
deliberately..) -
look cynically, to see
which was the chosen word,
the direction of the poet's thought;

and which the 'fill-in', like
some silly puzzle; even if
it stimulates the poet's imagination
perhaps

I don't like either of these phenomena
in actuality, or worse, in myself;
both these dirty me to myself.
This looks like being hard work
for the insulted mind
insulted, like some robot, by itself.

Diana, Robert, I am deeply, deeply regretful.

Michael Shepherd

! Presence Of Mind

Saints and wise men, so it's said,
live entirely in the present moment,
don't hang on to past things,
don't plan for the future;
live a life of here and now.

Jill, however, who also
lives for the moment,
gets invited to every party,
loves to meet you,
bubbling with life,
never short of conversation,
an ornament to society,
a gift to hostesses;
discreet, too, so they say..

can't remember if we've met before;
makes an appointment for us to meet again
in a certain pencilled tone of voice,
betokening a friendship more eternal
than one with a future,
never quite keeps the appointment,
the reason so charmingly explained,
should you be so tactless
as to mention it, that
it's almost a compliment to you;

a little short, perhaps,
of sainthood; but we love her...

Michael Shepherd

! Prosody?

Prosody:

it's about - it means - what poetry does,
and how. I guess..

In Greek, it just means 'tune'. That
should give a clue. In Latin,
the word they used meant
'song added to speech'.

So 'poetry' is pretty well
indefinable. It's - well—
whatever it means to you.
And how the hell it does that. There
are rules but,
it finds its own. For
one thing above all
really matters: poetry is
what it does. What it does. If
it doesn't do anything for you
that's it. No theories -
just that. Be glad.

Aristotle tried to help
with his 'Poetics'. Good on drama.
But poetry? Let's fast forward to
Ezra Pound: poetry's function is, he said,
'to charge words with meaning
to the utmost possible degree'.

Now put all this together and
I believe it's saying,
poetry's not - never was -
shouldn't be - couldn't be -
just words on the page, like this, but, it's
me saying them to you, strongly, here and now,
charging them with meaning
to the utmost possible degree..

So if your child comes home with
as homework, 'Analyse this poem by..'

- Angelou, Silverstein, Neruda,
Hughes of both hues black and white,
Milligan, Budowski, Pralutsky –
tell them, go back tomorrow and say
politely, 'Teach, Dad's a practising poet and
he says, why not have a class comp in
reading that poem aloud, and who
makes most sense of it and keeps us
listening down to the
tips of our toes; and by the time
we've all had a go and decided
who's the best, we'll remember it
for the rest of our lives and maybe, Teach,
not need to 'analyse' it much and
only after that? '

So here's to the next poem
that you read aloud, or write to read aloud,
charging it with meaning
to the utmost possible degree.

Michael Shepherd

! Proverbs For Sellers Of Honours

Many pounds make knight lurk.

'Payed! ' comes before a fall.

Too many records spoil the broth.

Michael Shepherd

! Prufrock Agonistes

I am growing old,
I am growing old;
I should stop wearing surfing shorts
below my belly fold.

Michael Shepherd

! Rain Is Never Blue

The rain blurs and beats at the window
like mercy frustrated;

it has fulfilled its magic promise,
bringing rice out of water,
corn out of earth

yet cannot reach those human beings
sheltering, unwashed by mercy,
clutching their sad poems about rain.

Michael Shepherd

! Reciprocity

What you do not wish for yourself,
do not do to others' said Confucius;
'That which is hateful to you,
do not do to your fellow'
said Rabbi Hillel;

is reciprocity, then, all the love
or charity, to use the fine old word,
we need to live the life
'in love and charity with our neighbour';
the life we'd love
the whole wide world to live?

Very nearly, most would say;
but even in our age – especially in our age –
a gentle voice should raise the thought,
the whole Creation is one single act of love...
that all around us
offers us a godly smile, a goodly message;
waits for us, so patiently,
to smile back.

Michael Shepherd

! Remembering The Future

The Greeks said, those great Muses
who civilise us, grace our dance of life,
were once, before they were nine,
just three; and before that,
only one was named: and she was, Memory.

Does that make poets just regurgitators
of what's already been oft said -
and better, too, some would aver...?

No, it's more subtle than that; ask a poet:
a poem that comes warm, hot, from the human heart
demands a summary birth; won't hang around
while you go out to buy more toys and frills
to hang around the cot...

it is indeed, more like remembering:
as if you step into a timeless place
where all that's needful is to remember
what the future poem shall, will, have said..

write it down; and maybe sleep on it;
when you wake, you may remember
two lines somewhere which you'd forgotten,
but know exactly where that is...

That Muse of memory will then decide
whether a poem that has a timeless birth,
may have a timeless life... or not...

How can a poet claim a poem as his, or hers,
when such a Muse? and yet, so close at hand?

Michael Shepherd

! Retirement

There's living; and then
there's dying; and between,
there's poetry,

introducing one to the other
for the first time; giving them
new names; sometimes seeming
older than both.

Michael Shepherd

! Rock, Stone, Sand, Wind, Time, Eternity

the sculptor,
called to the great task; through
the huge columns, ringing echoes even with a sandal's tread,
the stone chamber,
the assembled court, gold, enamelled blue,
eyes everywhere, walls, men,
the Pharaoh's presence:

'show me as I am:
man as lion,
king of the living and the dead;
show me as eternity'

the frail old man in heavy robes,
the courtiers nodding, smirking...

more men than men could count
whipped to task under a burning noonday sun;
behind, a half-built pyramid;
slaves chipped away the ancient bedrock
according to the careful measurements,
blocking out the figure, until the day
the sculptor himself – and older now –
mounts the scaffold to begin chipping
the face of time that meets eternity.

'time says nothing but I told you so';
which Pharaoh died before his monument?
five thousand years before our own stone dreams,
how many years of scaffolding?
a temple hollowing between its long, long paws.

was it looked upon with awe, or
as meaningless to children,
to their children's children,
as the frozen gesturing bronzes of our public squares? they,
running off around the back of it
to clamber onto its stone tail?

the night wind already piling up the drifting sand,
night wind in palm leaves whispering of metaphor,
green shores lost under dunes of time;
wind and sand sculpting their own unanswered question:
what is the reason we should ask of time?
what is the question whose answer is timelessness?

Michael Shepherd

! Rose Poem For Was It Fran *

The rose
you may colour it yourself
sang for many days
about God
for those who would listen
then fading and dying
or so it might appear
sang to a passing poet
who found a place for it
and the rose spent the winter
blooming in his poem
while the poet sang
about God
until the next year came around
when the rose
took up the song again
while the poem faded a little
but did not die

[*who didn't like the colour of the rose in the other poem]

Michael Shepherd

! Rumi Passed By Here Today

like a blank page, then
gold dust lightly scattered over it

then a soft breeze blows it away
but nothing is lost

for there was nothing to be gained;
enough, that you were here;

for you don't need to pursue a metaphor
when - see! - the metaphor is god, is world;

you don't need to convince us of anything
that we don't already know

just a reminder that this is
how it is;

a smile in passing;
your gold dust scattered;

for a moment
we are your beauty.

Michael Shepherd

! Rumi Was Here

It's his light touch.
He's not trying to tell you anything,
convince you of anything,
he's not watching your face
to see if you agree.

He's just mentioning something
as if you were walking together
someplace real nice.
Already, his light mind
is somewhere far elsewhere
in this world of wonder,
just mentioning it
because there seems a connection.
You too?

Rumi was here.
The air is singing.

Michael Shepherd

! Rumi's Silence

Rumi wrote much about silence.
Does that seem strange?

Poets live with silence:
the silence before the poem;
the silence whence the poem comes; .

the silence in between the words, as you
drink the words, watch them glide through your mind,
feel them slide down your throat
towards your heart;

the silence which you share with the poet
when the poem ends, sitting side by side,
feeling one another being one heart;

the silence after the poem,
when you are a different person
from the person who started reading the poem,
think differently, move differently,
act differently; know Rumi a little better
as a friend; know yourself a little more
as a friend.

Rumi was asked, why do you
talk, talk, talk, so much
about silence?

He said, the radiant one inside me
has said nothing.

And that's the silence which we listen to
and hear in Rumi's heart,
here, sitting in the cool shade
which the scent of roses seems to love,
while the fountain gently plays like a poet
with sound and silence.

! Saint Augustine Cries From His Heart

Brothers – sisters – do our years last?
Day by day, they slip away...
those which were, no longer are;
those to come are not yet here.
The former days are past;
the future days are yet to come...
but only to pass away in their turn..

Today exists.. but only in this moment
in which we speak, this moment now...
already, its first hours have passed;
the hours that remain do not yet exist;
they will come, only to fall away
into nothingness...Nothing contains
constancy in itself.

The body does not possess being,
it has no permanence; it changes with age,
it changes with time and place,
it changes with illness and accident..

The bright stars
have as little constancy;
they change in hidden ways,
they go whirling through space...
they are not steady, being is not theirs..

Nor is the human heart any more as constant:
how many thoughts disturb it?
how many ambitions now besiege it!
How many pleasures pull it
this way and that, tearing it apart!

The human spirit itself, although
endowed with reason, changes..
it does not possess being:
it wills and does not will;
it knows and does not know;
it remembers and forgets.

No one has in themselves, the unity of being...
so, after so many sufferings, diseases,
troubles and pains, let us return
to seeking that One Being;
seek out, join, those who dwell
in that city where Being itself is shared..

for a life without the sense, the sensing,
the living-out of eternal Being, is unworthy
of the name of life; only the changeless
gives us meaning in and for our change...

only the boundless frees our minds of bonds.

[paraphrased from his Commentary on Psalm 121
and his Sermon 346]

Michael Shepherd

! Saint Bernard In The Fields At Clairvaux. For Hilary.

That day as the sun set,
its afterglow flooded the world with light
like the meeting of heaven and earth; then
the great bell of the abbey tolled the vesper;
the workers in the fields lowered their scythes
and bowed their heads or knelt on the sharp stubble;
a grasshopper rested on the rough hem of my robe;
nature held its breath and knew eternity

I listened as the echo of the bell
took all my listening, and then
was heard no more; but listening remained;
the silence became full of all things, and
all things were praise and
all things were love and
all things were understanding:

there I heard no other;
there I saw no other;
there I understood no other;
but was infinity itself

love itself is understanding;
understanding is itself all love.

Michael Shepherd

! Saint Maximus At Prayer

Sometimes, it's all humour –
a divine joke shared between gods and men,
a twinkle in the eye of the Creator...

seeing to it, that the man
named Maximus, one day at prayer,
-his eyes were open, for his soul was still -
should notice the smallest beetle
making its way across the open testament,
minding, in its not so tiny mind, its own business...

and in its minimality, the man named Maximus
observed that it had, within its tiny iridescence, being;
watched his mind, learning of its nature;
felt his own being share its life, its spirit, with that little thing;

and understood – the beetle unconcerned, or so
it might appear, within our tiny world –
that in that moment, he had shared
the very nature of the Holy Trinity...
being, nature, living spirit.

Or as the Indians say,
from the Creator we receive
a smile, a message...

Maximal in minimal –
sometimes, it's all humour.

Michael Shepherd

! Saint Valentine On Tough Love

When those you most love
die
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

When those you have most loved
up and go, without a word,
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

When those you would most love
want nothing to do with you,
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

When you feel that all you need right now
is a little love, to change your life,
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

When you feel cheated by love
because it's never come your way,
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

Trust me. It's not easy to become a saint;
said Saint Valentine.

.V.

Michael Shepherd

! Sculpting Krishna (2)

His parents guarded the temple,
answered questions; the child
wandered, looked, later read
all that was said;

now, he selects the stone,
listening all the time, hoping that
he hears the voice of Krishna say,
take this piece...

sharpens his chisel; prays;
with each tap, a chiselled prayer
rings out the question; magnified; or diminished?

chips away – outside himself, inside himself –
all that is not Krishna;
until finally, all that awaits
is the faintest sound of flute, of lightest laughter,
heard within the sculptor's inner ear:

stone pretending to be Krishna;
Krishna, pretending to be stone.

Michael Shepherd

! Season Of Mists And Mellow Evening Class

There's a nip in the air these days.
Time for self-improvement.
In evening class, some nights
will be fruitful, joyous, all you hoped.

Then there'll be nights when
a diligent student has a 'problem'...
could be a particular or worse, a general...

The class, who've been together
long enough to bond,
hasten to join him under that black cloud,
misleadingly shaped like an umbrella,
of his/her problem; we're not sure
exactly what that problem is;
but we all frown, look serious..
who would think that silence could be so heavy?

only natural landscape would describe it -
black cloud, boggy ground, slippery scree,
fog descending; where's the compass point?

the tutor's seen it many times before.
It's the underbelly of the learning curve
shaped more like shark than jellyfish..

Michael Shepherd

! Senility - Now, Where Did I Leave That? ...

I wouldn't want to lend
anyone my memory, these days -

they might forget
to give it back.

Michael Shepherd

! She And She

they're 'close', we say,
wishing to be fair, kind, just;
wishing not to know too much;
in case this clouds
our mind's clear day..

they've been together since, oh, since
the one she, had a bright career,
the other she, just had a 'job';
and now they're old;

it would be easy for the mind
to label them... the which, the how..
and yet we know
(wishing not to know too much)
that love flows as it clearly does

and who am I and who are you
to say, to think, to guess,
that any love is 'not quite love'; or
whose love's just a second-best...

and as you see them walking slow,
Darby and Darby, or Joan and Joan,
your heart's heart knows, that as death beckons,
how each dreads to die the second.

Michael Shepherd

! She As Life Itself

She passes through life
with grace and ease and lightness
like a fine bright silken sari
caught by the gentle breeze
on an early sunny morning

and life itself seems content in that,
and smiles on her

and we who see her, feel ourselves
graceful, easy, light of heart,

love her for it,
and loving her,
love ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

! Shop Until You Surface

It's the weekend – but
you're feeling low – well, more than low...
time, perhaps, for retail therapy...

the girls, the boys, go about it differently:
with the girls, a sense of purpose:
phone your Best Shopping Friend, arrange to meet;
for the boys, it has to be covert, set up
as accidental, just a diversion
on the way to pub or café..

Your best friend senses that you're low;
so gently teases you by dragging off the rail
the most inappropriate; that's easy for the girls;
it's all huge fun, around the serious stuff;
for boys, even with your best friend – or perhaps,
because he is – the inner world is hedged with image,
self-esteem or lack of it.. a trip made best alone?

A new verse, now, for The Big Metaphor:
is this how Life Really Is?
You're feeling sorry for yourself, the victim
of your own life, or that of others; so
your best friend who's always there for you
teases you: here, try on this droopy number
labelled Sorrow; or here's this grey one, Misery;
this mumsy housecoat which says Given Up;
or this public statement, the ashy
sackcloth dress marked down - Distressed Despair...
or this loose-fitting one in charcoal, labelled Sin...
or maybe, go right to the other extreme – here's this
Life and Soul of the Party dress in vivid red? ..

The boys come out laughing – empty-handed,
or with some trivial purchase for the sake
of the 'right' bag...maybe he'll come back later
and alone... the assistants raise their eyebrows,
sigh with mingled disapproval and relief;
a secretive male ritual has been roughly re-enacted.

The girls come out eyes shining; this has been
total immersion; their past, their history, washed away;
inside the crisp new bags, a light weightiness, like spun gold;
or a silky something that slides snakily in the bag,
a promise of a new life for a new you
who is one step nearer to
the real you, just waiting to step out...

Sunday morning; you awake with the soft contentment
of someone who knows who they really are;
a little nearer to that elusive self, which this strange Saturday
had shown to you a little more, of what you're not..
to see depression's black black low as blessing in disguise
could be a gift beyond all market price.

Michael Shepherd

! Silent About That Night

In later years,
seated around a huge fire,
crackling and spitting on a snowy night,
the best beer in Europe frothing from the jug,
they'd ask him, jocular like but curious with it,
how it felt to be remembered
just once a year, all over the known world
for that one night long ago?

' 'tis strange really: he were a right sod to work for afore that -
never a word to me, as if I didn't be there;
but that night, it were strange -
it were the moment he stood there looking out of the window:
there were summat in the room -
wish I were a writer, like,
to say what it were...

we've never spoken about it, mind,
but we both know it's there unspoken, like..
we haven't had a bad word between us ever since...
that's what I'd like to write about,
that's the moment...'

silence for a time, as they looked into the hissing fire,
those woodcutters and their mates;
then put their coats on, trudged out
into the snow 'where the saint...'

well you know the rest...

Michael Shepherd

! Singing The Silences

It's almost as if we
sing them to each other all the day
to many tunes of silence:
toss them, daring you
to dropp them;

throw them like stones;
say them over our shoulder,
looking the other way;
half-fill them, because
the other does not deserve them –
thanks, give you a call, see you...

sing them to the tune of
a closing door;
shout them as if we wanted
everyone to hear them, say
yes, you're right...

say them so thoughtlessly, that
it's as if we've forgotten what we said
just before we said them..
and some words spoken
not with the mouth, but
from a shining eye, that speaks them
calling to another eye;

or in the bed, said so gently
and so softly, that
it's as if, not you, but the other
who is heard to say them; or is it
both of you;

there's a music in all these;
words, wrapped around
with the music of our silences
that sing unspoken words.

! Smile Enlargement! Free ****ing Offer!

Are you ashamed of your tiny smile?
Does it make you embarrassed?
Does it limit your social life?
Wouldn't you like to draw all the chicks,
have them eying you between the cheeks
in trains, wink at you in the street,
make a beeline for you at parties,
increase your confidence in the office,
be known as a 'big fat swinging smile'?

Wouldn't your partner – though she doesn't
mention it, kinda unsore point –
love it if you had a bigger smile? So she'd
feel thoroughly satisfied every night,
sleep better after, wake wanting more,
boast about you to the chicks in the office,
describe your smile to the other girls
on those girly nights, before the stripper,
- when she'd just smile and remember
your own whopper of a smile...

We can promise you a smile
that increases day by day, and
painlessly; that will never shrink back
and should see you right through
to that what-a-way-to-go moment
that you'll remember all your death...

It's called, Humour. You can get it
in the slower prose application, or
instantly effective, in verse. Act now!
before you lose her to Leroy Jones
down the road, whose big swinging smile
is the talk of all the chicks...

Smile! Send to Poemhunter
for a free trial – today!

! Solstice

This year, 21 December is the crucial day:
Earth, Sun, in their ancient dance.

Do they need our help?
The day, here in the North, shrinking;
what should be, if any, our concern?

Offer up our Christmas gifts
to beg exchange for longer days?

Hold vigil at Stonehenge,
believing that all our being,
all our attention, is what we owe,
to earn a daylight that
may not continue on the morrow
to shrink to eternal darkness?

Feel so small, as we contemplate
The mysteries of the universe?

Feel so great, as we participate
in so vast a system?

Or just, a private moment's awe,
then back to Christmas obligations?

How quick we'll be, though,
to note the day's few bonus minutes
in a week or two – post-Christmas gift
that was delayed in some almighty post;
secretly, we're sure that we deserve it;

yet, a lifting of the heart, while we forget
December's heaviness.
I have not mentioned love.

Michael Shepherd

! Some Applications May Be Denied

What's that noise, between a boom and a crash?
oh of course – it's the computer, having a bash
at trying to alert the next-room me
that we're running out of virtual memoree..

the PC should worry – it's young and fit;
this old microsoftie's in a far worse state than it..

Michael Shepherd

! Some Of My Best Fiends Are Critics

How easy, and how comfortable
to sit on the sidelines
of another's poetry!

You think you've paid
for your seat.
You haven't.

Michael Shepherd

! Some Other Poet, Some Other Poetry

and yes, since we can all dream
some other life – but do not, cannot,
dream its divergences, its accidents,
its departures and arrivals,

I dream some other life
rich in metaphor
so that nothing seen, but
draws into the mind its strange partner
far across the world:
food on a plate seen as
a battlefield; a chair as atoms;
a rainstorm as a marriage;
a fieldmouse as an empire;

and across years, the whole planet
drawn two by two into the arked mind
meeting its metaphoric partner and
questioning its own image of itself
living in strangeness

and in after years
a figure seen, in knee-high leather hunting boots
striding through city streets
seeing not a city but a world;
living words as if meeting strangers,
waking simultaneously in many heavens,
knowing the unknown into its own future words

Michael Shepherd

! Some Poems Have A Vast Interior

Some poems have a vast interior;
a deep, wild, impenetrable up-country,
traversed as in some dream
so long, no-one can say
how long; before
they meet the shore of love,
merge into that sparkling sea
from which, humanity;

how far has that so wild-eyed poet walked
to find the sea?

Michael Shepherd

! Sometimes It's Good To Underwrite

'I never cease to marvel...'

Michael Shepherd

! Sonnet 59 For Dad

I'm thinking, Dad, that soon, maybe, we'll meet;
at least, that's how it seems from what I hear;
the info's not at all clear on this point:
like, where exactly; and what will I wear,

and shall I bring you something; if so, what?
I'm not too easy, Dad, about all this:
like, am I sure to find you in that lot?
And, will we treat each other like - we did,

or as we should now (God knows how you'll be...) :
and, will we need to talk about past pain?
('cos that's what's really, really bugging me...) :
or can we wipe the slate clean, start again?

Dad - were you proud of me? You never said...
Dad - love you; are things better, now you're dead?

Michael Shepherd

! Soul's Soliloquy

It's said that universal single mind,
as in a flash it flowers in our individual mind,
hastens first in two directions: polar opposites,
and then and thus, duality..

then, within these mighty parameters,
all that we call our mind –
all our imagination, and its limits self-imposed,
all the great adventure of our human thought –
watchmaker's intricacy, tumble-dryer, roller-coaster,
battleground of warring factions –
all that we call our mind..

and thus from time to time, one concept which I throw
into this zoo, my mind, at feeding-time –

suppose the Hindu view correct – or at least,
worth any animal's good chew –
that our most inward part, call it
the soul or what you will, is on
an almost ageless learning curve of many lives:

each life as homework set by shrewd examiners
of the last life's papers; homework set to test
this candid candidate: we know your strengths,
let's now work upon your weaknesses...
and let's see, which family
would best suit you, get you going
one way or another...turn you out
a better-rounded personality...

If this is so – and personally, I like
the divine symmetry of this tiger
in the night of destiny – I wonder why
I should have no inkling of those past and future
friends, so intimate – my past and future soul:

to say to one, you, my elder brother,
are you proud of me? Have I upheld

our family's just pride?

and you, my younger brother –
or should I call you, son? I bequeath to you
the best I've got to leave you with...
some things you'll need, I may have quite forgot;
for that, I'm sorry; but here, take my loving wishes,
have yourself a great, great time...

you'll never know, I'll never know, perhaps
how much we three love one another..
or, perhaps, we shall..

Michael Shepherd

! Sources Of Carbon Emission

beanz

meanz

fartz

Michael Shepherd

! Spring Afternoon

A spring morning – well,
I only need to say the words?
I'll picture mine, you picture yours –
champagne bubbling in the blood and in the mind,
hopes and possibilities flooding freshly in..

but a spring mid-afternoon... like today, like now:
a subtle balance of the elements;
the sunlight bathes the room, but gently,
with its promise; yet,
there's a timeless peace with it
that's like a life surveyed; yet
free of thought, of comparison, or of regret:

the six loved paintings that adorn the walls
bought for a song, when art was like a song –
they love the gentle sunlight, and it in turn loves them;
five artists painting their sunlit peace, their happiness;
(two very different ones from the man
who lives so humbly halfway up
the mountain hills he rambles every day):
three oils; one gouache; one watercolour; and one pastel;

they all but two have clouds in them
as they're all landscapes;
one that hasn't, has a haze as if
the painter's painting the summer wind, in those high hills..
the other is a cloudless morning's peace,
the bend of a river in mid-France;
the river...it cannot be, just painted oil?
it's water seen as by a pure clear soul...

and the clouds – caught in an impossibility of time,
play out an endless drama of the elements;
timeless in the peace of, now, a slightly later
springtime afternoon; almost with a touch...
but how could perfection ever regret
its own departure?

! Ss For Ssnake

when it's the s tucked away in 'asleep'
in its s for secret hideaway
it feels s for safe and s for secure
though you can see it keeps
the s there just in case

now it's waking up, uncoils itself;
it's an awkward way that it has to move,
but it's s for strong, as you'll discover
if you hold one

if it feels threatened, my how it can move!
a rapid s for slither, or s for slip
into a drain or a hole in ground
quicker than an eyeblink

but if you catch it s for snoozing
and s for sunning itself, as adders like to do,
and it's too late to s for slide away,
then it'll hiss at you with a long ss...

to let you know that that there's an s
in 'fangs' and in 'poison'...
(and also, by god's grace, in 'serum'...)

so let it be, like the s wrapped in 'respect'
to enjoy its s for self, the s for same as you...

(Don't you wonder, if snakes themselves hear that s
when they slither or slip or slide their way
through the grasss or leavesss or stonesss
and know, that's my own s for sound...
because I'm an s for snake...?)

Now it's feeling s for strangely
s for slippery, inside itself...
oh look, it's going to s for shed
its s for skin...why, I do believe
it's turned into a... poem!

Now it can see and hear itself!
ssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss
there's a snakeskin belt for you

Michael Shepherd

! Ssshhh...Keep This Quiet.Ish...

I shouldn't really be telling you this
since it was told me by a brother Freemason;
but hey! what's the point of a secret
if you can't tell it to anyone,
or write a best-seller about it? ...

it seems, this guy says,
that the descendents of Jesus and Mary Mag
who are now spread over all the world
though no-one knows until we do their DNA
(maybe that tomb will yield it? we live
in exciting times) –

They converted to Muslims, since
that was the ultimate disguise;
and also they could move around more freely
in the Middle East, OK?

They were the founders of the Hashishim,
the secret society of assassins
(it's in Wikipedia, so it must be true)
and that's why (and this
has never been explained before now...)
they seldom murdered Christians (real Jesus Christians, that is) :

then when Christianity dominated Europe
they re-converted back to be the Templars
who as you know, are still going in Scotland
(where Zimmy recently moved, aha...)
and you'll have to work out
the Jewish connection for yourself...

and through the centuries, it's they
who've done all the unsolved murders.. you name them...
Lincoln, Kennedy –
the media didn't report this,
but they leave false clues –
in that Book Repository, on the shelf but sticking out,
a copy of the Bible in Sicilian,

signed by Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe...

and yes, the Pope, but just to warn him...
and that guy in Holland;
and of course, Princess Diana –
well, it's obvious, innit?

well that's what this guy told me...
but you know I think –
I think there's an even more secret secret society
(authors' agents, spy novelists, wannabees,
that sort of person)
who every now and then, carefully timed,
launch a tasty, juicy new
conspiracy theory on the world
while they get up to something
even more occult
(they're using robots now...
triggered by thought-patterns,
of course it's hush-hush..)

chizmite, niceta torkcha... seeya lya...

hurry up please it's time

Michael Shepherd

! Suppose A Smile.

Suppose a smile.

Suppose it always, with a smile.

Suppose the sun to shine,
shine with a smile;

suppose the rain to fall and smile
smile at the earth;
the snow, with gentle smile,
protecting tender shoots;

suppose the wind to smile
mysteriously, about its secretwork;

suppose – that's easy – flowers
to open with a smile; and
smile as they fade and wave farewell,
a smile that says, that's how it is...

suppose some patient smiles:
as rain-forests say to those who cut them down,
you'll live to regret this; here's
your chance to learn;

suppose the desert sand to smile
and say, you took the trees, and now
I'm here; plant, call down rain, store, irrigate...

suppose the ice-cap, melting with sad smile,
saying, I did not choose...

suppose that Abraham, Moses, Christ, Mohammed
spoke their uncompromising, uncomfortable truths
always with a smile; a gentle smile;
a smile to say, I'm here, you're here to learn...

suppose the spear to smile,
hammered into pruning-hook..

suppose smile met with smile.

Suppose.

Michael Shepherd

! Sweet And Sour

but some mornings
while of course you'd like to write
a poem, there's nothing there;
so you read a poem that 'someone else' wrote
though of course it's your mind reading it

and after you/I read it,
there drifted into the mind the phrase
'the sweetness of life'...

a phrase more common,
even more evocative -
'douceur de vie'
(or even plural.. 'petit douceurs'...))
in French writings..

how wonderful the workings
of the mind: that first, tiny
explosion of consciousness in the mind
instantly offers in language
duality; and opposites;
take your choice,
and be bound by it...

so, there was sweetness: which this morning
seemed a mile away;
and... sourness! Yes, of course!
life has been... just a little sour... these last few weeks
for no apparent reason – though of course
I could offer reasons flattering to me...

Yet also, heavenly grace, as it may be,
presenting duality, allows
the glory of a unity to be seen:

this morning, knowing life as both sweet and sour,
both and neither,
I'll choose what's been lacking
(which is the definition of pure desire...) and

without even the wish to elaborate –
just to name it, in its beauty to the mind,
the sweetness of life;
it's like a poem in itself.

Michael Shepherd

! Synecdoche

Darling, we need to talk...
no not here and now; in private..
it's about synecdoche...

yes, I know you thought that it's just
one of those things that poets worry about...
but not any more...

it's like eating of the fruit of
the tree of knowledge - now we can't forget
that it's like it is, now, no longer like it was then..

synecdoche means, taking the part for the whole...
like in poetry, 'living by the sword'
when you mean, throwing a whole army into
removing one tyrant, when in the old days
you just sent in hired assassins, got on with life...

anyway the point is, I've been getting far too many e-mails
about.. well.. 'satisfying' you... implying that
if I don't keep up with Mr Jones down the road
(and yes, we're on the same rugger team,
I see him in the showers...)
that if I don't - well, you know -
Mr Jones may, er, extend his favours
in your dire erection, sorry, mistyped that one...
guess my Freudian slip is showing...

and now I see they've started e-mailing you
with much the same message - that
for Christmas prezzie, shared between us
(that's one crossed off the list...) -

well, should it be the vacuum pump (gift-wrapped
under discreet plain mailing cover) ,
or should I try the old-fashioned weights
('Sorry, he's not available right now,
he's weight-training behind closed doors...') ,
or should I go for patches?

Darling, you're so sensible about these things -
how do you feel about this, considering
our forty years of married life, and how you feel
about the Mr Jones's in your future plans?

yes, synecdoche - taking the, er, part, for the hole
(oops, another sp....guess it's getting to me...)

but let's remember, darling - synecdoche also says
that he (and she) who just live by the sword
then perish by the sword... should we consult
the GP, in view of my heart condition...?

darling, I leave it all to you -
yes, ask the other girls next time
you have a Summers party...
I'll check the new small print
they've added to the life insurance policy...

Michael Shepherd

! T H E R E M E M B R A N C E R S

and it's difficult to say exactly
what they do, or
how useful that task really is

for like the ideal rulers
of ancient China,
the better they do their job,
the less we notice that

you could say, they are
remembrancers:
they hold memories for millions of people:
they remember people, good people, poor people,
and honour them as we should wish to honour them;
they remember heroes and the dead;
they remember history; and how
things used to be done, when they were done well;

it is their duty, over a whole lifetime,
to remember what is so deep in all our hearts
that we have forgotten that we know it;
that we could hardly express it;
yet, as those stories of every nation tell,
as King Arthur is said to arise from the sleeping soul
in times of need – this is what they remember for us;

they remember what it means to be a nation
when others have forgotten
but as they have no executive power
they can only advise and consent
when asked

they draw to themselves, good and wise people
who help them to remember
to remember for the rest of us

and such is the mystery of what they really do
that we laugh about their private lives
over our morning newspapers

while they set out for another day
full of official engagements
of being seen to remember something
and we remember having seen them
and how we waved our flags and gave them flowers
but may or may not sense
what they remember for us

and as they move around,
in and out of cars and sometimes planes each day
receiving flowers from children awed by the moment,
shaking hands, receiving in a few seconds our clumsy response,
respect; admiration; recognition for duty done; even, love;
they must remember all that is unspoken, unformulated,
in those clumsy moments of the heart and soul
and that great mind which makes of human beings
families, tribes, nations, humanity
in those we walk with, through our life

for memory is not visible
and what they hold for us, we seldom think about
and we shall never know how much we owe to them
unless they were no longer here for us

they are sometimes called to be called kings and queens
and some are great,
born great, achieving greatness, or greatness thrust upon them
in the holy oil with which status is anointed;

but our gratitude is seldom shown
until their jubilee,
or in time of war
or at their funeral
when we, wearing black,
may celebrate their life, their light,

the remembrancers

Michael Shepherd

! Tagore And The Cobra Of Illusion

Yes – we read the world wrong,
and say that it deceives us,
said Tagore...

just imagine, if the snake said,
you can't see me... no, I'm just
a stick of rotting wood,
a length of old rope thrown away,
mouldering in the undergrowth...

or the rope said, I'm reborn!
I'm now a snake, I've risen in intelligence
and consciousness – watch out, all those
who treated me so harshly as a rope...

or the shell said, how beautiful I am!
I'm mirrored all like silver;
once I was a humble shell,
content to be myself; now -
how precious now I am!

Or the silver coin said,
I'll hide here in the sand
and look like mother-of-pearl, nacreous,
and wait to give myself
to some delighted beggar...
how virtuous I am; and how
rewarded I shall be!

no, Nature, prakriti, has never learned
from Man, how to deceive...

ah, but mankind... how we deceive
our mother, Nature... we promised her
we would look after her in her old age...
but all we did was steal her wealth,
cast her into a filthy wilderness,
pretend to others that
she never was of our family

but an untouchable who works for us...

oh Rabindranath, what would you think
of the behaviour of your grand-children...

oh Rabindranath, you never guessed
how we've deceived our world...

Michael Shepherd

! Teenager Seen From Above

The teenager around the house,
confronted with the suggestion that
God smiles on him, would be
rabbit-stunned beyond reaction;

but, inspect him thoroughly from toe
to top (leaving aside his as yet
creditable carbon footprint; cash-strapped
is carbon-friendly) :

the trainers, sweat-made in the Third World,
now look as if they're back there; they've been known
to walk out of the room from under the bed
in sheer self-disgust;

the forever jeans, customised with
a designer rip just above the knee,
are of that subtle shade
where worn meets dirty;

the 'top' – at least there's some hint there
of choice; sending out coded messages
which groan-ups cannot read; could be
footie with the boys; or could even be
let's sleep together, no big deal..
we'll just have to wait and see, or guess;

the face, now: that gets little attention
first thing in the morning; but in the evening
it's a different ball-game; Mum's facial things
have even been known to be employed
when rumblings of an imminent socio-visual
eruption threaten;

but, the hair... thirty, twenty years ago
if someone his age took this long at the mirror,
we'd either be considering counselling,
or buying him Judy Garland records...

eventually, he's out from there; the immaculately
tousled gleaming wildness is a sennight's
tribute to the week's Top Ten...

angels, passing over, smile to themselves
at the view from above; murmur at
what a well-groomed lot the
humans are these days.

Maybe it's time to haul out
Great-Granma's hand-stitched
sampler from the loft, and put it back
in the downstairs loo, where
we used to think it such a joke
in our first-house years –
'God Sees All'...

Michael Shepherd

! That Bit Of Pinky Stuff On The Carpet

What is it doing on the clean carpet,
that bit of pink something?

Not a curse upon the house-proud
nor a criticising comment on the housekeeper,
or retribution for the gap under the front door,
or – it it's blown in from the garden –
a hint of early autumn threatening poetic sadness
or a reminder of the fragile evanescence of all things

it is a whisper from God
which has eluded the debris whirling between stars,
the heat of the sun, its solar dust,
the icy-cold of atmospheres,
airless space of ether,
antennae of early-warning systems,
hover of spy-planes,
click and silent breath of listening devices,
tick tick tick of incriminating tapes recording,
unforgiving eye of spy cameras,
the chatter of minds forever elsewhere,

it is a petal shed from the geranium outside the door,
of the most delicate, almost transparent
pink no rose no shell no just itself
of a fine fine substance which no man can yet make
on its long, long pilgrimage
from beyond the whole vast cosmos of
innumerable solar systems, beyond where
space bends upon itself in homage
where the mind of God dwells

to find itself again in my suddenly open heart
as if it had never travelled from or to,
this whisper of pinky-rosy-shell-like stuff
on the carpet by the warm bare foot.

Michael Shepherd

! The Afterlife Of Death

Why should mankind not face
the thought of afterlife?

For half the world or so,
there is no great concern:
in time you just come round again
to improve upon your last performance –like
an athlete, daily training round the track

which if it's so, then, perhaps, how sad
that we are not aware just how we've done this time,
compared with how we did last time -
it might be quite a spur!

of course, if heaven's way beyond
all boundaries of time and space
we can surrender with relief
our picture of our tone-deaf self
learning to play the.. harp..?
or engaging in those activities
(outside time and space?)
which Islam seems to promise...

but if the whole Creation, as it's said,
is all one single act of love,
then let's imagine death, or afterlife
a part of that same divine love:
for if, as every religion expresses in its way,
our god is love – then how can death
not be a part of that same love?

so (as those who have nearly died, aver)
there stand to welcome us, all the family
and friends that we have ever known and loved;
but with this difference: that seen
with all the vision of that total love
we understand all our, and their, apparent differences
and see this from that heart of total love..

and if it's so, that once again
we have to re-enter earth's burning atmosphere
born into another life that we've now earned,
our first cry and tear and heavenly smile
may tell all

And if perhaps this seems all fantasy – then,
perhaps, if all is love,
love's sleep, love's dream, and love's awakening –
and also, this, my fantasy of love in death,
may all be samely, simply, love.

Michael Shepherd

! The Couple In The Evening Class

As the new year's evening class
filed in, in varying displays of enthusiasm or cool,
discreetly summing up their tutor
you couldn't help but notice them
despite their modest manner –
of equal height, and that a little under average

couples attending class together
always catch my too premature thoughts –
has he brought her? has she brought him?
is this just a stage in careful courtship,
attending a class together?
where will they sit? couples tend to choose
the front row or the back, I've noticed;
often arrive at ease, as if they've met up after work,
taken a coffee or a light snack...
which will ask a question first? and when they do,
will some slight frisson of emotional thought-wave
pass between them? suppose after the first term,
one leaves, one stays – will the one who stays, feel freer
to ask more questions? or will I sense
that invisible tug of apron-strings...?

over the weeks, although they gave no overt sign of it,
they became a sweet, still place in the class,
a perfect balance between individuality and togetherness;
when he or she asked a question or gave an answer,
the other radiated almost imperceptibly
a quiet pride so pure that it was more, delight,
as one might do with a son or daughter.

At the end of the year, our paths went their separate ways;
and yet, after so many years, so many classes, so many students,
they've left a quiet place in my memory;
of humble simplicity, strength clothed as modesty,
boundless possibility –

they, the silent tutor;
I, the observing student.

Michael Shepherd

! The Dark Cloud Of Depression

The dark cloud.
It sits around your head
or inside it, more like.
Around your mind,
or inside it.
Around your heart,
or inside it.
Does it reach your knees?
Seems like it, some days.
Your toenails perhaps?

If you let it, it has a voice.
Please don't listen to it;
that's really dangerous;
it makes general statements
as if it knows you better than you know yourself
like, 'your...' - no, it claims to BE you -
so, it's 'MY life is pointless..'

Have you noticed, it's
never in front of you,
always somewhere behind you,
whispering over your shoulder

so on a bad day, it's there in the bed with you
the moment you awake; not of course
in kissing range, that might be fun - but behind you,
murmuring in a bedly voice
'WE are really down this morning aren't WE? '

or it catches up with you in the bathroom
or a bit later, like when you review the day's appointments
or start out for work.

The First Aid for depression is of course well known
(to everyone else, at some other time...) :
put some music on, sing in the shower,
sit in the brightest light,
toast your hidden beautiful self

in orange juice; take some vigorous exercise,
seek out good company in
someone or something; be
good company yourself, for someone else..

they all work, for a time; but don't you wish
for the classic fairy tale encounter –
there you are walking through the dark wood
of the dark cloud, and suddenly
the monster springs out in front of you
in all its horror; for the first time
you meet it face to face; it's
terrifying, but a curious relief:
now you know it's not you after all,
but something else; you look it in the eye,
you don't retreat, but march towards it,
say Boo (for linguistic reasons, rather abstruse)

and as you get nearer and nearer to it, the monster
gets smaller and smaller, until...

and then, marching back
triumphant with a spring in your step,
you may feel like
nailing it with a poem, to say
wow I've survived;
have a great day!

Michael Shepherd

! The Dark Night Of The Soul

Not death - no poem's yet been writ
on that - but that dark door and passage
where everything, all that one knows of life
must be surrendered, in the service
of a brighter light, a brighter life...

Only those who apprehend the soul
in all her glory, must submit
when time calls time, and there descends
that total darkness of the mind
which wipes out any thought of things
created; any sense of former life;
any creature that might say
I've done my best, so take me, God...
no, there's nothing left, when hope
is as it never were; or ever named;
truth no longer means a thing beyond
this total darkness, which could not be more true;
eternity, pure timeless state of nothingness,
nightmare without movement, frozen heart..

how can those with nothing to hold on to,
no hands to hold, no reason to hold on...
what can they do, but curl up in a ball
like nature's creatures faced with stranger, death,
that never spoke its name to them?

One thing only, mercy then will grant:
you will survive... pale, humbled, weak,
wondering what is left, to try to build
a pale approximation to a life
which now, you have no taste for...

and in the coming days, as if
you tasted water for the first time in your life..
you sense a strange new cleanliness..
there's some new life awaiting, there,
wherever 'there' is.. to be lived...
perhaps a new created world

may come of soul's dark void..

Who can understand, prepare themselves for,
this strangest blessing from the gods?
But that's the package: unpreparedness is all..

Imagine, now you're high and dry,
gasping above the sandy waterline, a shivering wretch –

imagine all the glories of a summer's day;
all the stirring of the blood in Spring;
all the miracles that burst from earth...
an equal miracle, it must be,
the miracle of winter, stealing from us, leaf by leaf,
all we never owned...
this winter's tale, the heart must kneel and praise;
as marvel; wonder; see as holiest whole -
this timeless, darkest, hopelost, night of soul.

Michael Shepherd

! The Dark Night Of The Soul 2

Everything's going well,
you seem to have everything arranged
as you like it: you glance into
the banqueting hall, the chandelier
sparkles above the laden, enticing table;
there's the scent of perfection

then the lights go out.
Worse, there's a note
in the butler's pantry:
gone elsewhere; you're in charge.

No notice given, not a hint; it was
all going so well.. where's
the fuse box? Candles?
Torches?

You remember, what they said
but it didn't mean anything at the time:
when you've sorted it all out yourself
you'll be like a different person.

Then - everything becomes a delight;
everything lit up and sparkling;
fragrance and scent around all things;
every single thing, its own special flavour.

Michael Shepherd

! The Equation Einstein Couldn'T Solve

Defense = retribution = aggression

Michael Shepherd

! The Eyes Of Impressionism

Saints.

Like swans, gliding untroubled so it seems
to us, lazing on the river bank
of a Seurat summer Sunday afternoon,
gliding over the surface of the waters
as love perhaps, on that first day;
they as floating symbols
of the beauty beyond beauty;
their work, invisible to us who watch

Painters.

Like waterlilies, resting in perfection
on the surface of the waters
as love rests, sure of their own beauty;
painting just the sunlight
falling on things, moving on
more slowly than we see;
the depth of the waters
in the painter's mind and heart;
his work invisible to us who watch
his dabbing at the canvas
as a dabchick bobs in the water, his mind
moving as time moves;
for him, sitting at the canvas,
always time present,
in the water-garden already on his palette

Cataracts.

How far a word from
the stillness around him as he sits,
his beard a little yellow from the nicotine,
seeing the waterlilies as if for the first time,
but each year the water seems to tell
more about time itself... like Proust;
where is time going in this painting?

Eyes.

Cataracts, yes; but perhaps over time
they too have sought to serve him,

become themselves, impressionists,
presenting him with images
prepared like canvasses are prepared;
gently watering inner gardens
between the eyes and mind

yes, that's Monsieur Monet over there;
don't disturb him; but if you stand
a little way behind him, you just may
enter the stillness around him,
enter the stillness of his mind,
see with his eyes, that work
invisible to those of us who watch
which swans and saints and artists know.

Michael Shepherd

! The Eyes Of The Ikon

The door creaks as she opens it
and the fall of the heavy iron latch
echoes through the empty church.

The atmosphere inside, this cold day,
is heavy, as such holy places are,
locked now at night; heavy,
with what? Anticipation? Memory,
of all the human emotions
that have passed through them?
There's still the clinging promise,
the fragrance of yesterday's incense;
it could almost be a midnight forest
in its wood-scented mystery.

She lights a candle, drops a coin
slowly, as those do to whom
each coin has a meaning.

She is small, shrunken as the aged are,
wrapped into roundness against the cold,
yet neatly; today there's an extra sense of purpose
about her walk towards the glittering
gold ikonostasis –

is it the anniversary of the day
her husband perished in the labour camp?
Or the day her son died fighting
so that such as she might live,
to mourn him, proudly, all her life?

Or was she, is she, that unmarried, famous
junior lecturer who lost her job
for speaking truth, whose students
carried her shoulder-high and placed her
on the tank outside the university,
challenging its gun?

She kneels in front of the ancient ikon,

framed in gold; the ikon that tourists
note with a glance, as 'Christ'...though when painted,
it was known as 'Son of God'; now they call it
'Son of Man' – that seems to suit it.

She looks intently into its eyes
as she has so many times; each time,
a new day, asking what He has in store for her.
As intently as its painter, praying as he worked,
that He might come and fill the painted form
with His eyes, His heart, His soul; all that He brought to earth
from That which sent Him...

She looks into the eyes of the ikon –
or does the ikon look at her?
In some other world, there is mighty sound,
perhaps a word; the air is filled with soundlessness;
there's fire that burns forever; great waters flow
like grace itself; new earth is watered.

She sees, in some great where between
herself and all things, love that cannot be measured;
mercy that can only explain itself with itself;
grace that's only known; her life
opens itself to her clearly, soundlessly;
all is revealed to the seeking heart.

The candles flicker; the door creaks,
and the heavy iron latch echoes
once, in the empty church. The Son of Man
in the form of an old woman wrapped against the cold,
steps out into His kingdom. A few snowflakes;
a pale winter sun. Look into her eyes.

Michael Shepherd

! The First Bike

Do you remember
that your first bike
with all its magic,
had a smell?
Do you remember?

Do you remember
when you first saw it
and all your senses
went on full alert?
Do you remember?

Do you remember
how everything about it -
the scary learning,
Dad's careful teaching,
the moment he let go of the seat without telling you,
the first time you went out on your own,
all these filled a new world with magic,
Do you remember?

Do you remember
how you lived every moment
as a child?

Do you forget
how easily it's brought back?

Will you remember?

Michael Shepherd

! The First Photo That Memory Took

that moment when ...
when memory first opened its treasured album
and began to make our picture of ourselves -

it belongs to all of us, to each of us.
it's where each meets all, and all meets each;
more of ourselves than we have ever stopped to analyze:

that blurred, out-of-focus moment – was it
the pattern on the hood of our pram,
the strap around our kiddicart,
the turn of the stair,
the pattern of the bricks around the fountain in the park,
the memory of our first fall;
the lion's head fountain on the wall?

was it not a person, of
those who peered into our cot, or lifted us,
simply because
we could already control those beings around us
with a dribbly smile, a vague wave of our hand?

was it the first thing that we remember
because it paid no attention to ourself,
but simply, was... was, outside our favoured world?

whether we ever open the album, or do not,
it sits there, unexplained,
holding some secret of a consciousness
beyond the theories of scientists and philosophers;
inevitably, ours

to be followed – some years after –
and this, we may deny at first –
by that moment of a further consciousness:
when - as equally mysterious, unforgettable,
and often unremembered to this day -
we knew that we knew something
but did not know what it was we knew.

Michael Shepherd

! The Forum

It's like trudging home after
a heavy day at the workplace,
you open the front door
and the house is rent with upraised voices -
all the children adding new wounds
to years of grievance; your eldest daughter
threatens once again to go live with her boyfriend
although she's under age; your eldest son
despairs of girls 'not being able to argue properly';
the cry, 'that's not f a i r..' rings through the house;
the younger ones still seek adults to be on their side,
- for the moment - to dispense justice
to the aggrieved, comfort the broken-hearted...

Are you glad you came home
without your usual stop off at the pub?
It's all so familiar...dammit, you know very well
you'll miss them when eventually
it all goes quiet... but at least
they certainly know about justice
when it's not there for them...
they'll be vigorous employees,
trade unionists one and all,
if and when they leave the nest..

Were the 18th century coffee houses
from which emerged those tracts
of endless literary abuse,
sharpening their language on each other,
just like this? 'A polarity of poets'
might serve for a corporate term.

Michael Shepherd

! The Girl Who Was A Waiter

'We never care for the present moment. We are so foolish that we wander in times that are not ours, and never think of the only time that belongs to us; we are so frivolous that we dream of the days that are not, and thoughtlessly pass over the only one that exists. We never live, but hope to live; and since we are always preparing to be happy it is inevitable that we shall never be so.'

- Blaise Pascal

(1623 - 1662)

French philosopher and mathematician

Not a waitress; just a waiter.
Though she sees herself as
a planner; a Girl With Plans.

Mid-January; travel brochures
all over the sofa; and not decided yet.
But it's just such fun – she's been like that
since she was a little girl – the future's always
golden, shining, full of possibility...
the present simply doesn't compare..

She'll take an early holiday this year; and then,
a whole summer of café tables, clubs;
she, tanned and glowing, sharp eyes skinned
for – no, not Mr Right – that's silly chick-mag stuff.. but
a Truly Meaningful Relationship...
oh she just can't wait. Though wait she will.

Then, it will all fall into place; glowing
with life, she'll get that new job
which must be waiting for the glowing her, and with
more money, then that sure success which she knows
is just waiting in her to surge out;
feeling that good, how could people
miss the potential sparkling dormant there?

She's in good shape for a girl
in her late 30s; and what is that these days?

She doesn't throw herself at men, more
than a girl looking for a TMR has to do;
looks them long and straight between the eyes,
letting them know that here they've met
a Girl With Plans; and that, soon
sorts them out..

Time to look at those brochures again;
she just can't wait to begin to live;
until then, what to do but wait?

Her much-loved cat is wiser in its way than she:
living only in the present, and well content with that;
while she just waits her life away.

[based on a character-sketch from Ernst Tolle's 'The Power of Now']

Michael Shepherd

! The Grace Of Metaphor

When a metaphor on blessed wings
flies to the heart like Mary's dove

or when you seek it, you grimed with earth,
in the darkest places of the heart

still you must examine it with a surgeon's skill;
probe; bleed; question; diagnose

before you ask of it, consent
to grace your magnificat.

Michael Shepherd

! The Guna Show

So much has travelled from the East to West
that it's surprising that those three great forces
which the Indians knew so well, are not
in Western consciousness; they tell so much;
and seen for what they are, we are prepared
for their perpetual play – their ceaseless game
which plays a merry hell, a merry heaven
with all of nature and our mortal lives..

They're known as 'sattva' – all that shines, enlightens
and uplifts; 'rajas' – that's all energy,
that gets things going, keeps things on the move;
and 'tamas' – that's inertia's purest form...

these three are said to be divine, in that
they're pure of nature – as when joy bursts out,
and feet join in the dance – then rest, and sleep;
while tamas the divine mysteriously
renews us from within to face new day..

yet, if we live a life where these great three
are out of harmony, then demons lurk –
false dreams seduce; or curséd restlessness;
or sloth brings ruin and darkness in its wake.

These mighty three respected, life is easier;
and like some party game, they bring surprise;
they keep us on our toes; yet serve, mysterious,
some greater purpose beyond mortal eyes;
when huge suns burst, stars cool, and life arrives,
they play their part; rule, here and now, our lives.

Michael Shepherd

! The Guy Who Ones Us..

and there's this guy,
hits my poems every day
devotedly
that's a lot of poems

doesn't read them,
just hits them
to drop another 1 in the voting box
on new poems, or ones he's already oned, alike

he or she no surely he
girls have better things to do
saw some poems had rated 10
naturally assumed that this was faked
because he's like that, decided
it was time to take me down a peg

but adding his comments – no,
too public, better do it secretly
then announce it publicly
as an act of holy justice..

if a poem's got no rating – bliss!
a very public 1 like a steaming turd...
if it's already got a 10, a 1
will bring that down to 5.5..

and there's always tomorrow..
a 10, two ones make 4.0..
a 10, three ones, make 3.3.. and so on...
alas for him, he can't ever reduce my score
with 10 plus 1 to the xth, to lower than 1.0...

funny, I still feel the same me in my poems...
I hope there's only one of him,
it's an awful waste of time, chasing
a paper power, a passing screen...
fun though it is, to spread childish smears
across the adult world...

needless to say, his many weeks of work
have served to elevate our hit-rate...
and as we sink on one list, then we rise
on another... the injustice of it all...
now the real false figures are his, not ours...

and then, he thought, it's time for Frank..
and then, for Tara.. and who next?
maybe some I haven't spotted?
That high scorer above all,
Nikki, so far, has escaped his attention...
But then, Nikki has no poems to one!
last year, he was called Joe Fazio or some such,
this year, he's called 'Poet Watch'..

if only... I'd be happier, as a poet,
if he had read the poems he oned...

Michael Shepherd

! The Heroic Carrot

The floods have ruined the British vegetable growers.
Tough. But
the supermarkets will just buy elsewhere,
we'll hardly notice, apart from TV's brief comment...

This week, what of our organic vegetable bag
whose carrots are usually a joyful memory
of what carrots, pulled yesterday, used to, still can, taste like?

- so this week, just one, huge carrot. The Great Survivor.
Gnarled, a giant among the pretty, washed, and fashionable ones
smiling under the golden light of supermarket shelves -
it looked as if it had fought battles, come through wars
which of course few want to be reminded of
by those old veterans with their tales of times
too testing of mortality for us to think about...

eaten later, it would have a subtler taste -
of gratitude, of praise.

A kitchen; a carrot; a man holding a knife,
on the edge of tears.

Michael Shepherd

! The Hunger Without A Name

The hunger, even felt
by the adequately clothed,
the adequately fed, the
adequately housed..

the hunger without a name,
a smell, a taste,
without an image, without
an advertising agency
to shape it for us; quietly
whimpering, whining at the door
to be let in and fed;

is it something we've never had?
distantly remember
like a childhood happiness?
or have, but want much more of?

and if a good fairy passed
and said, I can offer you only
one of these three things:

to be almost always happy;
to understand almost everything;
or to live almost forever...

which one would we choose? and
would the hunger be assuaged?

Michael Shepherd

! The Kite The Wind Took As If A Poem

You bought the kit,
couldn't wait for Mum to clear the table
to spread its bits and pieces out

didn't your Dad help you? Yes, of course –
those were the good times..

'your Dad'... do we ever really realise
they had a life of their own,
not merely extras in the drama
of your life?

the wooden struts cut to length,
the careful, don't hurry Michael cotton wound
around the glue, and then more glue,
put the top back on again Michael
or you'll be sorry when you come to use it again...
what's again, in a boy's life? ...

that special waterproofed paper
finally in place; Mum's hair-dryer
cautiously used to tauten
the bright kite's sail
not too near Michael,
read the instructions...

it's alive now, the kite,
the two of you waiting
to learn about wind, even
what you thought a mere light breeze...

what strength! on that first outing
on the beach or in the park;
the mere light breeze
which as your kite sailed up there in the sky,
dipping, soaring around the other kites
like a half learned, half graceful dance
which the wind wrote

but you did not listen fully to:

a sudden pull of wind, a parting
somewhere between string and kite...

no longer your kite; now
it's the wind's kite
sailing off into the blue
to meet the clouds perhaps

was it your Dad, after
he too had been silent-sad,
or was it Mum as she wiped your face who said

the wind, the sky, loved it too much
to give it back

and so with poems.
Throw away the box and stuff
but keep the glue, it may, like memory,
come in useful
next time

and so with poems.
The wind, the sky,
deserve them for their own;
they can go further, faster, they're more strong
than you;

let go the string, now, as it falls to earth;
watch the bright kite
till it's out of sight;
was it ever yours?

Michael Shepherd

! The Last Shower

The radio, first chattering companion of the day,
timed its cold shower of the mind with lethal precision
reminding as I stepped into the warmth of water
of those who stepped into the 'shower'
and never stepped out
those many past numbering
but each one a one

and a gentle Scots Quaker voice
conducting this Holocaust Day memorial
to the indescribable
spoke the phrase
'the dignity of difference'
offering the heart some way to walk
the path of grief with human hope

the dignity of difference –
an empty form of words
like poetry,
like grief,
poised between nothing and everything
waiting to be filled
with tears and joy
with love and sorrow
with memory and hope
with prayer and promise
with mercy and resolve
with humility and lawfulness
with life and the memory of death
with the memory of death, and life

Michael Shepherd

! The Library Of Memory

and then in between remarks,
you fall silent, still, the eyes
not far away but rather,
seeing the faraway right here
and those who know you
or who know the feeling of themselves,
know where you are

how describe that place
where a lifetime's memories are stored,
clean, precise, waiting, neglected, seemingly forgotten?
is it a castle; a linen closet; a box room, that place in the inner mind?
rather, it seems a library, of the books that life writes

and there comes a moment in between remarks
when the present offers nothing, so it seems;
and your mind leaves the assembled company,
walks into that quiet room, its shelves so carefully arranged
by someone unknown to you, a librarian
who knows you better than you know yourself;

I sit down in that green leather armchair, quietly;
but such the power of the memory of you
the pure essence of the memory of memory itself
that I need not reach to take that well-read book down again
but simply glance towards that place; on that shelf; where it rests;
sit, for a minute of eternity; rediscover myself;
then rise; walk, the back erect, dignified;
the stature taller for the memory of whom I am;

turning the smooth handle of the door as it closes, and
beyond all love, the watching;
freedom that makes the whole world live anew

Michael Shepherd

! The Life Or Death Question

You could guess from the crowd
converging on the Memorial Hall
and on a Saturday night, that
the speaker must be world-famed in his field,
making his first visit to the college.

A French scientist of renown –
cognitive theory or some such –
turned Buddhist monk these thirty, forty years,
he carried the blessing and the curse,
the burden of responsibility not only of his vocation
but his fame. The hall was packed.

Serene – ‘together’ has to be the word –
he spoke for an hour; enthusiastic applause;
then question time.

There’s always that tense silence before
the first question...how will
the hall respond tonight? Will it hold the level
of the speaker’s mind? ...we knew all too well
those ‘first question’ students – the one
who had to wrap a compliment in
confectioner’s sugar, eliciting an inward groan –
as if the speaker were unaware of his own ability...
she’d marry rich, then live a life of patronising
complacency bestowing well-publicised charity...

or the one whose ‘clever’ question blatantly advertised
to whoever might be impressed, beyond herself,
that she was already on the speaker’s wavelength
before the lecture and before the rest of us...
she’d commit herself to a future academic life
of maintaining this self-superiority,
exhausting herself, losing friends and influencing few...

but no – tonight it was that wild and self-abusive student
who seldom attended any lecture except to challenge –
‘Can you give me one single reason

why I should go on living? '..

You could have heard a cliché drop..

a pin; a paperclip; but loud, the universal thought –
how could the speaker know, this was the brilliant boy
of already three serious suicide attempts...
representative of the rite of passage greatly magnified,
sex, drugs, rocknroll, and whatever lay beyond...

'No... I cannot...'

This was the boy we detested, despaired of, tried to befriend,
hated for his disruption, but almost feared,
feared for the wild openness of his mind...
the hall united in hushed, waiting silence...

'... for you have given yourself the reason –
you have asked the question few of us
have dared to ask... and a question
sincerely asked, brings its answer with it...

'..when you hear the answer that your question
holds in its heart, like some golden lotus,
you will have the answers to all questions,
and you will be a wiser, happier man than me...'

only Buddhists and their like can smile
with such detached serenity; with
a space that's full of meaning. The hall
broke into the laughter of relief; great laughter;
the unqualified love of five hundred students
poured like a mighty river on that boy

who was still standing, wild-haired –
and I saw that he was laughing too
and through my mind flashed the thought,
the air is full of angels..

where had those angels who laughed
so lightly with us, where had those angels been,
before; and would go, after?
The boy, still laughing as he left.

Michael Shepherd

! The Lovebirds

We used to call them 'the lovebirds':
you couldn't miss them -
they were like some miniature, but very human, sculpture;
in their sixties I'd say,
neither much over five foot, the same height;
he stolid, compact, focussed; cap; sometimes a pipe;
she, always nicely - quietly - dressed,
different hat each day, in careful rotation,
different dress each day in summer, likewise;
and they walked, arms so tightly linked
as if they were discovering each other's companionship
each step of the way
and had done for - what - forty years?
They walked like a couple
striding through the world together
even though their strides were small, like them.
I reckoned they were Polish, I don't know why.
I'd see them from the pub window in the morning
walking quite fast for arm-in-arm;
then in the afternoon, he'd go off alone
walking slightly faster but stolid with it,
I guessed to see his old army pals at the Polish Hearth
under the wide painting of the Pripet Marshes;
sometimes I'd see him returning, impassive as ever
later in the afternoon, as if from a meeting well carried out.

And you know how it is with people like that,
that you see and notice every day -
you don't know whether you really want to talk, make their acquaintance,
or not -
they're so complete, self-contained,
content
and been through a lot together, I'd guess.
Children? Sometimes you can guess, sometimes you can't. Dunno.

I missed them for a time.
One day, the local charity shop
had a window full of hats.
I recognised them, all so gaily displayed;

and felt somehow personally offended.

I missed him for a time.

Now I see him walking past in the afternoon,
unchanged in manner;
stolid, focussed.

The only difference

is that every day he puts a plastic bag of domestic rubbish
into the small street bin that's not meant for domestic.

I don't know why that affects me so much.

Michael Shepherd

! The Loved Stranger

I remembered I'd promised my Aunt Adele before she died
that I'd get in touch with her family in Oz
just to put matters to rest, since they'd not spoken for years
since she upped and went off with this Pom
and left the family without its clever high-earner...

I wasn't looking forward to it with all that bad blood -
'Enough for a vampire's transfusion' said my uncle, the culprit -
but a promise is a promise. I had Auntie's old phone book;
worked out the time here that would be Sunday afternoon in Oz.

The voice was open, strong, friendly - I guessed I'd hit
that great moment when they'd had the barbie,
the few beers after the few beers,
the guests had just gone off
and the washing-up could wait until after a beer...

He was really glad I'd phoned -
he'd been away from the family most of his life, one reason and another -
so we didn't have much to try to piece together
which was probably a good thing, could've been
a pretty forced, stilted conversation -
so we got chatting about one thing and another,
our different lifestyles, our families -
and you know how it is, strangers on a train and all that,
got quite carried away, about how much we enjoyed life,
loved our wives and families, wouldn't change a thing,
what life had taught us - almost anything, everything really
like we were old friends who hadn't met up for years..

It was quite late on in the conversation, when we were working out
if we couldn't fix up a family visit, and he'd said,
no, they'd never lived in Adelaide (after which city
Aunt was proudly named - 'greatest city on earth' they said,
not having travelled further than Sydney -)
when I realised I'd phoned the wrong number; but
felt good and he too I guess.
So I had to choose the moment
to laugh and say hey this is an expensive call,

talk to the wife and call you back, Jacko...

I've never known my family so bloody merry
as when the story got around.

Michael Shepherd

! The Mind Revealed

and wouldn't it be weird
if we could click on our name page
and see - our mind!

spread out in all its random,
untidy, crossed-out, raggedy,
contradictory, half-chewed,
etc.

it just doesn't bear
half thinking about

how clever of, let's say,
Providence,
to keep it like it is, invisible; we,

letting it out under supervision,
teeth clean, polished shoes,
opinions prepared
for the lunch-break
and water cooler
and photocopier

and under supervision even more strict,
maximum security,
'association hour', when
it mixes with the lifers,
the condemned,
the emotions,
the instincts;

yes, better keep mind
behind closed doors;
there's only so much space
for the untidy,
savage,
so busy,
inconsequential,
vulnerable,

rupted,
God-given so they say
mind.

Michael Shepherd

! The Monk And The Tree

At dawn each day, as
the monk awoke upon the polished floor, and
rolled his bedding mat, the Way –
the way things are, the way they follow –
walked its way beside him.

Later, he would take his brush,
the ink-block, paper, and the water-pot
he filled each day with water from the river,
and find a place, among the woods,
or by the river bank; where the Way
would teach him old things, seen as if now new.

Most often, he would sit near an ancient tree
which had so much to teach him;
its trunk and branches gnarled and twisted
with the wisdom of the Way.

The tree was, as great trees are, the most
adventurous of artists: every Spring,
it would put forth new twigs,
as awkward as a newborn deer on
stick-like legs, trying to stand and walk;
the tree would let the Way make it
as awkward, unsymmetrical,
as inartistic as could be...

then slowly through the year, the tree, the Way
would make of this, a new and daring beauty;

and the monk would learn of it,
take up the brush, moisten the ink-block,
and – brush gently swishing black on white –
draw his daily lesson through the year...

and because he was so loved and famed,
connoisseurs of that most ancient art
would beg his paintings; find their breath
held, at his daring; their eyes would learn the Way.

When the monk, now old, joined the Immortals,
his many students gathered near that ancient tree.
They said, the tree did not seem sad at all;
threw out new leaves, seemed to rejoice;
as teachers do, whenever pupils shine.

Michael Shepherd

! The New-Born Poem

Of course, it's yours
so you want to love it,
want to believe that
though there are other children,
yours is special

but when it first appears,
there's a moment....
should it look like that,
is that the way they look?

then it's cleaned up and
looks better...but there's a part of you
ready of course to fight for it,
but still slightly wondering,
how will this miracle turn out?

then somebody who has to say it
because they're on duty or
because you've invited them to see it
says oh what a beauty

and now that just one other person
has looked at it, it seems already
blessed by the looking and you say

yes isn't it, isn't it a miracle...

Michael Shepherd

! The One Who Simply Looks

In the mirror, as the shadow falls across, then
for a precious fraction of a second,
The One Who Simply Looks
looks at itself...
then - whoops -

it's old familiar Me...

if you're curious,
remember this.

Michael Shepherd

! The Parsing Of Senility

The names go first. That's not
uncommon, and even among those who
are younger.. psychologists say
(how discomforted this couch, Professor Freud..)
it's sheer selfishness; we don't want our friends
to know our other friends..

The names go first. One learns the dodges –
'You'll all know each other, of course..';
names, they're nouns; so how far will it go?
how well can I live well, when without nouns?

Spirit lives in all things; the self exists in all;
perhaps I'll manage with this thought.
Then, what will be next to go ? (The nurse sighs
as the impatient patient cries, '..want..THAT...')

Ah, there's the clue: pronouns simply stand for names;
first person, second, third, will merge
into one selfish self – 'want.. that! .. hungry..! fetch!
no.. not that... that... when shall see...? '
I'll need a patient nurse...

So in the this nameless world, where all things are as One,
what then, the next to go?
Conjunctions would be no great loss –
no ifs or buts, as Nanny said, when an all too similar
frowning plaintive child tried bargaining...
re-punctuation, editing, those shorter sentences
which editors would beg of me – yes,
'conjunctivitis' was my writing's curse...

Prepositions have had a chequered history
in languages: sometimes on the end of words,
sometimes going before them with a flag;
immigrants were never very strong on them;
I'll pretend I'm fresh from Ellis Island...

And Mediterranean and Near Eastern hands

could learn to play their part; who would spot
if adverbs, or those adjectives so dear to poetry
turned into grand, expansive gesture? 'Such
an effusive man..' they'd say.. maybe I'd turn
into an opera star; the words a little blurred...

And like the poet Elisabeth Bishop, I'd have to learn
how to surrender things, with joy... and read, maybe,
with ecstasy, every printed word as new, unspoken, magical...

...And the last age, lean and slippered in
those hospital pyjamas and blankets with that rough kiss
that Rupert spoke about; ruthless, toothless age,
sans words, sans lips, sans native tongue, sans...
..now, what was that word ... Oh, Nurse! Nurse! ...
oh damn, damn, damn.. oh yippee! .. can still curse...

Michael Shepherd

! The Philosopher's Study

A very average room, in a standard terrace house:
the welcome sunlight- ruthless though -
truth itself come down to earth -
reveals that the windows
could be cleaner; yet,
could be dirtier;

shows up the gentle layer of dust -
gentle in its fall, not gentle in its mercy - and
not rising from the earth, but
falling invisibly over time
from the ceiling whose last decorator
used a paint less than the best;
who ever invited dust?
But here it is, inviting in its turn
a passing twinge of guilt; it could be
a metaphor for the philosophic:
dust the mind occasionally,
time brings complacency
and thoughts grow stale,
minds decline...

to a stranger or interior designer
or feng-shui expert, all too cluttered;
too many books for home improvement mags;
not books horizontal, but books vertical;
one could remember how each comes to be there;
for its owner, convenience; occasionally
the slight annoyance of a book urgently sought
(I mistyped 'ungently' there..)
requiring the careful craft of extraction
from far down in some tottering pile...

here's beauty of the mind
for those with mind to see;
and today, the early pale green leaves
from the trimming of the Japanese maple,
every single leaf looking as if it had been bred
by centuries of Japanese devoted to the belief

that man and nature, hand in hand,
may reveal a beauty beyond both –
each leaf tilted delicately towards you as if
as a host bowing modestly in welcome at the door –
these few leaves take your humbled breath away.

In this place, the world itself:
'infinite riches in a little room';
as above, so below; as without, so within:
here, heaven and earth, all, open to question;
here is the human mind at home;
meditating; dreaming; waiting in patient hope
like those humble maple leaves
for some new idea to enter,
to expand the loved, mysterious,
boundless glory of the world which constantly
threatens to shrink all to a tiny, wizened, unwise thing;

while unexpectedly at any time may come
a poem, interrupting the philosophy,
to say the things that have not yet been said.

Michael Shepherd

! The Poem Called

and when the cat had finished drinking
and he had watched that delicate pink tongue
lapping as carefully as any lady
and had wondered whether cats enjoy this patient method
or whether they long to pour it down their throats, carelessly
and savagely, as they live wildly in the nights

then he heard the poem call
faintly, almost indifferently, the sound unmistakeable
yet always different
this time it came from a far distance
beyond the cat, though the cat was somehow part of it,
beyond the yard where he had once and never forgot
put a bullet into the old dog that
could not stop shaking

beyond the barn, beyond the field
where he nuzzled his favourite of the horses
and it allowed this intimacy, patiently;

so far beyond, so faint, the cry that poems make
as they, like cats, like dogs, like horses
who know nature so much more certainly than we
the sound that poems make as they wait patiently
to be found

he walked towards it but many times was lost,
he had to stop, stand still, listen,
and wait to hear that sound
recognisable but different every time

and when he and the poem had found each other
they were for a moment, silent, still,
then both turned to look over his shoulder
to where, yet further still,
the next poem had begun to call to him, faintly, almost indifferently,
the sound familiar, yet never quite the same

! The Poem That Got Away

I started a poem with a serious intent...
but who would ever guess the mess, and where that poem went?
I'd barely writ a line so fine, when the poem turned to me,
looked me in the eye and ear, and laughed demonic-lee,

pranced around me, singing, boo! you can't catch me!
ain't no rules nor grammar for the boldheart and the free!
race you round the chocabloc, poetic chairbound fatty!
you're just like every pompous poet, thinking always that he

can control a poem with a life that's its own!
tries to rhyme each couplet up, as if lines were circus clones...
tries to measure poems by some rules about their feet, or
wants to match my singing lines to some archaic meter...

'cause I'm a poem!
I've got my own life!
I want to dance around the streets,
I want to join a band!
I've got so much to tell you,
I want to lift your heart...
I want to make you weepy too,
If that's the way I feel..
I want to talk to children,
or to live in fantasy;
I want to feel much bolder
than this sillybilly world,
quick and slick and fancy-free;
and sail past time and space;
or wonder what it could be like
before the world began...
I want to shuffle words around,
like books upon a shelf;
I want to be all bold and free –
I want to be – myself!

So boo to all your metered rhymes,
you faded, jaded poet...
poems are the masters now...

it's much more fun,
it's just begun...and
it's time for you to know it! ...

Michael Shepherd

! The Poem's Flight

A poet, far from his beloved,
wrote a poem full of meaning
and, calling a carrier-pigeon from his loft,
sent it as a white dove to his beloved

It was a long flight
and by the time his beloved read the poem
under the lamplight in her room
its meaning had changed for her
with the course of time and the human heart

If the pigeon, midway on its flight,
had rested in our loft
to drink a little rain, eat a little grain,
and we had read the poem - would it have
any meaning for us?

Where does meaning go
when it is not here?
How does meaning change,
between a smile, a tear?

Michael Shepherd

! The Poems I Love

There are poems that I envy,
poems that I admire and respect,
poems that simply sing to me,
poems that I puzzle over...

but the poems I most love -
they may be jewelled and adorned
with adjectives and adverbs,
similes and metaphors, (but
they must be enlightening, relevant,
making mind and heart to expand
in sheer exhilaration)

or they may be so quietly, humbly carpentered
that they say, I'm simply here to serve you...

but they all say to me with
shining eyes, as if
the world made new in that moment,

'Yes, I was there!
Join me there! '

and their 'there' is here and now
and as great as the universe
and the heart that yearns.

Michael Shepherd

! The Poetry Student

Wonder
is a philosopher
is a poet
looks with awe
upon all things
sees one in many
praises one,
delights in many
loves
reasons
wonder is a poet

Barely a year ago now
what was he?
an adult student whom I scarcely knew,
self-contained (and what
an epithet that is...) ,
a human being with a warmth,
a keen mind for profounder things, but
not burdened with over-education,
still an innocent guarding wonder with a hidden strength;
who turned up one day
for the occasional poetry session

not much to start with
but he kept at it

and then it seems that the Muse,
so much wiser than poetry teachers,
casting around for messengers
as she must, to tell her glory to the world,
decided that he just might fit the bill

and now he's hers. Love,
and the knowledge of love
pour unpretentiously from him, with
a depth of insight expressed with simple clarity;
the choice of words seems to come from purest instinct;
beauty, goodness, truth flow through him unimpeded

very soon he'll wonder just who wrote these poems;
the answer, as the Muse must know
is in the wonder. Yes, she chose right.

Michael Shepherd

! The Present Is A Present, So Be Present

Always, behind the known,
the greater unknown...

behind the tedious Latin translation,
the struggle to find French elegance in French -
the private joys of the translator...
that rare intimacy, as a soul to soul
across the divides of language...

'Laetus in praesens' says Marsilio Ficino
in his Renaissance colloquial Latin
written up around the wall
of his Academy, such as it was...

The translator – half mechanical,
half philosopher, scribbles down
'Rejoice in the present'..
and presently, pauses, contemplates...

Is it, was it, as easy as all that?
Sounds good, but is it practical?

In another age, Eckhart Tolle will expound
The Power Of Now – how joy
will follow presence, as the night the day...

The translator, cautious in his guidelines,
contemplates 'Be present, rejoicing..''
as a poetic alternative... thus satisfying
philosophy as the study of causes...
checks various manuscripts; ah,
it's written in one as 'impraesens'...
almost adjectival; as a necessary state:
'rejoice, being present' then, perhaps?

Behind the shoulder of the translator,
stands as always, just as does
the unknown at the shoulder of the known,
(not quite nudging, sometimes, the writing arm)

the author...so close, this present moment,
is his presence...

the translator, gifted with a present by the wise,
the presence of the wise,
is wholly present; and that almost
imperceptible joy – recognised only
by the absence of all other things –
which the wise call bliss,
steals like a blessing
from the eternal, timeless, unblemished,
perfect now.

Michael Shepherd

! The Presents On The Gift List Yet Unread

and there's the presents
which we don't talk of
which we secretly wish
for ourselves; wondering
whom we might ask for them;

or whether they were already ours,
bestowed by fairy godmother
there beside the cradle; in which case,
where did we hide them
from ourselves? ..

to wake each morning,
not to depression and the lack
of any sense of personal self-worth..

but to praise and gratitude and joy...

unwrapping the world,
loosing its knotted golden cords,
easing its sticky tape,
folding the paper neatly into memory,
discarding all the packing which defends...

or must we posit a god so just and merciful
that time to him or her or it, is but an experiment
to give us time and freewill, to remember
where we hid those presents from ourselves?

Michael Shepherd

! The Professional Poet

and of course it was wrong
to label him as that – in just that tone of voice;
a touch of envy there, no doubt

implying a comfortable life,
a smart careerist, older poets youthfully
cultivated, poems in the right magazines,
editors gently kept in touch with;
keeping on the right side of his peers,
'interesting' reviews of their poetry skilfully woven,
professional favours quietly exchanged;
academic posts gracefully filled, and
moved on from; leaving grateful ex-students
recommended for the vacancy;
and an acquired ability
to write just enough, but not less;

so it should be rather, a lifelong devotee of poetry,
and when he started to read to us I felt mean
for assuming him to be some artificial thing
a professional poet;

I wanted to inhabit his poetry, the
house of his poetry; but some doors
to rooms were open, some were shut;
would I give the time to find and love the key?

He read his own poems
as if they were step-children –
proud to show them off, and yet, not really his;
the audience, taken aback by this,
hesitated to applaud.

But when he read the poems of others,
he read them as though they were miracles
to stun and to admire, yet he was, we were, barely worthy of;
dropping as fine mercy, as the gentle dew of heaven; he read like
an amateur would read the great, in awe; as -
a lifelong devotee of poetry. He shone.

In each of us, a poet was born and lived.

Michael Shepherd

! The Ripe Pear

Quartering this ripe pear
- a knife-and-fork job; it gave little away
except a slight softness around the stalk,
yet seems to contain more juice than
any work of man could hold -

quartering this ripe pear,
I'm caught up in wonder:
this is almost too good for human beings -
it should have a religion built around its praise;

as if it wishes to tell us something
that we might have overlooked
about such mouth-worn phrases as
Nature's bounty and God's grace..

or as if, two thousand years ago,
it had leaned, heavy on its branch,
from the wall of Plato's leafy Academy,
saw him writing of ideals,
and smiled;

and now I've written that,
I can eat this pear,
tasting it and what I've written;

this pear, I swear,
now tastes even better;
as if I had submitted
on some altar, to be consumed by praise;
praise that tastes of pear; pear that tastes of praise.

Michael Shepherd

! The Sad Story Of Happiness

Statistics tell. You can be independent of them, but you cannot deny them.

Though white Americans are freed from many of the hassles and indignities that affect black Americans, yet, on average, they are only very slightly happier.

Men have more power and freedom than women, yet, on average, they are not any happier. (Women experience more depression, but also more intense joy..)

Though the young have so much more to look forward to, than the elderly, yet ratings of life satisfaction rise slightly up to age sixty-five, and for some, beyond..

People in colder areas of the USA might expect Californians to be happier. They are wrong.

Surely people who are more attractive are happier than the unattractive? Not so..

If you're adequately housed, adequately clothed, adequately fed, then wealth will surely bring you greater happiness? The rich are only a very little happier than the middle classes...

So is this the end of The American Dream – Joe, José, Leroy, Yusuf, Gianni, Johan, Boris, Ivan, Ravi? isn't there a happy ending, over the border,

over the ocean, over the rainbow?

Yes, there is...

happy people grow rich faster..

(thanks to Jon Haidt for this)

Michael Shepherd

! The Secret Society Of The Suddenly Quiet...

This Christmas, as ever at this time of year,
there's a worldwide brotherhood and sisterhood
whose numbers I cannot count
and would not wish to know;
who seldom know each other;
and perhaps, that's just as well..

who, in their dressing-gowns on Christmas morn,
amid bright wrappings hasty torn,
and exclamations...
fall suddenly quiet,
are far, somewhere else for several moments;
return, and look silently in thought, deeply,
at partner, children; their eyes
now a little more shining than they were..

or who, at a lively dinner-party,
fall quiet for a minute,
look around the table, thoughtfully; or
squeeze a hand, secretly; then
return as if they'd never been away;
return perhaps with new vigour
in their conversation and in response..

or even, acceptably alone at Christmas,
celebrate it in this quietness;
if you knew them, which you don't,
you might say something to them;
or, just might not know what you should say..

who are these, suddenly quiet
for a moment, far away,
celebrating something in their quietness?

they are those whose quietness would say,
this is what I never knew, when I a child;
longed for, never thought it would come true;
how fortunate I am, that I've survived
to feel like this...

Indians might say, this is the story of your present life,
which you wrote with your previous life..
the drama of separation now transcended...
that may be so, explain a lot; or it may not... but,

look at them- when they don't see you doing that-
look at them deeply with the eyes of love;
saying in yourself, yes, yes, yes...

Michael Shepherd

! The Secret, Treasured World Of Metaphor

True, I can rhyme – endwords, and inner too;
fangle fine assonance, like thought made new;
march to a metre –regular in tread
or cunningly disjointed – silken, the thread
then sharply pulled, to wake the reader's ear;
rhythms, I can dance with a magic, laughing twirl;
play like the ringlets of poetic curls;

but metaphor – ah, there's the sadness in my play:
that golden box, its gleaming lid all joy,
all mystery... if I only had the key
to throw it open, cave with dark velvet lined,
shimmering with jewels from rare and secret mines,
flashing with colours never man had seen,
thrown together as words have never been –
making new language out of words grown old,
sounding new sounds of tales that are not yet told..

oh that I had the gift of metaphor –
that showering of gold from a land unknown heretofore...

Michael Shepherd

! The Shining. For Tara.

It shines.

It shines from the new-born baby;
shines in the magic of birth.

It shines in first love;
in lasting love.

It shines in laughter,
in tears of sadness,
in tears of joy.

It shines in wisdom,
shines in goodness,
shines as beauty.

It shines in the held breath
of the peace of dawn about to break;
it shines in the stillness
of the hour of sunset.
It shines as life.

There is no limit to its shining
except the denying of it
and even then,
it shines

Since you know it so well,
does it need a name?
A name perhaps, to praise?

Nameless, known to all,
beyond all praise,
it shines.

Michael Shepherd

! The Simple Person

and when you're a child, you learn so much
of 'grown-up' life, of 'grown-up' values –

by the tone of voice
in which they say things

my mother, saying of a particular person
whom I'd never met – or if I had,
would not have known what to make of them –

'She's a simple person'

and the tone of voice with which she said this
was full of compassion, without a touch of criticism:

it meant, she has no mind with which to make complexity.
Not a hint there of some label like mentally challenged,
or mentally under-privileged;

rather, the purity of a soul untrammelled;
indeed, a state of grace

for in her day, the honourable poor
looked after, were at one with their simpler kin;
while free to honour the skilled and fortunate

and I listening, wondered if I could rise to life's challenges
as a simple person.

Michael Shepherd

! The Snake Skin Scarcely Shed

Just before it happens,
does the snake look forward
with relief, or feel vulnerable
to some strange force?

and when it's happened,
is there a feeling of new freedom -
that's got rid of that worn out thing,
so battered, scratched, dry, and cut?

I look in the shaving mirror
envying the snake
with no mirror, to which to sadly say
oh sss*** - it's much the same..

Michael Shepherd

! The Song That Mary Sang

In the stillness of the dawn,
in the stillness of the dusk,
then, my heart is most alive,
there, my soul is most at peace.

In the freshness of the morning,
in the coolness of the eve,
the Lord God walks in every garden;
be still, so to know Him there.

All day long I tend my garden;
there, this evening, God may walk;
I may see Him; I may not - but
yet I meet Him in my work.

Michael Shepherd

! The Sound Of Cities

Turn on again, that old, once new film of your life -
it's called the 'establishing shot'; and as it pans
across your once-favourite city, corny in the sunshine,
arty in the dusk and rain, the home to all your dreams,
the music slides in, takes the reins, the heartstrings of recall...

New York: for some of certain age, the needle hiss
before the recording studio draws in, lung-deep
the low lights, the clink of glasses, murmur,
- the film's in blackandwhite, the evening suits, the faces too -
as the silky rhythm, the syncopated beat
tells the old old story of a love that's sour or sweet..

Pacific Coast: a background seethe of waves;
the studio's Zen-silent; reminiscent saxophone,
a dreaming horn, a rhythm barely sketched;
is it the silence that draws out the sounds,
or sounds (as in the haunting - plink - of Japan's films)
that serve to paint the silence? ...

Paris: rooftops in the rain; and yes, its blackandwhite again:
accordeon plays first, a cardboard lung
wheezing out a memory of the dance of love
or barrel-organ, cranking out a background
like an old toothpaste tube; it's only half-believed
like some street-beggar's story; but you both know
that memory's longing for this sweet dipped madeleine
of romance and the words of love, from that endless source
and flow of Seine, its quays, its honest poverty,
its silver-grey and words of love...

Michael Shepherd

! The Sound Of Silence

I'm walking down the street
and I hear the sculptor in his house
working on his statue of Krishna

and the chisel rings out on the stone
like a bell that wants to tell you something:

the stone saying, I am perfectly made for this;
the chisel saying, I am perfectly made for this;
the sculptor saying, this is prayer;

Krishna saying, I shall enter this.

And I hear in the sound of the chisel on the stone,
as sure as I know my own name,
that the sculptor is listening to all this too.

The bell-like sound lingers in the air
as if the air would keep it for ever
as the air's prayer. It's music.

The clearer the sound
of his striking chisel on stone,
the deeper the silence

as if sound and silence between them
know a secret: that sounds like this
can do anything in the world;

even call Krishna with their music
to play at being stone for us.

The stone's laughing also:
playing at being Krishna.
They're both laughing.
The sculptor is smiling too.

Michael Shepherd

! The Soundtrack To Our Life

...more than we or others ever realise, I reckon,
the music of our younger years
makes the soundtrack to our life -

there I am sitting beside the driver
and the speakers correction stunguns
in every corner of the car
are belting out pomp-rock in all its triumph
and I'm thinking christ if I'm deaf now
what will they be at my age,
and well-they-all-sound-the-same-to-me
and I see the guy growing visibly,
livin' the singer and the music and the song;
and I take that in and feel a stranger to the world
then ten, twenty years later
I see a brilliant TV ad
with that as background music
and it hits me in the stomach or between wet eyes
and I think christ I wish I could've written that, then, now...

but I'm marked too -
the hiss of the needle on the vinyl
as if it were the carrier wave
of the first ever message from a new planet;
then the saxophones,
new york new world new life
and the witty lyrics
slick and silky
sly and shady
and the last outatune bars
world weary but oh so sophisticated
before the final hissnclick...

the music of our younger years,
the soundtrack to our life.

Michael Shepherd

! The Stone And I

By the edge of the mini-pond
where I sit when the weather's fit for it,
there's this stone.

I'd like to call it a rock
because that sounds more dignified
and metaphorical and carries
more tradition, but
it's a stone

and on it grows a lichen;
not the vivid, flat, yellow and vermilion and red and black
lichen that grows on stone walls
by the seaside; this one
has those colours at its edge
but has a furry crop of tiny green fronds
cropping from its mossy green
which are quite vigorous in their tiny way.

I liked it so much that I tried
to get the other stones around the pond
to match, by douching them alternately
with urine and yoghurt in the approved manner
after dark for obvious reasons
but they didn't respond;
I guess stonecrop beautiful word
knows its own field so to speak
and won't be rushed, at least
it makes me treasure this one more

If I had the money which I haven't
and the patience which I don't
I'd have a perfect, model
Zen garden complete with sand
which I'd rake with a wooden rake
every morning into swirly lines
with graceful sweeping Tai Chi movements
until I got bored

but I just have this stone
with faintly Japanese pretensions
mine not its
however I'd like to think a Zen master
would quite approve of my modest intention
and say, less is more, more or less...

and now I think of it, the stone
has its own Zen garden; though whether
you could call this an eco-system,
whether the stone and the lichen
have a relationship, is open
to question, as is
whether the stone so agreeably placed
by the pool well OK pond
has a relationship with the pond

anyway, on a sunny day
the stone and I sit there together
if together is quite the right word
I feel we're together whatever it feels
if it feels at all that is

and I guess it's even possible
in an evolutionary view of things,
lichen on stone, first life on earth
and all that, that the lichen
and I are really related, with
a common ancestor
which would account for a lot

and we sit there quietly in quite
a Japanese sort of Zen-ness
of being one with nature
and I become don't laugh more stony
and still; as for the stone
I really can't say but
It feels good

and in this state of relaxed contemplation
which I guess is the point of those
Japanese gardens

it occurs to me that the stone
and perhaps the water too

have qualities that I lack –
they know just how to be,
to be still, to be themselves

so there may be a point to what
we sometimes call with the trace
of a sneer,
communing with nature

since as Saint Augustine said
the whole cosmos is our
holy book; so why not
open it

*

[with a namaste to Augustine and Eckhart Tolle]

Michael Shepherd

! The Toad Not Raken

Now that the frost has gone its rimy way
there's the matter of that long grass
that meets the undergrowth
at the end of the garden;
time to take steps to tidy it.

two rakes awaited my decision:
there's the metal one, which makes hard work
but scarifies the moss and aerates the top soil as well –
and the wooden one, slightly Japanese looking,
its tines further apart, and easier on the arms,

which combs the long grass rather than removes it,
setting it up for the strimmer when the grass dries off.
But I remembered how last year's early raking
disturbed a sleepy toad and, to my shame, partially dismembered it.
These little choices make our road and name us.

I took the gentler wooden rake, and dragged it careful-slow;
the reward, a scuttling movement in the grass ahead.
Two rakes were there for me to make my choice;
I'm glad I took the one less often used, the gentler one.
Though looking at the grass, it's hardly made any difference.

(For all respectful but mischievous poetry fans)

Michael Shepherd

! The Tricky Area Of Sacrilege

'He has insulted Islam! ' they cry out,
'Off with his head! '

Thereby, some might say,
arrogating to themselves, Allah's work
upon the jihad of our own true souls;

and 'infidels' might say,
watch out that you don't use
invented victimisation, for intolerance...

for shouting or whispering or even thinking
ill of God, is surely first, to damage oneself;
cutting one off from His mercy, justice, grace..
how can one insult God?

Jews and Christians say,
'God is not mocked'...
meaning, He is all-powerful, has His own
just, merciful and graceful ways
of redeeming the lost soul...

perhaps we should cry
God is not mocked, a little louder,
that is, those of us who still believe this true...

Michael Shepherd

! The Two On The Road

In later years, this day came back to you
as days of presence often do:

It's the end of the midday break, and
the sun, already warm for Spring, is easing;
the sheep are grazing on the new grass;
two of them have jumped the low stone wall
to munch the juicier grass of the roadside ditch
which has spent the morning in dewy shadow.

Where the path to the stony fields
crosses the track back to the village,
you've found yourself walking just behind
a pair returning to the village,
father and son – or is it, grandfather?

You could overtake them, just to show
you mean no harm; but something about them
draws your attention; so you walk behind them
at a distance indicating that you know they know
you're walking behind them, yet too far
to be listening to them...

which you'd dearly like to. They walk
slowly, deep in conversation,
this boy, this man; their relationship
catches your curiosity. You,
whose childhood was not always easy,
watch them with delight, a little mixed with envy;
you study their body language for some clues.

The man listens to the boy with such respect,
he could be a young grandfather,
marvelling that his son has fathered such a treasure,
quietly enjoying that unique blend
of bond and yet detachment which is grandfatherhood;

now and then, the boy touches his loose sleeve –
not in the way a child clutches, when he demands belief

in some tale of fantasy; more as if
the boy had discovered some gift
in what he says, and wants to share it with you.

And now and then,
the man touches the boy – as we do
when our child has said something so mature, so wise,
that we are speechless; and can only reach out
and touch them; as if some new relationship
had just been born; our touch
a mark of recognition beyond our words.

Just once, the boy turns his head, looks back at you,
briefly, but with that open look that village children often have,
when every stranger is a friendly curiosity;
you're glad for him, of what that moment tells.

You follow them back to the village,
your curiosity aroused more than it should.
They open up the wooden front
of the lean-to where they ply their trade;

fascinated by their tender, deep relationship,
you'd really like to come back in an hour or so,
to look in on them, and hope to see the son
working on the wood as lovingly
as he has spoken to the man.. but
you decide against it. One day,
you might come back, request their careful skills -
perhaps a new cupboard for your house.

Their tidy, ordered workplace needs no craftsman's signboard;
if there were, the villagers tell you when you gently ask,
it would be Joseph & Son.

Michael Shepherd

! The Ultimate Hamburger

The great Hamburg football team
is to lay out a cemetery for supporters
next to its pitch – in the form, of course,
of another pitch whose grass
is eternal, whose goal is the final goal...

and then, the appropriate memorial inscriptions:
'Heinz – the Referee blew time on December 15...'
'At the end of the day, Gunther,
that's what it's all about...'

'Joshi – scored his final goal on July 3...'
'Fritz – took an early bath on October 14...'
'Rikki – good to the last kick...'

'Alfi – now shouting in the terraces
on the other side...'
'Lorenz – always on God's first team...'

'Tomi – called to the great away fixture
in the sky on March 27...'
'Birgit – my beloved home supporter...'

'Denni – always in training...'
'Klaus – hung up his boots on May 15...'
'Kurt – a life without a penalty...'

'Bart – his final match drew to a close...'
'My beloved Else – a Hamburger
tasty to the last bite...'
'Reinhold – he played the field until the last...'

I think we'll blow the whistle on this one now.

Michael Shepherd

! The Unity Of All Things

The unity of all things
is a belief which some
would consider pointless;

others might regard,
as insidious; suspect a lurking
hidden agenda; some
might say it's useless and unproveable,

declare pathetic fallacy, and hurry on
to life's more pressing details and specifics;

I can only say that there are things
so useful to the mind, although
they cannot be proved;

I'll say that holding this concept,
this glorious possibility, in the mind
makes one more inquisitive, be it
journalist or writer, or simply
human being: seeking always
the causes of all things beyond
what they profess to be;

so too for poets, swimming in a sea
of metaphor – of all things joined
in one more radiant meaning which lights up
the life of every thing; as when
a housewife dusts and polishes
a room into a home; bestows
her being on our space;

the unity of all things
makes space for all things;
Creation promises some order;
behind the smaller things, the greater;

a place for grace, for ordered life,
for hope, and charity, and love;

a boundless place; a grace;
a graceful space.

Michael Shepherd

! The Un-Ked

Words are like unicorns –
come from nowhere
without any one's permission or request
because there's a need for them.

Whose painful, sudden, desolate need
called this word to be?

Market gardeners pushed further out of towns,
their customers now too far a wagon-ride away;
shepherds too, pushed further out of valleys
to the barren windswept hills;
refugees from starving lands across the sea;
the many orphans motherless from too many birthings,
childbirth fever, fatherless from cotton-lung;

all these knew what unked meant;
but they had lived with it;
it strikes with sudden, hope-drained emptiness
the comfortable, too, when they least expect it;
it can visit monks and other religious and devout,
praying in their solitary cell;
even parish priests about their rounds; or
princesses, put into cold storage
until that right dynastic husband is found;
princes, knowing that they one day must rule
after their hated father's hated rule...

the Psalmist knew it strike his heart;
John of the Cross called it
the dark night of the soul; Rilke said,
leaning over the chasm of myself..

say the word, sound it, roll it round your mouth,
savour its sour aftertaste; live it for a moment.
What does it tell you?

A little like 'unfed' – and that they often were;
'unshod' – and that often, orphans were;

'ked' – a short word with the certainty
that it's known exactly what it should be;
so when it's missing, we know just what's lost..

or maybe, just a curt, abrupt abbreviation
for 'uncared for'... its suddenness
beyond all family and friends then, in that moment,
a desolation of the soul; no ease from god or man;

you'll know it; or you won't:
unked.

[a Lancashire dialect word, which Mrs Gaskell found invaluable]

Michael Shepherd

! The Watchman Of Dark Christmas Night

The brazier's glowing coals lit up his eyes.
I asked the watchman as he guarded time:
tell me, watchman, of the truth of Night..

he said: when I had conquered all the tasks of day,
I took night-watching as the sternest test,
to seek the weakness, and to seek the strength
which I might find there in my deepest self..

In darkest night, I lost myself – or so
I thought I had: for every night,
as the third hour after midnight moves
into the fourth hour, there came a time
when all one held as precious to oneself,
all joy and consolation, all the point of life
was taken from me... then I felt
myself an abject, faithless wretch..

for it seemed that even God
is in repose, in that abyss of time..
taking from me, even faith,
and hope, and love itself..

and then one day, I saw in paint –
it could have been by Rembrandt's guided hand –
the darkness, to be full of light..
more full than day itself..

the light itself, as God, all in repose;
and in the darkness are all things
drawn back into themselves;
so that they may awake at dawn
the fresher; Diadochus, holy man,
who knew dark well, for all his holiness,
and welcomed it... gave it a name:
'educative desolation' was his term...

for what mortal man would not become complacent
to think he walked with God both day and night?

At that darkest hour, faith, hope, and loving-kindness
may be withdrawn from human kind; yet,
they cannot die, I learned; they must return..

And no one may tell – as shepherds watch,
and angels fill the skies –
what Mary feels, before her faith and hope
are born as joy and love..
what Mary feels, this night as dark as sin..
what Mary feels, before the holy dawn;

only humility, for her, for us,
will see us through the testing hours;
will teach us in this darkest night
the darkness full of brightest light..

We sat there silent for a space,
I and the watchman of the Night;
the brazier glowing warm and bright;
the silence full of grace.

Michael Shepherd

! The Week Between Christmas And New Year

These are the strange and dull and heavy days
(in the Northern Hemisphere at least –
we seldom spare a thought for what ordeal
our brothers and sisters, basking in the summer sun
are passing through in mind...)

For children, these are precious days, of course –
waking each morning to the knowledge of new toys—
(premature, by orthodox tradition – a birth, of course,
but not yet the presents that are due
to celebrate the Epiphany, the showing-forth of Love Itself)

but are there other gifts which grown-ups have not found,
buried in the garden soil, the frozen fields?
For it seems this week, as if the earth and nature
are caught up in some mighty pull
as this great globe itself rounds some vast narrow bend
and we with it; as if we are nature, earth as well:
aroused by some peremptory alarm clock
at some ungodly, godly hour,
to help push up the snowdrops from their roots
and all other things that must be stirring in the earth
to feed and flower.

Some esoterics say that these seven days
are rich with some strange octave in the mind
whose qualities are sensed within our music's scale:
some universal starting power; reluctance; recovery;
faintheartedness; a sunny strength; need for authority;
yearning for completeness – these, they say,
are to be lived through in the mind;

these to be lightly seen and sung in heart;
best, in these over-eaten days, to participate
in joyous activities in company..

Others whose star is in the East
look for a sequence of twelve days of Christmas:
wisdom has set out from Persian lands afar

on its journey to acknowledge new-born love;
some old order gathered in the safe sheepfold of strict law
knowing in its wisdom, it's now time –
the law known and secure -
to learn the new-born testament of love;

All this, buried in the Christmas tree's root and branch,
the holly and the mistletoe, the alert, fierce robin
sitting on a needful spade,
the angel (wondering if it still has a place in our hearts,
but knowing the powers that its wand
may never lose)

In these strange and dull and heavy days
all this, all these, the presents yet to find,
we could not make or buy; lie wrapped in mind.

Michael Shepherd

! The Wheelwright. For David

The wheelwright worked, as carefully,
yet so fast, as a wheel spins.

One day, someone said to him,
the centre of the wheel never moves.

Infuriated, the wheelwright worked night and day
neglecting his other work,
to prove this was not true;

he invented a wheel which was all rim;
but it still needed a hub, an axle;
but he had invented the flywheel;
his business flourished despite him.

He invented a wheel with a hollow at its centre;
but had to devise a radiating hub;
yet he had invented machinery;
his business thrived.

After many years, he sank back,
beaten by philosophy; reduced to stillness.

Around him, a huge business enterprise;
he, the hub, the axle,
the still centre.

Michael Shepherd

! The Wisdom Of Toys

That worn, stuffed bear you hide -
have not quite thrown away

is more than your childhood
seen through rose-tinted time -

toys that speak,
toys that are talked to,
toys that simply listen

are the mediators between
the wisdom of the animal world
which shares with us, a heart

animals who live a blessed life
only in the present now,

and the wisdom that children bring
from the heaven that lies all about us
in our infancy, as the poet said;

toys are reflectors of our self
that remembered what's our self;
that remember what's our self.

Michael Shepherd

! The Woman At The Crossroad Who Laughed

As I walked up the pavement, up the slight hill
to the traffic lights at the crossroads outside the station,
I saw her waiting to cross.
Or rather, I saw first, her laugh..

She held the hand of her son
as she exchanged words with a passing friend
and laughed..

and what I saw in her eyes, her whole face,
as she laughed, was that as she laughed -
(did she know this? How could I tell her, a stranger?
Lady, lady, at the crossroad of our lives,
I'm writing this poem for you now...)

as she laughed, while she laughed,
I saw that she was in touch, the whole of her,
with her deepest self – just that... all that...
and as I saw that self, which was
(Lady, are you reading this?)
the perfection of perfection, all that's perfect...

it was as if – no, it was just so –
her self looked at me, and so
the perfect looked at the perfect;

herself and mine together laughed,
laughed at imperfection

and as the perfect looked, it saw perfection
spreading through my eyes from our shared self
so that her son was perfect; and her friend was perfect;
and all around us, every they and it were perfect..

(Lady, Lady, at the Cross's foot,
was it like this for You?)

the light turned green. And we were free
to cross the road; and

free to live; and
free to laugh away illusion; and
free to be ourselves; forever,
in that time which is forever.

Lady, by my faith, this by my hand;
and with my life I do yet swear
upon my life, this to be true;

Lady, hear, in this my orison,
there are no sins
to be remembered.

Michael Shepherd

! They Also Loved

'We only love if we have first been loved.'

Aye, there's the rub.

The teenager, her room walled round
with rock and pop stars who, it seems,
all smile their open, deep-eyed smiles
just for her... twists, red-eyed, on the bed,
hammers the pillow with clenched fists...

the boy she loved has dumped her;
she gave him all her love, and now
he's taken it, so she's got no love left,
not now, not forever, in her life..

Here in the tidy convent, where
everything seems polished, even the faces,
the nun kneels. Her veil hides her face; is she young or old?
She is very still. We may not know her thoughts.

Not far away, the monk is praying too; kneeling,
he's restive; from time to time, raises his head,
looks to the crucifix. We may not know his thoughts.

Here's Saint Augustine. When he was young
he was the member of a gang; did all the things
that young men spur each other on to do;
knew hot lust and passion to surge up, and fade;
then took a longtime mistress; loved her, and desired.

So when he says, we only love
if we have first been loved,
his words sound many things to us:
he's tearaway, lover, man, and monk,
teacher, perhaps; and saint.

Here in a cell in Patmos, is Saint John:
sees all things as clearly as the Grecian landscape,
the sea, the sky, blue; the tiny boats down there,

white sails matching white summer clouds:
takes his pen, writes daringly: 'God is Love'... the heavens
do not fall in upon him; only cicadas and wild herbs
sing in the silence: he sees Creation in its perfect order,
Man made by God, and in His image; so, adds,
with the certainty of which the stars and sun are made,
' We love Him, because He first loved us.'

The teenager, given time, will dry her tears;
time brings tears, and time wipes them away;
given time, she'll give her love again.
What love is, is for each to say.

'We only love, if we have first been loved.'

Michael Shepherd

! They Only Feel Real When...

'they only feel real when
pretending to be themselves...'

sometimes, psychology and poetry and philosophy
come close together; and like a dog
meeting another dog for the first time,
we're cautious – that statement has legs
and claws and teeth ... do we want to meet it,
might it be more fierce than it looks,
is it that 'too much truth' which mankind - says poor Tom -
cannot bear?

our tails quarter-wag, wag and stop,
our weight's on our back legs,
caution is advised..

we'll back away right now,
wait for the next meeting;
meanwhile, there's always the tree to sniff,
a sharp reminder of the bone we'll gnaw,
hide, dig up yet again, and gnaw...
gnawing on our own blood not the bone,
living a dog's life, a dogged life,
mongrel, thoroughbred, alike:

.

only feeling real, when
pretending to be ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

! Threats And Opportunities

Here's three cheers
for Jon Haidt, who's reminded us
in 'The Happiness Hypothesis'
that our lingering primitive selves
respond more quickly to a threat
than to an opportunity...

and thus, a more powerful emotional weapon
in the hands of politicians and journalists
and others with an axe to sharpen..
while astute moneymakers, more than the rest of us,
look always for an opportunity...

so President Bush hastens to warn us
that 'Iran remains a threat'...
and so do you, George...and
so do bananaskins, and wet leaves
on a warming sidewalk after frost...
and polar bears to garbage cans -
themselves under our human threat
from global warming...

It's a world of threats, and threats of threats...
wars and rumours of wars, as the good book says...
maybe I should stay in today...but then...
was this, then, how the West was won?
I think not...

Some say, still say, that somewhere out there
there's One who made a world
entirely of opportunities...

Meanwhile, pity politicians
in a world of spin:
if Dubbya-doh came out tomorrow
all bright-eyed and Bushy-tailed (by security men...)
and announced in upbeat tones,
'Iran remains a golden opportunity...'
we'd all turn to each other and say,

'What's he up to, then? ? '
and oil shares would fluctuate...

well, there you are... if boredom threatens at this point,
an ice-cold can of beer remains
a golden opportunity...

Michael Shepherd

! Three Persons And A Dog And Loyalty

I, you, he, she, it...
three distinct views of the world
(though perhaps not to the Creator?)
which seem so different. Which
grammarians note, and writers write about.

A father who was all mine, I thought,
waiting for a boy one day after school
who was that younger me
with a small and lively bundle of love and energy and loyalty
straining to meet this stranger, as if I'd been a friend
already all its life - yet whom he'd not yet met -
straining at a brand-new brown leather leash...
how well you remember it...

he said he'd bought it for that son, who was me
but when, a childhood ago, he had to have it put away
it was he who cried for, so mother said
only the second time in his life.
I just felt betrayed. Again.

so when they gathered at his, that's father's, funeral
thinking of things to say
that would not hurt too much to say
they said, and he loved that dog so much he cried,
for the second time in his life, Dorothy says,
we never ever saw him cry...

and you remember that day and what they said
so clearly

and though I've moved from there
they may if they remember me
say much the same of other matters about that boy
who was me. For

memory doesn't distinguish much in the past
between the living and the dead, in grammar,
why should it

and you wonder, well I do,
whether Sport in his unspoken dog-grammar
even with his eloquent tail
perhaps, sniffing at an interesting tree in the park
might not distinguish just as sharply with that wet, wise nose,
I-dog, you-dog, he, she, it-dog,

living with memory of some unspoken kind, yet
oblivious of death
or betrayal.

for Max if he likes it

Michael Shepherd

! To A God-Daughter On Her Sad Poem

Yes, we get blasé and dismissive on this site –
reading in the reams of Poemhunter posts
'yet another poem of teenage angst',
we say, scanning the raw wounds
too rough for poetry – but what else
will ease the pain?

'I thought we loved each other for ever –
how could you do this to me? ...'

we nod our older heads, remembering
just slightly, as if it doesn't really matter now,
how it was for us...

but then, who writes of happiness,
when happiness seems eternal, hope untested,
and life is to be lived?

that first heartbreak ... it seems
there has to be a first one;
a worst one; and only poetry
can begin to salve the wound..
at least you've got your poetry..

yes, reams of poems, and all much the same –
but this time, it's from someone that I know,
and that – that really hurts.. it's almost worse
than if it happened to me myself – in that
there's nothing I can say, that's not been said
a million times.. and a million times, she's said
'You just don't understand...' and of course, she's right –
it's the first time in the world, her world,
that this has ever happened...

I'll say nothing more than what I've said;
than what your parents and your sisters say; for,
how can time heal, when there's no time for time?

(and how could I dare to voice to you the thought –

your poetry will deepen when your heartbreak heals? ...)

Michael Shepherd

! To A Younger Poet

Well, thanks for asking - quite a nice surprise...
first off, you have my passionate support -
for how could I believe in any less
of poetry, its value and its power?

And I know well of you, that despite all
your youthful, quick impatience, so sharp shown
to those, the wrinkly; grey; not keen on change -
you'd like to hear our comments on your work;
yes, even to reject them, red of face...

But spare a thought for ageing minds and hearts -
like comfortable kitchen-cupboard store
in that beloved house of realised dreams
where we can now at last just be ourselves,
where favourite brands cram out the sagging shelves
with jars not opened for too many a year -
more for sentiment, than for some new cuisine;
there's not much room for untried brands, alas -

'despite the fervour with which youth may praise
the heart-wrench of those wild love-seeking days,
or praise in detail Her so unique sight
to eyes so red from passionate wild night'...

there's not much room for endless rhymes for love
now, in the store-room of our ageing hearts;
we've been there, got the Tshirt (somewhere there, and
rotting from the dazzling blue sea's salt
of love's abundance, into which we two splash-dived) :

So please excuse us if we don't pour praise -
however fine your wild and winning ways;
we're poetry-besotted; live in thought;

know this: our passionate and full support.

Michael Shepherd

! To Denis, Tara, And The Muse Of Poetry

O Muse...

I have a serious question for you
but I can't wait to put it into beautiful poetry.
I hope you understand...
Respect.

Some poets feel the need to consume
substances – liquids, solids, smokeables, injectibles...
before, during, and after the creative act
as, uh.. consciousness-enhancers ...
(there are, needless to say but I'm saying it,
those who strongly disapprove, but also,
those who call these, last defences of the immortal godself...)

I'm wondering, (and of course,
I'm fairly well versed [so to speak - a curious phrase, that]
in the slight evidence of the Dionysiac abandon
that balanced and accompanied
the ancient Apollonian disciplines...)

I'm wondering whether, you've always approved
these means of lubricating praise to You and poetry...
especially in this Iron Age, and we so far
from sparkling and nymph-haunted streams
and rocks and groves and verdant fields of sheep and goat
and shepherds writing poems to all this...

or is it that
You, knowing who your faithful worshippers truly are, and
gently sighing, allow their glorious poetry
to manifest quite irrespective of what they believe
they need to find You within their writing selves?

I'm sorta hoping that
You, who know all the arts of healing which poetry bestows,
reward these devotees of yours through thick and thin,
...through sick and sin...
with that blessing and that heavenly smile

in their pure hearts; replacing all these
Iron Age's physical protections
for the heart, the mind, the soul,
with Your pure fire,
the fire of Your immortal speech..

which looks so strange upon this printed page;
not sung aloud to Illyria's echoing rocks and hills ...

and that indeed You love them
more than they or we may ever know,

O Muse.

Michael Shepherd

! To Li Po (Li Bai) And Uriah

Dear Li Po,
strange things happen to poets
during their life,
especially those who like wine.

But now, more than a thousand years
after your suicide,
men have named a crater on
the planet Mercury with your name...
Mercury, the planet the Greeks called
Hermes Apollo, messenger of gods and poets;
the shining one;

although men have not been there yet.
When they do, they may find you
sitting in your crater, watching the Moon
(we think it will appear to you
two times a day instead of once...)
and drinking wine with Uriah;
(and your shadows will be there too,
tall on the crater's slope...)
you're teaching him Chinese;
he's translating your poems into English
with your approval.

He'd like that. We hope you would.
A strange place for immortals to drink wine;
but poets do and say strange things;
that's why we love them, just as
children love surprises,
dear Li Po.

Michael Shepherd

! To My Valentine

I always think of you

when I smile

Michael Shepherd

! To Omar Khayyam

Omar – (do I need to insist
that's the poet, not the terrorist?) –

when I was young and life was frantic
I found your poetry romantic –

a loaf of bread, a jug of wine,
and that non-gender-specific Thou,
about whom, scholars gracefully decline..

but now I've weathered the twentieth century
with perhaps a touch of grace

I'm equally content, and grateful too –
chewing on my baguette of chorizo,
the screw-top wine beside me,

in this battered caravan park
where immigrant children play
and TVs flicker in the dark
bringing desert headlines by night and day;

so, not oblivious to fate's deals
and dust beneath the trailer wheels..

Michael Shepherd

! To The Spirits Of Abn 'Arabi, Poet, And Averroes, Philosopher

The philosopher asked the poet,

Does what the poets and the mystics
find in their hearts, agree
with what the philosophers have discovered
or reasoned to be true?

The poet answered

Yes, and No

and between the two
is a place, a space, where
the mouth is silent,
the pen hovers poised above the paper,
the eyes sparkle,
the heart leaps and rejoices,
and the mind soars on journeys
beyond anything that was known before
and lives experiences never before experienced;
finds words behind words
that were never spoken before,
sounds behind sounds
never heard before,
a knowledge beyond love,
a love beyond knowledge..

a place where poets and philosophers
meet together in a world of wonder.

Michael Shepherd

! To William Blake, Poet, At Christmas

Through the tears
soon breaks a smile;
See God's Grace
here in a Child.

Eyes washed clear,
the Soul shines bright;
eyes washed clean,
the World's Delight.

Michael Shepherd

! To William Carlos Williams, Sorta

I would talk to you
of shadows cast by street lights;
but not so much in words

rather, take a walk with you,
say, this is a street I know well,
may we walk together?

not to influence or be insistent,
but rather, see this, and this, so
let's pause a while here,

perhaps just for a comma, or a space, or
the setting out upon the page,
a walk together,

a poem as a guiding of the reader
in the experience of the poem
I'd like to share,

not as insistence but rather
see it as loving care
as one would unwrap

some treasured heirloom
from its silk wrapping – this
I care for, you should know

and perhaps, as we walk together
through the experience of the poem
there'll grow, a friendly trust

of imagination shared;
and like old friends, we can then talk
of anything, of everything.

Michael Shepherd

! To, For, About, Because Of, Spike Milligan

Spike, we talked of you today.
You'll have to live with that now, I guess -
it seems that everyone has
a place in their hearts for you.
So, like a heap of 'floral tributes',
they're all individual, but
it makes a very great pile

For myself, it's that look on your face
that stays – as if you found life just so great a thing
that it stupefied you, wondering
how to confront it – whether
to laugh at it or cry for it
(both of which you did so well,
that perhaps it didn't help you much
to decide between, so, lucky us, we got both by turns..)
and on your face, that quizzical appeal
to the rest of us, to help you to decide
how to confront life...or sometimes, should we even try? ..

When you see, in theatre foyers,
those two masks of tragedy and comedy,
it could say underneath –
'To Spike Milligan, who knew both'
and perhaps people would notice them more and think.

And though you laughed and cried
at our mortality like
a philosopher who was also
a stand-up performer with tears of absurdity in his eyes,
it seems we've decided that
despite how you may be feeling now,
we've decided in our mortality
that you're immortal.

I guess
you'll just have to live with that.

! Tolstoy On Love

Love is life. Life is love.
Everything I understand,
I understand only because
I love.

Everything is,
everything exists
only because
I love.

Everything is united by
love alone.

Love is God
and to die means
that I, a particle of love,
shall return to Love itself, whole and complete,
the eternal source of Love itself.

Michael Shepherd

! Tony Hoagland

and yes even the photo
on the back cover
as if he'd gone to the studio,
said, I've written this book
of seriously funnily serious verse so
make me into a randy curate
in a dropped-trouser farce
or OK like a real cleric then
looking sideways over his spectacles
as he drops a wicked line in his sermon
and the packed front pews of ladies
of a certain uncertain age
quiver with a well-dressed lust,
and yes, highlight my bald dome,
I liked the Dr Doolittle stories didn't you,

and that hair like a classroom demo
of iron filings standing to attention on
a ball magnet, or if we're trying
to match his humour, you noticed then,
since this is a covert fan-letter disguised
as a don't miss - his hair peeping over the dome
like that moment in a film when
a double-page spread of Indians suddenly
appear over the brow of the wide-screen hill

while inside the book, just as you laugh at the wit
he's moved on to serious, and the tears of things

and you think this is how to be
American and triumph over being

me I'd just like to go up after a reading
and sincere sincere and straightfaced fan-style
say to him, when I read you hear you
I wonder if poets aren't the how shall I
put it, unacknowledged legislators of
mankind if you see what I mean...?

and we'd do as many double-takes
as it takes because
to him, I'd mean it.

How close laughter can be to tears.

Michael Shepherd

! Travelling With Robert Frost

Everyone but poets
(who have their own allegiances)
would acknowledge it – you were, and I guess still are,
the most famous and popular poet of
the 20th century – to Americans at least;

though since we're now into the 21st century,
it's appropriate that you're being pushed hard, even overtaken,
at least in the charts here on
by the Afro-American and Spanish-American poets;

and your 'The Road Not Taken' is
currently lying around fifth place
to the favourite poems of
those guys

it must be the most inappropriate poem title ever given
since you don't tell us anything about
the road you didn't take – and come to think of it
not much about the road you did take –
except – and that's so 'you' – that it
'has made all the difference' –
without telling us what that difference was or is...

but then, that's you:
prose doesn't appreciate much, if any
ambiguity; but it's the stock-in-trade
of poetry, where – as it's fashionable to say –
the reader re-writes the poem for themselves;
and ambiguity is certainly your thoughty-forte...

OK the first line then, since
we're on this road together (whichever) :
like Dante, you're discovered in the middle of
a dense wood; though (unusually in woods
except those planted for cutting)
there's some kinda crossroads there;
though of course that's a neat Dantean metaphor too..

and it's yellow, which means autumn/Fall, most spectacular
in the New England area – how easy to forget
that you lived your first eleven years
in San Francisco – and wrote this poem
in Old England, not the New; and before
you became the famous you..

As for the second stanza, Mister Ambiguous –
there's just a sneaky feeling that
it was the obligation to rhyme that
makes you imply, that you were adventurous, but
there wasn't really much to choose between them...

and right to the end of this famous poem
you leave us with this ambiguity:
sticking onto the road 'less travelled' the little word
'by' – hinting that both roads get you to much
the same place in the end...
then tell us that that 'has made
all the difference'...like, uh?

so there you are – that's poetry:
scholars, academics, pull it to bits
to find out what makes it tick—
whether it's a heart, or just wind-up clockwork –

yet out there where people just read poems
to aid their deepest lives -
deep in the springtime thicket of their life
or even later, in the yellow wood –
out there, in there, hesitating at the crossroads
looking for some sign; knowing deep inside
that 'way leads on to way' –
this is the poem which for so many
their life's heart has lived with.
And that is how it is.

Michael Shepherd

! Txtng U Phers...

IMHO -

& jst FWIW -

u my thnk ths pm a slly 1

or u my brk out in mrth -

bt if u're LOL

thn, at th nd o th dy (ATEOTD)

thts wht it's all abt (TWIAA)

- if u'll prdn my clché...

Michael Shepherd

! U N I C O R N 1 5

and though there are places, times,
when you are most likely to find it
there in your heart,
there in front of your eyes –

the mossy glade within the woods,
the sunlight filtering through the trees,
or in the pure air of the highest hills,
or among the tossing white-topped waves –

or at the quiet times –
as the dawn sunlight makes the world anew,
plays to make diamonds of the dew,
or as the peace of dusk descends,
carrying a silent blessing –

the places and the times
when you're most ready in yourself to meet it –

yet it can appear to you at any time or place –
the crowds, the rush, the noise
cannot disturb it
if it wishes to be seen by you

and afterwards, you'll remember,
know just why it happened to be then and there;
and what it told you, all about yourself;

when it's there, although we call it 'white',
it's more than white – almost transparent,
almost like a living crystal sculpture of itself,
almost silver; somewhere where substances and colours
are first made, and meet each other;

it may look at you, with eyes that seem to know everything
and find everything, peaceful, loving, beautiful and reasonable;
or it may not look at you; but still
it talks with you with its very presence;
you know that's so, because

you find yourself speaking to it in the same way,
opening your heart to it, because
it listens to you; it's there just listening;
its listening is understanding;

and afterwards, the 'afterwards' is changed for ever;
as if you've met yourself, and find that good;
the world is yours, and possibilities
are boundless; and the unicorn
does not need your eyes - it makes its home
there in your heart
as if it had never been away.

Michael Shepherd

! Unbound Lyric, For Shirley Who Said So

Bonding, but not binding...
now, there's true love, for you...
fondly done by finding
what joins you for true...

bonding, but not binding...
free to fly in space,
space to face together,
no limits to that place...

bonding but not binding...
these words mean what they say –
trust is just a must for friends, for
love grows strong that way...

Michael Shepherd

! Unmethodical Discourse At A Café Table

By the flickering candlelight
of the long evenings,
inimical to study so they said

they played this game
to while away the time
between learning and authority

in that Jesuit college
in the early 1600s:

blindfolded or simply shut-eye and don't cheat
you turn the pages of the Latin dictionary at random
and stick a pin, in turn, upon a random word;

the first to make a sentence
in the fewest rounds, the fewest words, wins
a prize of choice..

we do not know the prize
(among those severe, repressed, ambitious
boys, perhaps it's just as well...)
or what the others drew;

but this we know: that night
René pricked a first word – 'sum' – ah! -
promising! a verb was useful, in this game—

the second round... he pricked on 'ergo'...
that swift mind already playing the tables
of his agile mind...

the air was tense; they'd remember
this night, this flickering light,
forever in their future lives...

a hush (how boys fight to win
more fiercely than Christ's soldiers,
whom they would become...)

'Cogito'! A shout of triumph
from our René – and the rest
is history – alas..

It's said the Devil enters in
at the third stroke; and so it was:

in three words, a lifetime's career
as the greatest of divines
in an age of awe for the divine

were lost to mere – philosophy...
the age of Clairvaux, Cluny, Chartres
for all too brief a moment,
saw the vision of a glorious revival; but...

triumphantly, our René shouts
'Á moi, c'est la conquête! Le jeu d'esprit á moi! '
(impeccable Racinian hexameter, naturellement..) –

alas for human vanity! The gods were whispering
'Sum, ergo cogito! ' in his spiritual ear – but no –
his chose mankind's so vain conceit

and launched a thousand thousand
café tables on the pavement; seated there
in black, with scarf and beret, sunglasses,

in a cloud of choking gitane and gauloise smoke,
centuries of self-satisfied philosophes,
believing 'cogito, ergo sum': that they are their thought; born
as true Frenchmen, to be world thinkers, Rodin-like; and
that because they think, they are... somebody...

oh René, what a fall was there...

Michael Shepherd

! Victimisation As Threat And Control

She's the village's Force For Good –
or that's the flag she sails under;
news of distant earthquakes, floods,
famines, ethnic or other massacres
are her stoke-up calls...
she'll soon be knocking at your door,
or coming up to speak to you at the WI
or after church...

knowing that you know she knows
you know the details of just how fortunate
she thinks herself, to have survived
that terrible childhood (details vague) :
so by extension, you should know yourself, and show yourself,
fortunate too... by giving to the latest cause...

Have her in for drinks, and her roving eye
will spot that electric towel rail you don't now use
which would be just the thing which would alleviate
the widow Smith... Though, should that widow Smith
dare to grumble to her – and she'd sharply (with a smile)
remind her, aren't we lucky, dear, we've got
the Social Services here, while they, poor things...

How she delights in, praises, our new outfits
which we bought last week in town!
We don't need to be told what follows
as the night the day – we should have
a still-smart something to pass on to her...
though I've yet to see an African
caught on TV wearing my old Top Shop number...

Sometimes, husbands take the mickey..
'How is it that now we no longer hear
about the Burmese tragedy, Martha, now
the orphans of Darfur are in the news? '...and
in private, joke to us about calling in Miss Marple
to root out the village emotional blackmailer...

The one house in the village and the largest
is the one she least often calls upon,
and that only in the afternoon
when the housekeeper's in, but the owner's
still at work: Alan was a kid to five adoptive families,
three of whom were good... now he's the owner
of a large industrial firm whose workers love him...
At their first meeting, when she tried
her own pathetic story, his curt
'Oh get over it..' has sealed their subsequent relationship...

Somehow, I've never warmed to her
since that first visit, when she stood
dead-heading the geraniums around the door
while exchanging pleasantries...
and left me steeped in self-reproach
and communal inadequacy...

Chaucer, with his perceptive and discerning eye
would have spotted this Martha of the many causes...
'Methinks she has the more concern
for Mercie's name, than for the human soul...'

*

He's the spokesman for his faith – although
faith is a word that seldom elevates his speech;
perceived injustice is his line: it's rather, our bad faith;
a speech about immigrants by one authority,
made only a day before
the figures of illegals published by another...
conspiracy against his community is his suspicion
(while his community just get on with it...)

extreme cynics who know their extremist radicals
deconstruct his subtext to be saying,
we're only a poor community, but
we wire up terror like the best –
you have been warned..

and we, the tolerant and good-hearted,
forbear from that sharp riposte

which would have him foaming at the mike...
if you feel so badly picked upon, so disapprove
of your adopted country and its morals,
that you desire to meddle in its politics and laws –
then why not return to the country you were born in,
whose messy state, you and yours have failed to deal with...?
Of course, he can't, because it's just too dangerous...
Back hopme, they're just him, but on the 'other' side...

Oh perfidious Albion! Have you forgotten
your imperialist and sharply-ordered past?
The guilt of centuries lies heavy on thy heart –

well, at least as far back, as the Danish invasions
of massacre, rape and loot; the marauding Jutes before them,
the migrating Saxons before that; and the Roman soldiers,
law-givers and architects and builders, before them...?

Yes, it's time for an Emotional Blackmail Studies
Department in the local Poly... there should be
no lack of smiling lecturers, to remind us
how fortunate you are, mate, to be educated...

I'm thinking of applying
for a lecturer's post, myself...
wait til the appointments board
hear my personal cv of injustice done,
childhood without care or opportunity,
the bruises bravely borne...
a triumph of self-education out of the gutter...
and if they turn me down...
well, they know what's coming to them...

Michael Shepherd

! Washedaye's Metaphysikale. For Tara.

Myne mynde to me a tumbledryere ysse,
where muste I watche my scrumpled, worn-oute thoughtes
seeke their redemptione in Hys watere's grace;
thynkes-bubbles that do forme and burste in ayre,
thysse mynde's so constant turmoyle withouten cease;

O maye I humble sitte and contemplayte
the roundel windowe of drye thoughte contained
and I, the watchere of myne turbulence,
Thy watchere aye; 'til time and change begone.

Michael Shepherd

! Watching The British Play Tennis...

and I'm more than ever now, convinced
the British have a subconscious urge
to prove to the world that a good game
that everyone enjoys, sitting forward in their seat,
is more important than who wins..
we do this just so well

I wonder if it's much the same with war

Michael Shepherd

! 'We Read The World Wrong...'...Worse Than That...

Yes – we read the world wrong,
and say that it deceives us,
said Tagore...

just imagine, if the snake said,
you can't see me... no, I'm just
a stick of rotting wood,
a length of old rope thrown away,
mouldering in the undergrowth...

or the rope said, I'm reborn!
I'm now a snake, I've risen in intelligence
and consciousness – watch out, all those
who treated me so harshly as a rope...

or the shell said, how beautiful I am!
I'm mirrored all like silver;
once I was a humble shell,
content to be myself; now -
how precious now I am!

Or the silver coin said,
I'll hide here in the sand
and look like mother-of-pearl, nacreous,
and wait to give myself
to some delighted beggar...
how virtuous I am; and how
rewarded I shall be!

no, Nature, prakriti, has never learned
from Man, how to deceive...

ah, but mankind... how we deceive
our mother, Nature... we promised her
we would look after her in her old age...
but all we did was steal her wealth,
cast her into a filthy wilderness,
pretend to others that
she never was of our family

but an untouchable who works for us...

oh Rabindranath, what would you think
of the behaviour of your grand-children...

oh Rabindranath, you never guessed
how we've deceived our world...

Michael Shepherd

! We The Unforgiving

and we'll never quite forgive our parents
for being our parents

and we'll never never forgive that one
we thought our best friend
for stopping being our friend without
an explanation or anything

and we'll never ever forgive our first lover
our first for heaven's sake
for dumping us and ruining our whole life

and we'll never quite forgive -
no, let's not go there; that's
too close to home...

and we'll never forgive God for,
oh everything, if we knew
how to not forgive God

and secretly we'll never forgive ourselves
for all the things we wish we hadn't done
although of course we deserve to be forgiven
for it wasn't really our fault was it..

how could we forgive ourselves, when there's that
that dark figure lurking behind us saying
don't you dare forgive yourself,
you ungrateful little...

and if you forgave everyone, you wouldn't
know who you were... it's not
as easy as that, oh no

oh yes it is. oh yes it is.

Michael Shepherd

! Welcome To My Casting Couch, But Read The Small Print First

Where is the one
I used to love so passionately –
and who, I thought,
loved me so passionately too...?

good question..

Two hot, cool chicks,
Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Walster,
told me that...
(OK, 'Interpersonal attraction',
Freeman, NY,1978 – that's
even before your parents knew...)

that we should distinguish carefully
between passionate love
that's too hhot-t-t... not to grow cold...
and companionate (the slippered) love...

Give it six months they say.
And if you're still on speaking terms,
come back and tell us what you've found...

So goodbye, dear, and Amen...
here's hoping we'll think, now and then...
it could be for keeps...

and perhaps the perfect gift,
the romantic film, the bottle,
nose candy or the pills,
the getaway, just-each-other holiday,
white sand, sun, palm trees at
a brochure's distance -

and the whole damn cycle could
start all over again...
but... you cutest butt...:

come live with me and be my love,
and wrong, we'll all researchers prove...

Michael Shepherd

! What A Wild Wind Today

What a wild wind today
in Wimbledon Park,
80 mph they say,
mischievous, shameless,
wild child, it cannot distinguish
between fun and destruction

here in the park
it does what it can with the boating lake;
but the ripples are barely waves,
and the boat club has wisely shored its boats,
no fun to be had there

but wait – here's a woman with a covered pram
walking along the path beside the lake...
the crafty wind dies down, then
one huge gust – whew, that was a near one,
she'll remember that next time..

now it's spotted three laughing nuns – what fun!
it tries to lift their skirts – it knows no shame
in its innocent fun; it would most like
to turn them into whirling, spinning dervishes in black;

instead, it catches their veils, as they, laughing
as if they are being teased by their own sweet Lord,
as Krishna (would they know) by milkmaids -
turn this way and that to avoid it;
they look like startled magpies, now like
laundry on the convent clothes-line;
it would love to make them into
divine helicopters

now it's looking round the sports field;
the cricket ball's too heavy, no fun there;
it does its best to be twelfth man
in a soccer game, but lacks the patience
to do more than bend it to the goal; it hasn't learnt
to pass, dribble, stepover, show off..

but now it spots the tennis courts and
uses all its thwarted bowler's skill
to turn the service and return
to swing this way and that;
the teenage boy, eyes sparkling,
joins it in the fun, a double act,
wins point after point in this windy game;
a few scarved spectators cheer on his skill.

the wind is nature's free testing kit;
it tries every tall tree in the park
to test their roots; and they perhaps
sending a fast intelligence from branch to root,
become a little stronger if they do not fall..

now it's moving on to test the works of man –
no need to pay consultants' fees
to check your roof tiles; the wind will do this
more thoroughly and for free..

and now it's spotted laundry on the line
in the back garden – here's its chance
to play at being a human being!
it loves most of all, men's shirts –
fills their arms like sumo wrestlers,
hunches overblown backs
like a row of fat men bending over food

and now the sun comes out –
the wind is suddenly subdued
as if its master had just entered the cosmic room;
and I'm suddenly full of joy, as if
I had never known until now
that they might love each other, sun and wind,
for some reason which includes us all

Michael Shepherd

! What Is A Poem? (From The Chinese)

The poet, bent over the paper, ink-brush in hand,
carefully defining poetry for his pupils
did not see the first stork of the Spring
in the limitless blue sky,
a new poem in its beak

Michael Shepherd

! What We See As...

What we see as nouns
are verbs to God...

see the water in this glass –
clear and still;

taste the water in this glass –
its sweet taste with no taste..

watch the Spring rain;
smell the earth give thanks

see the washing blowing on the line
smelling happy to be clean

see the mighty river, fierce
to reach the sea

watch the evening sea-fog roll in over the bay;
see the city washed afresh in the morning sun;

look up to the glorious theatre of clouds,
obeying water's laws for all to watch;

know what mercy is; how it descends – appears,
as the gentle rain from heaven within;

what we see as nouns
are verbs to God

Michael Shepherd

! Where Poems Grow

I love poems that grow
out of themselves
out of nowhere really

like an empty window-box
you've cleared, but haven't
any plans for and one day

some seed from
some bird and
some meal
somewhere

settles in and look
yellow courgette flowers
sprawling delicately
all over the garden path

poems that grow from
a random glance
like someone gives you
a useless present and
it asks to be told its story

poems that grow from that
patch of waiting soil
in the heart saying
there's always something
to surprise, to please when
there's earth and water
there,
and warmth.

Michael Shepherd

! Where Sexy Meets Demure In A Place Called Trim

In the seat opposite in the underground
in the off-peak afternoon,
neat shoes, nice legs, skirt just the exact right length
where demure meets sexy in a place called trim;

well-chosen outfit; wasn't her face
vaguely familiar in some other context?
Had we met, in Tahiti, Cuba, Necker Island,
or on some other sandy shore?
Met, yet not spoken? She offered me no clue..

Ah yes – for several years,
come January grey but promise of a summer sun,
the TV infomercials fill our screens
with this year's new holiday destinations
for the single girl who's demure to sexy,
late thirties, but still trim.. writing her own script
but with all the real life edited out..

How often had we seen her on a sunny beach,
her swimsuit just where sexy meets demure in trim,
about to enter a blue blue sea
with no-one else about...
such the conventions of the travel film,
she too often in the shot...

or at the table, glowing in her evening outfit,
bronzed, relaxed; but still alone;
filling us in with details and the sights to see
over the lavish fruit cup on the table
before the smiling waiter brings the laden plate -
after the waterfall where we'd seen her laughing,
the market where she'd handled exotic fruit,
the boat ride, she in the stern, her hair blown back.. or
riding in safe open car through crowds of exotic natives?

did she choose her invisible cameraman on these trips?
Were they an item? Or did his compensation
begin with the local talent when he put his camera down?

Did she queue at airports, fluster over overcharging,
wait for days for thunderclouds to clear?
Arise dishevelled from an ill-advised fling with a local,
which remained unspoken as the background
to travel for the single girl?

Sitting there, ex-travel correspondent, professional,
dressed where sexy meets demure in trim,
the camera and the sound were off; she
did not meet my eyes; but if I'd had
a travel brochure with me, I could have played
a merry game with her across the way..
What a joyous disaster film her memories could have made,
what a chance the infomercials cannot take...

Michael Shepherd

! Who Can Weigh Love?

Light. Lightness. Light-heartedness.
Who can measure their measureless weight?

On the kitchen scales, we balance
weight against weight; but how different
the substances - on the one scale,
iron weights with their iron discipline
maintain like monks and nuns their constancy;

on the other scale, perhaps fine flour,
poured as bakers recommend, from a height
to catch the air between the grains; a foretaste
of that greater levity that yeast will bring;

Lorenzo de' Medici, praising publicly his tutor,
Marsilio Ficino, said of him, that one thing in him which he loved
was that in his speech, gravity was mixed with levity,
and levity, with gravity;

what then, of our substance? In the lightness
of our being, then how bright the light! And in
the dark and heavy days, what lightness of the light may lurk
in melancholia – a yeast of wisdom yet to act?

And then – there's love...its golden weightiness
so full of light; and hammered out and spread,
the brighter then...oh, who can measure out
the lightness, brightness, of our joy? What golden scales
of justice, mercy, grace,
may weigh the shining of a shining face?

Michael Shepherd

! Why I Call My Teddy Bear Jesus

I've got a cuddly teddy bear,
Jesus is his name.
I wondered what to call him;
and then the answer came:

My Mom and Dad have told me
that he's the friend who frees us,
and loves us, keeps us out of sin;
that's why my bear's called Jesus.

Michael Shepherd

! Wild Bees, Lost Souls

The bees, this year,
have come before the swallows dare
and take the wings of April
inadvisedly;

ignoring the cloud of jasmine around the open door,
incurious, it seems, about the front garden's offerings,
they swoop into the house,
take a left turn where the corridor gets darker,
and land up in the front room; where
they swoop again, then like lost souls
start for here and there, change flight-plan,
and end up nosing uselessly against the window
which doesn't open; crawl a bit; and
surprisingly soon, fall down, on their backs,
legs folded in some final surrender
just enough like a human being, to chill...

I take the kitchen strainer
since it's larger than a jam-jar, reaches further,
dab a touch of first-aid honey on the rim,
persuade them to settle on its promise,
and whisk them off to the front door,
tap them into freedom.

I thought that bees were focussed, busy, pretty bright,
with radar, iPods, mobile/ cell-phones all built in;
this year, they're aimless as illegal immigrants
hoping to exist, but not to work..
surely even wild bees have a sense of home?
'Go back where you came from...' I yell at them
like some nationalist speaker at a rally...
there is now no Limbo for these lost souls, it seems;
bees, who through the centuries
were said to have close links to human souls...
it's puzzling, disturbing, too close for comfort,
or for ignoring.

! William Wordsworth Hits The West Coast

I wandered lonely as a cloud
o'er California's rocky coast
and fields of melons, oversized,
and Baywatch babes to match;

Earth hath not anything to show more fair
than oiled and suntanned blondes with shampooed hair.

Michael Shepherd

! Wisdom

and they behave like children –
always themselves, and always natural,
all they do is natural;
they seem to be as expert untaught children;
and yet, they are not childish,
nor like novices;
appear to be accomplished; yet
not weighty; wisdom
not a burden or a badge to them;
nor the severity of teachers;
but question them, they answer, sweetly;
loving them, we love ourselves the more;

they are bright, in every way;
light – like dancers on the stage,
their simplicity
lovely to the sight; they live simply,
as if things they need
just come to them;
living without anything attached to life
because they love to live in freedom,
love to live as limitless;
like swans, like lotus flowers,
they float on the lake
of their own stillness;

no single thing
attracts them, yet
every thing around them shines;
shines of itself, as if it shines for them;

and when they speak, you hear -
the sound that shining makes.

Michael Shepherd

! Wisely Love The Wise

The wise love wisely.

It's said, that when the truly wise
surface from their sleep,
they see nought but heavenly blue
in which the world then gently, slowly shapes itself
as if this whole created world were but
a single act of love; and within that love,
their love is wisdom, knowledge, law;
as they emerge from their wise sleep,
this is what they are.

The wise love wisely; when they look at you,
(you who maybe meet them for
the first time; offer them perhaps
a flower from too hot a hand,
a fruit, a handkerchief...
or meet them by some heavenly accident,
they, like a comet through your life)

and their first so wise glance at you
sees nought but your perfection;
they do not doubt that you are they,
that they are you; and while they're here
you share all this with them;
you've met yourself; for this
is what you are..

The wise are careful lovers
for love is care, and care is charity;
and yet the wise are widest, wildest,
most romantic lovers:
they throw, they strew their love
on all and every one and thing without a further thought,
offering simply, lawful freedom, happiness;
bidding love well as it flies away,
wishing you themselves;
wishing you, yourself;

The wise love wisely;
for they know the secret law of love:
the more it's given, the more there is
to give.

The wise love wisely;
so, they wear a wise disguise;
they look like you and me; because
we are that same disguise.

Michael Shepherd

! Withitness

Some people love the experimental in poetry
Poetry, in the experimental, love some people
Love poetry, experimental people. Some
Lovesome

Challenging all preconceptions
Preconceptions all challenging...
Preconceptions challenging all
All-challenging

Playing with outmoded language
Language playing outmoded
With playing language
Language-playing

But with an implicit social critique
Critique but social
An implicit but
Critique-implicit

In the spirit of post modern irony
Irony modern in spirit
Spirit in modern
Post-irony

Look Ma I can stand on my head
Stand Ma on head
Stand on my Ma I can
Can-head

All-challenging language-playing
Post-irony
Critique-implicit
Lovesome?

Michael Shepherd

! Woman On The Underground

Nondescript – her clothes say nothing
except perhaps, 'neatish'; hair – just there..
certainly quiet; not hiding behind a book
or newspaper; nice eyes, though;
she's nearly your age; maybe more...
and yet – surely, you've seen that face
somewhere before?

What an incredible memory we have
for faces – like, the managing director
of some store firm which you've never used,
seen profiled once on the business pages
which you never usually read...

You stare discreetly at her, as if
you want her to reveal herself some way –
a sorta condensed silent biodata...

Then it all comes back. Her name?

No that still escapes you..

but it all comes back:

small parts, years ago, on the West End stage;

housemaids; faithful retainer in some famous

Shakespeare with those two stars;

A housekeeper in Ibsen, was it?

The one you missed? Then came TV; her nondescript, not unpleasant but not
memorable face, has served her well,

unlike those who always play themselves; she played

a Queen Victoria with an inner dignity,

a fierce integrity barely hinted at, but there;

not one of the famous ones; but unforgettable.

And then - oh, of course - that famous Scottish serial;
she, the caring housekeeper..

And now she's equal star (un-interviewed;

I guess that's quite deliberate; a true professional)

of a slightly overplayed, farcical comedy serial

so successful that they put on old repeats

every Christmas and at New Year..

She's been, in fact, a feature of your viewing life right through; she inhabits all her roles in such a way that – you care; as if she were somehow, family..

And now you want to catch her eye; and in some way (embarrassing - you still can't remember her name or all the roles she played...) but in some way (how can you do this privately in the public underground, she'd hate you for it..) somehow say do you know how much pleasure, no, not only pleasure, offered us an insight into many inner lives of great and humble human beings.. almost everyone in this carriage has been enriched by you, did you know that? ..

Maybe, if she leaves first, you'll catch her eye as she gets up, and with a 'meaning' glance imply, knew who you were, but respected your modest anonymity; (how well you play anonymous Miss Nobody!) - no need to recall your own most celebrated role, you and I go further back than that... or maybe I'll leave first; but I'll do the same..

and I left first; as I got up, tried to hypnotise a glance from her; but no; I did not even figure way down on the cast-list of this play of the moment..

Then, some fan-letter, perhaps? 'You won't know me, but I was the man who sat opposite you, yesterday, remembering...'
Oh forget it. But what a life a dedicated actor leads - when they're in work...not many parts for ageing actresses these days; bless her, and her nondescript, rich, unforgettable, life-enhancing brilliance.

Michael Shepherd

! Words Mean - What They Do

We throw them to the winds;
like water from a shower;
what wind? what shower? and who throws them to whom?

In 1996, John Bargh, with scrupulous research,
found that, hearing words about the elderly –
even when flashed subliminally on the screen –
makes us walk more slowly...you kidding? No...

and in 1998, Dijksterhuis and Van Knippenberg
showed that if we hear words about 'professors'
we're smarter playing Trivial Pursuits;

while hearing words about sports hooligans
makes us dumber...

and this without referring to the images and sounds
of crime, guns, killing, and computer games...
ah well, we identify with those glamorous criminals
and then are shown that justice always prevails –
er, doesn't it? ...but what of those satisfying PC games
where, zap! we always gun them down...
oh, it's all harmless play; like Shakespeare's gods,
'we kill them for our sport'...

words mean what they do;
science has warned us when all else has failed.
Good mortals all, be of fine heart, and hale...

Michael Shepherd

! Wordsworth A Fortune

I wonder if Wordsworth
noticed that if he stood
very still, aware of his body
from his toes up to his head

and looked at the host of
nodding daffodils, then the daffodils
disappear into the sense
of presence as if
they were he and he they

I hope he did

cos if he had to walk home
to recollect his emotion
in tranquillity instead
of standing in it
out there on perhaps a wet day

then he'd missed something i.e.
emotion in tranquillity recollected

Not to mention surrendering
the feeling he'd lost
something since his boyhood.

Try it yourself, it might
save a lot of walking and
trying the view from over there
instead of here

and now.

[Yes, Eckhart Tolle, it's thanks to you again...]

Michael Shepherd

! World's Oldest Political Statement

(said to have been found on a Sumerian clay tablet)

'I, of course, would never
have sanctioned this,
had I known about it...

Right now, I'm looking
for a fall guy
who didn't carry
a voice recorder..'

Michael Shepherd

! Yee Haw! A Country And Worse-Than Lyric

When I was a-dyin', lyin' on the sidewalk,
head split, blood 'n brains a-runnin' down the drain,
my life flashed backwards in my mind, just like they sez it does;
the dog came to life again; she came runnin' back;
the more I hit the liquor, the more the bottles filled;
laffed myself to death I did; laffin' like a drain...

Michael Shepherd

! You Couldn'T Make It Up...

Morning newspapers exist
to bring us spluttering outrage
at the breakfast table, Soggies
splattered over our office gear...

but sometimes they have it
handed to them on a plate...

our finest universities,
concerned at the drop-out rate
of students who just can't cut it
(or perhaps, cut it just too much...)

are considering in their donnish wisdom
whether to postpone essential lectures
to the afternoon... and this
will dropp the drop-out rate? ...

the afternoons - when healthy students
take their exercise outdoors,
budding actors have rehearsals,
libraries are visited,
clubbers wake to check their evening's gear...
and those precious foreign students
who pay for their tuition, wonder if they'd
have done better just to stay at home...

somehow, this problem never arose
when college gates were locked at midnight;
but then was then and now is now...
fortunately, it won't affect
the research for my doctorate
in Youth Culture Studies...

Michael Shepherd

! 'You Have A New Comment About Your Poem...'

'What is the purpose of poetry? [Candidates will be awarded up to 80% of the total marks for this paper on the answer to this question. Write on one side of the paper only but with both frontal lobes; hearts may be used in answers to this question.]'

After the two hours is up, hand in a blank sheet; the examiner may sigh and smile.

Some sages say - those not affected by some academic status to uphold - (that pause, that look, which indicates, it's not as simple as all that...) - that it's the oldest-fashioned thing, to melt the heart...

but today I'd say, well yes and no - more like a key you turn and - whoosh! - there cascades out, all that's in their heart, all the vast all which they have to give; and you stand aside, stunned and humble; such a small key; such a vast world is there.

Michael Shepherd

! Zeke Snirer, Poetry Critic

Zeke Snirer.

he's young. ish.

he's got something to offer the world:

he's the best judge of poetry. ever.

this is his sincere opinion.

so he's obliged to tell you. often.

in case you missed it.

he'll take on any other poet.

invited or not.

especially celebrated ones.

he'll even interrupt their own poetry readings

tell them how bad they are

and offer to read his own poems

to prove to the audience

what poetry should be.

he'll grade Shakespeare's sonnets

and tell you the very few

which are nearly as good as his own -

perhaps, just perhaps, better in some ways

though of course not in others

if he were interested,

he would grade you Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed,

and himself,

if he got into that line of business.

he's a great spectator sport -

you can read him now on the internet -

if you like that sort of thing

and if you're not one of his punchbags

for he's like a boxer who announces a title fight

(to which he's not entitled)

against a heavyweight opponent

(whom he hasn't actually invited) :

then in the ring, it's him

and a punchbag with his opponent's name on it,

he hits it for a round or two,

claims a knock-out,
awards himself the title.
and afterwards says the other guy's a coward
for not being there in person..

Bur does his abrasive whizz-kid act
aid poetry itself? does it shatter
the undeserved reputation,
the accepted status of the famed,
the thoughtless infill of the poetry
that sounds like poetry, but is no more than that?
a fresh breeze blowing through
the stale and dusty air of the pedant's library
in the Creative Writing staffroom of the University of Academe?

or would a poet who believed completely in himself
be content just to offer us his finest poetry,
and let us recognise it for ourselves;
and put aside this damning of all others?
even if he tells us quietly (as Shnirer does)
that 'we' will be reading him above all else
in five hundred years of poetry?

I wonder – deep inside this combative assailant,
Defender of the Faith and of the Muse,
is he so devoted to poetry
that he just can't bear
anything to be written that falls short
of what he thinks is worthy of the Muse?

or does he really hate poetry
for allowing others to partake of it?

whichever it is, he's not in doubt
that he'd be the best judge of that, and
you better believe it.

Michael Shepherd

! Zero Self-Esteem, Zero Self-Valuation

your life's a mess.
you're a mess.
oh forget the details.
a mess. totally.

so who to blame?
your parents of course, like everyone else does.
they **** you up, your mum and dad.

so?

try this one.
it's Hindu, it's unprovable, but
it's a working model, if you're not into
praying for God's mercy, absolution, etc.
or you could even do that as well.
safety in numbers.

this is how it goes.
we have a succession of lives.
how you lived your last life
lays down the pattern of events (just the events)
of the life you're living;
however
and this is where the mercy comes in
because deep down, we're all perfect as constructed,
you have the power to overcome all these

just like a steeplechase course
where after the last race
you put up the hedges, ditches, fences, water hazards
to test yourself this next time,
improve your jockeying skills.

so, it all depends on you;
you got yourself into it,
so you can get yourself out of it

the bracing thing

(you want to be braced, yes?)
is that if you can see it like this, you can
stop blaming anyone, anything, else

it just could do wonders
for your self-esteem.
trust me.
I've ridden the course.

Michael Shepherd

0002 Lonely Dropped Me A Word

lonely
dropped a word to me today

said

you wrote a poem about me thanks
yesterday so
I wanted to explain myself

especially as they're discussing me right now
in academic though wobbly drawn circles

the older guys say I'm a Concept
and therefore existed
before Shakespeare found a name for me, while
the younger guys
the So-Sures and the Deriders
say I'm merely a Signifier with
an uneasy relationship
with a Signified or
if you're into that sort of abstruse joke,
a Significant Other

deep in myself
I'm One; that is,
an individual in one sense
but Everything, All One, in another theological
or philosophical or ontological sense
which feels pretty good,
a One without a Second
say the gurus

to illustrate my point
I'm writing this on the pommel of my saddle
riding the range out here where men are men
and no-one mentions that film;
Nashville on my i-pod,
Lonesome himself,
my chosen state of states,

the Iconic All-American
free as a wild mustang in the hills

though sometimes I'm just
Lonely
waiting for that ride into town and
the bar where everyone knows my name
and the barmaid says she waits for me alone
if it's the third Thursday in the month

Lonesome. Lonely. Close.
That's the West for you.
And someOne has to do the job.

* * *

(For Will the poet and Will the barber with thanks)

Michael Shepherd

0003 Reborn Metaphor

I was born to be a metaphor;
Darwin, embarrassed, did not talk of me;
I did not fit into his scheme of things; I,
knowing secrets of the tears of things,
while he used his fine mind
(which is, so obviously, beyond the physical)
to deny that world, the metaphysical..

To be a metaphor
you need to know your place;
stay around too long, you lose
that vital force; no one believes
in the unbelievable – when there's no mystery,
that's the end of metaphor for man.

Better choose a quiet place,
some corner of a foreign field
only to be found in mind,
do the necessary – a few dry leaves and sticks
to lay false trail – and the semblance of a nest; you,
a place apart..

The desert, then, was easier; Egypt understood;
the sun rose warm
on the eggshell of pure thought;
Greece, appreciative, then found a name for me;
a whole race followed in my rise;
Rome was, how to put it, unoriginal;
America called a dry town, in an arid zone, after me;
may yet know me, nested in my cruellest magnificence,
ash and twisted steel and concrete, office equipment;
I a metaphor, awaiting a new birth.

Michael Shepherd

0003 Similes, Metaphors And Stuff (2)

Isn't it strange, this thing called
Poetry – and even stranger, these things
called similes and metaphors, which are
the very essence of what poetry
uses to try to get to us?

Look! Over there, in that field! Did you
see it?
No, what?
A hare! Never seen one before! It's
hiding in the grass now – there! It's jumped up again!
watch it bounce up and down as it runs,
must have strong hind legs,
isn't it funny? So fast, too – our dog will never catch it...

No I still didn't see it, I was watching that beautiful
perfect V-formation of wild geese against the blue sky
over there, I wonder where they came from,
where they're going? And does
their leader know and lead them, or
do they all know and they're
all on the same goosy wave-length and
they must be cleverer than us then,
how do they do that...?
You missed them, they're
out of sight now, so
we'll never know...I guess our dog
barking, set them off...

And so, our mind – that lively, scatty, playful, faithful dog,
chasing hares which catch our idling attention,
chasing wild geese which are out of reach,
barking up the wrong tree,
seeking with a wagging tail
the beautiful, elusive good;

Or, like Swami Vivekananda describes,
mind as monkey – restless, vain, vindictive,
agile, watchful, quick to move,

never quite at rest – and worse,
intoxicated, selfish, full of pride; and
worse again – cunning, drunken, angry,
inventing enemies in its divided mind –

Similes for one thing like another,
metaphors for situations which
connect in depth of mind like
crossword clues which finally
illuminate – ah yes, now I see
what it's getting at...and
we're into a world of enchantment where
the word makes all Creation one, and new...

Like parables, they take us deeper, subtly
tease the mind, and then dart round and past it
like wingers on the football field
thrilling our attention, their joyous goal
touching our heart with the adventure and
pointing it towards a boundless love;

similes, metaphors, homely proverbs, parables –
more difficult than thinking, easier than thought,

magic.

Michael Shepherd

0004 Lyric 3: Rosefall

O, what is the song this late, late rose is singing?
where will its petals fall, pale orange-yellow rose?
when shall the breeze and the rose cease laughing, dancing,
when will the raindrops bring time, and loss, and tears?

who wrote the song that the rose is singing, singing,
who painted petals on this fleeting rose?
when did the breeze discover dancing, dancing,
with roses that fade and fall in loss and time and tears?

after the rosefall, a colder breeze is blowing,
rose petals lie in drifts upon the ground;
but the breeze remembers, wintering red rose-hips, sowing
the rose's spring and singing; remembering rose's sound..

Michael Shepherd

0004 M I N D

and mind might ask,
why then are brain cells gray? Is it
because the world is just
so wonderful, that they, stunned
and amazed, cannot decide
which colour to praise first?
(Mix all the colours of the paints,
and the result is gray.)

or is it because they feel themselves
so dull in comparison
with the miracle which is creation,
the miracle they (miracles themselves) , faithful, serve?
(Mix all the colours of the spectrum,
and the result is white.)

or is it, because they know
their work lies between ultimates
such as (do they themselves
call them this?) black,
and white? do they know
their work is equity –
to balance all things, so that gray is not gray
as we use gray for worldly metaphor; but

the gray of lakes at peace;
of silver that lives in itself,
needing no sun but its own innerness;
mercury that is moved but longs
to be united in a perfect sphere;
gray of clouds that know
the blessings that they hold;

and, the shining gray of mind -
for which gray hair is living metaphor,
the wisdom which life holds in store for you -
as how many poets, this moment round the world,
are joining new electric paths of thought between
these tiny, great gray worm-like cells which hide, compact,

their vast and inner space which spins out eager words
of metaphor, for that so nameless,
boundless, dazzling spectrum,
the radiant space of self?

Michael Shepherd

0004 Car Boot Sales

I'm always getting this junky mail
plopping through the door
inviting me to a 'car boot sale' -
but I never wear boots in the car!

Michael Shepherd

0004 Love And Law; Law And Love

Law of love? Sounds good... so, tell me more...
Love of law? mmm...maybe...not so sure...

You can disregard the ancients –
label them Not Applicable – bin that bulky file...
or try to make some sense; and they insist
that love and law are so close intertwined
that together, they may tell
more than each other taken individually.
What might this mean? Where can we start?

Those ancients say that all this universe,
all this creation, is one single act of love;
love brings it forth, sustains it, nourishes it,
and so ultimately, it merges into love;

and by the laws of love,
which hold all forms by law,
our natural state is naught but love;
and knowing this, knows no injustice in ourself;
knows all as equal; knows no pressures nor compulsions;
knows no darkness; and no partiality or preferentiality;
and partaking of this universal love,
we're therefore just, and light of heart,
and ready of response..

and so, this love, which knows ourself as love,
(for every creature's nature is pure love)
may love the laws which make our nature thus;
love the laws of love, and live as love;
so out of love, comes law;
and out of law, comes love.

only in this fleeting moment of the present
is our life lived;
and only if, in this continuous now,
love and law are present in each action,
may we make our golden future;
live a golden life, where law has made us free.

this, the ancients say; the proof is ours to live.

Michael Shepherd

0004 Love Lyric: When Everything Is Said...

When everything is said, my love,
there's only love to say;
and though love's word can not be said,
and love will live when we are dead,
I'll say it yet again, my love –
there's only love to say.

Michael Shepherd

0004 Oxymoron

You know the type - the word's just perfect for him:
built like an ox, brain like a moron.
shaved head, one ear-ring, bull neck,
gold chain, tattoos,
black gym-pumped T shirt
(strange to think that thirty years ago
that would mark him a, er, Judy Garland fan..)
or football shirt on match days,
jeans, trainers
for a quick getaway between the blood and the pig-van,
and sharp eyes in an impassive face
as if one eye's always on the lookout for his mates
and the other for the other lot
so don't catch his eye, OK?

a 'football supporter';
now that's a real
oxymoron.

Michael Shepherd

0004 Rilke To A Young Poet 1

There is only one single way. Go into yourself.
Search for the reason that bids you write;
find out whether it is spreading out its roots
in the deepest places of your heart,
acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die
if it were denied to you to write.

This above all - ask yourself
in the stillest hour of your night:
MUST I write?
Delve into yourself for a deep answer.
And if this is 'Yes! I must! '
then build your life according to this necessity;
your life, even within its most indifferent and slightest hour
must be a sign of this urge
and a testimony to it.

Then draw near to Nature.
Then try, like some first human being,
to say what you see and experience and love and lose.

Do not write love-poems;
avoid at first those forms that are too facile and commonplace:
they are the most difficult, for
it takes a great, fully matured power
to give something of your own
where good and even excellent traditions
come to mind in quantity.

Therefore save yourself from these general themes
and seek those which your own everyday life offers you;
describe your sorrows and desires, passing thoughts and
the belief in some sort of beauty -
describe all these with loving, quiet, humble sincerity,
and use, to express yourself,
the things in your environment,
the images from your dreams,
and the objects of your memory.

If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it;
blame yourself, tell yourself that
you are not poet enough to call forth its riches;
for to the creator there is no poverty
and no poor indifferent place.

Go into yourself and test the deeps
in which your life takes rise;
at its source you will find the answer to the question,
whether you must create.

Michael Shepherd

0004 The Gifts Which Gifted On..

This is the story that the tribe,
sitting together crosslegged,
children at their feet,
tell about
the first gift

a man so loved his wife
that one day at that season of the year
when the sun is so low in the sky
that there is fear that it might disappear

and only the wise old men, say
this is the time for hope and prayer
and the sun will return the stronger
and we, the more joyful

this man so loved his wife
that one day he brought home
besides the daily food,
a beautiful thing he found
and gave it to her
because he loved her

and she, overcome by this
new event, kept that
beautiful thing carefully hidden
to remind her of his love
for many years

until one day, because
she loved her son so much that
she in turn gave that beautiful thing
to him

and the moment she handed it
to him, the beautiful thing
shone more brightly than the sun
so bright that he shone too

and the tribe say, they learnt from this
that gifts received are gifts unearned
but come from grace itself; they are not
magic gifts until
you pass them on to someone else
and then you are indeed blest by them
and grace surrounds you as the sun

this is what that tribe say
sitting there crosslegged,
the children at their feet
at this season of the year

Michael Shepherd

0004 The World Has Lost The Ear For Rhyme

The world has lost the ear for rhyme.
It still makes children squirm with pleasure;
and from some witty pens and minds, its fireworks fizz;
so, after all these centuries of rhyme
and all the games of meter, dancing words,
should we now mourn its passing?
Have we lost the music of another world?

Instead, the easy unpretentious discourse,
sober, light, familiar, honest -
the world of daily, homely, shared sharp life,
that's now preferred. Not prose;
much more than 'chopped-up prose' as those may say
who think that poetry should be more visibly hard-earned;
- as if a human life set down in honesty
were not a poem in itself, unwrit;
'prose with enhanced consciousness' it's often now defined;
and consciousness - now that's earned, if you like...

and simile, and imagery, and metaphor - all the repertoire
of glorious poetry - they're all still here
to work their magic; if more played down, now,
unostentatious as T-shirt and jeans;
unostentatious as the beating, bloody heart.

And yet, when years bring tears
and time brings death and dying,
it's time for rhyme, to heal the heart
and charm away the crying.

Michael Shepherd

0005 The Anvil Of His Mind

He's a regular on the TV arts review slot;
sitting there waiting his turn to speak,
he projects plainspoken ordinary man,
working class with intelligence;
more mouth, and he'd be
a trades union official;
less, and he'd be one of the invisible
guys in the back room, on the shop floor
who mend it for you, beautifully, and on time,
loving their craft, their skills;

he's present here as writer-critic.

waiting, attentive, business-like,
his sleeves rolled up as if they always are,
his forearms are as thick as Popeye's;
you almost look for the anchor tattoo; .
no pipes on the TV set of course these days..

and as he sits he holds his arms and elbows
out and forward from his body,
his hands open, ready –
what does this strange posture mean?
I'm fascinated as I watch..

is his inner self a potter,
about to soften and remould the literary clay?
or an expert butcher, ready to cleave the bleeding carcass
of the artwork into neat digestibles?

those strong forearms – ah yes, I've got it:
he's a good old-fashioned blacksmith!
he's ready to take the glowing iron ingot
hot from the artist's imaginative fire
from his assistant who's been heating it,
his left hand's reaching for the long smith's pincers,
his right hand reaches for Thor's mighty hammer of justice..

and in the shortest time with deftest craft

he's fashioned it just perfectly as you would wish it..

but hold on – he's been asked for his opinion;
now as he gives it vigorous expression,
sells it with his whole body-language,
his hands are busy fashioning
something more malleable, more intricate;
a wrought-iron gate perhaps
to the great house of art

I wouldn't fancy him as my initial editor;
but with his craftsman's common touch
I bet I'd be grateful later on.

Michael Shepherd

0005 The Poetry Reading

You're two-thirds the way through.
The corners of their mouths are turning down.
Their eyes are filming over.
Their shoulders are stiffening.
They're in defensive-polite posture.
They feel threatened by poetry.

But isn't this just what they should be?
Their little worlds, threatened by the greater world out there?
Didn't you have to go through this yourself?
For their sake, those who follow, wish to follow?
Isn't this the proof that
Poetry Matters? ..

Sure – on paper – but not, please,
so visibly, and not right now...
the carer in you winces;
the poet, calls the self to duty;
the teacher in you, piercing of eye and human perception,
marks them off, one by one –

the officers of the poetry society,
impassively attentive, have
the easiest job – they don't have to
like your poems – just approve,
clear up after, lock the hall...

and some look just simply hungry;
traffic bad in getting here
so get home first, then eat;
some find it just too long;
a little poetry goes a long way for them;
some are here because they think
you'll notice if they aren't...
some have just combined you
with a shopping trip to town; culture
a kinda penance for the overspend..

yup, time to flip over the pages

to the funnies, and the family ones;
turn up the volume of your voice, speed up a little
as if you too, are glad it's ending soon;
with a bit of luck, you'll get them
smiling at each other at each poem's end, towards the end..
The applause is warm with virtue and relief.

but at least you threatened them a while -
if not with boredom, perhaps with poetry.

Michael Shepherd

0005 'What Is There To Live For? '

and you asked this question
half-privately, half publicly, (so there's some hope then?)
but we, knowing alas your high intelligence,
must pause, reflect, before we answer you...

we could just say, in our severest tones -
that question comes from a nowhere, no-time place
where ignorance is loved, and knowledge is denied..

I'd say, off the cuff, damn you, do just what you like...
you'll do that anyway..

but if you want some words from me..
(who knows the power of words, despite
all evidence to the contrary?) -
some words about what you already know...

I'd say, the answer's in the shortest word
inside your question - 'is':
that tiny window in our life
between the past - that which has shaped your 'is' -
and future - which your 'is' will make for you;

that tiny window, which the gift of life
(and what else do we know of this?)
offers you through all your lived-in life -
gift, to be free; of past and future; simply be,
live in a world of free unselfishness,
be anything and everything, be what you wish -
or better still, be what unsullied life
continually offers you out of the blue...

Or you could count your blessings -
think as Mark has written, just so beautifully, to you...
you'll do just what you do, when all things have been said
and all things written down in words - damn you -
though I for one believe you far from damned..

I knocked upon your door - you didn't answer me;

so now I'm running round the back,
calling through that tiny window
of your very present life; and just to say,
you know yourself; know all the questions, all the answers; but
I'm here for you...and by the way, that ' I ' means we...

Michael Shepherd

0005 A Shouting Poem

This is a SHOUTING poem.
Not a gentle wildflower poem
not a whispering-of-love poem
A SHOUTING POEM.

This is a POSTER poem.
Not a subtly persuading poem.
not a think-about-it poem
A POSTER POEM

This is a HARD OF HEARING poem.
A what?
I said a HARD OF HEARING POEM

This is a LOST SPECTACLES poem
to test your sight.
No no not LAST TESTICLES
no try the next line - -
A LOST SPECTACLES POEM
now where did I put them

This is a HAVE YOU SEEN MY? poem.
I know I put it down somewhere.
Are you sure you haven't seen it?
Oh no, you didn't use it for THAT...?
Why are you laughing it's not funny.
I hadn't even finished it...

This is an ACROSS THE ROOM poem.
Read it while you're in bed
watching TV
doing the ironing
reading the newspapers
putting the new wallpaper up
combing the cat
having a bath
washing the car
talking to the neighbours
gardening

this is an ACROSS THE ROOM POEM

This is a BLOWN ACROSS THE STREET POEM

no need to run after it

and pick it up

just watch it blow

maybe wonder

if you missed anything

(revised)

Michael Shepherd

0005 Letter To A Younger Poet

Thanks for your letter. Though
you've caught me at a rather awkward time –
I'm going into surgery tomorrow – a rather
risky op; so I'll try to put all the answers that I've got
into this one letter;
I hope you'll understand...

and that helps me to make my first point to you:
write as if you, too, may not live
beyond tomorrow – write as if
it's the last thing that you'll ever write –
give it everything you've got,
hold nothing back;

or better still – write as if
the world will end for everyone tomorrow:
write so that in their last hours, too, this
will make them feel, will make them know
we've faced life fully, faced it so complete
that death is relatively unimportant now...

write as if it were only yesterday
that, in an air crash, all your family –
parents, wife or husband, partner, children, and best friend,
had lost their lives; write as if,
were you not to write,
your heart would break forever, or you would go mad...

write as if you're writing somewhere
where there's no such thing around, as ink;
you'll have to use your own blood in the pen,
so use it carefully; so red, so living,
look at it... so beautiful, so precious,
and so solemn – use it carefully, don't spill a drop...

write as if you're borrowing every word
from the very centre of the universe, where suns and gods are made;
and need thus to account for every word
with your whole life, no less; know that every word

must be given back, cleaner, stronger, brighter
with your own power, than when you borrowed it;

write as if every poet that ever lived
is leaning over your shoulder, so that you
can feel their breath upon your neck as they say
'Tell them all that we would tell,
but cannot now; tell them all of this'...
this, now, is how you must deeply be and speak;

write as if you are the only being on earth
who can tell them this; as if tomorrow, if tomorrow comes,
you shall visit them every one, at home,
and look them in the eye; write as if
you love them more than they will ever know;
write as if you were offering to live their lives with them;

write as if you were a force of nature in yourself:
as if whatever earthquake, hurricane or flood might do,
whatever law or love may greatly do,
whatever gods or men can speak, in fullest force,
this you may do, because the sound of poetry is such;
yes, write 'as if' – but know you really write 'because'...

write as if – no, write because –
you know that only poetry can tell
all, that must be told, and must be known;
and as all hearts melt in the heat of your own love,
be in no doubt – and see that all are in no doubt too –
that life was never, never more serious,
never more glorious, than it is right now;

write all this.

Michael Shepherd

0005 Totally Boring Poem

I'm totally bored by:

poems that sound like other poems

poems that try to sound unlike any other poems

poets who never take risks

poets who think that taking risks
makes them good poets

poems with 'meaning'

poems with no meaning

poets who slag off other poets
as if that achieves something

poets that tell you that rhyme
is not for an age but for all time

poets that tell you that rhyme is outmoded and boring

poets who think that the poetry of 'the past'
is greater than that of 'the present'

poets who think that the poetry of 'the present'
is greater than that of 'the past'

poems that tell you the poet's the first to discover sex

poets that tell you they're the best sex you'll ever have
although you'll never meet them to find out

poets that tell you they've been dumped

poets who've never known love and being dumped

poets who are ambitious

poets who are unambitious

poets who tell you all about higher things

poets who reject higher things

poets who think life's just a joke

poets who think life's no joke

poets who sit on the fence

poets who have no sense of balance

poets who despise 'the middle ground'

poets who talk about technique

poets with no technique

poets who just throw down their thoughts

poets who 'work up' their poems to a self-satisfied polish

poets who list what they like (who cares?)

poets who list what don't like (who cares?)

poets who write about extreme states

poets who think they're immune to extreme states

poets who tell you why they're bored

poets who have opinions

poets who seem to have no opinions at all

poets who have boring opinions to air - why choose poetry?

poets who comment on others' poems
as if it's the last word

poets who never bother to comment
on others' poems

poets who don't love poetry passionately

poets who tell you they 'love poetry passionately'

poets who – oh I'm too bored to go on reading this,

how about you?

I suppose you have boring opinions too?

another time perhaps

and oh yes I'm most of all bored by
those who waste their precious time on this earth
being bored

well I feel better for that.

how about you?

Michael Shepherd

0006 Weasel Words

It's such fun spotting them –
this should be built into the syllabus
of every English class: to con the cons;
sharpens the mind, too –

those words that cloak deceit,
prevarication, ignorance,
evade the point of a discussion,
evade answering the vital question and questioner,
simplify the complex,
complicate the simple...

'the real point is..'
say they, switching the agenda
to the home ground of their local thought,
'more to the point is...'
'more importantly...' (that's smart..)

said quickly (that's the trick
of weasel words - make them seem
more like an um or er or hello or throat-clear
or, just some punctuation mark) ..

and anyone who says
'it's absolutely clear...'
should be frogmarched off
to the Absolute, his, her, itself
to answer in person for their arrogance..
the rest of us left, of course, to guess that
if they say that... it just ain't...

and now, there are 'mission statements' –
confronted with some cruel inhumanity
perpetrated on the innocent individual or group
by some institution, public, private -
a 'spokesman' solemnly reels off
the high ideals they stand by to deliver,
which just happen to be totally
at odds with the (often unmentioned)

suffering caused to some (better unmentioned...) human being..

pop goes a good old weasel in the football press
today: "We take this area of regulation
very seriously. When we find evidence
of breaches of rules and regulations,
we investigate thoroughly" – you bet they do;
but how about that 'when we find'?
try 'when we seek to find'..
I rest my case. And so would they too, if they could..

Michael Shepherd

0006 A Thankyou To A Fellow Poet

This is a thankyou for your poem
though, it may not seem like that, to you -

To be quite honest, I can't now quote
a single word.. but all the same,

I remember exactly how I felt
when I'd finished reading it,

and that, I'll remember all my life...
so....thank you.

Michael Shepherd

0006 If Only

If only

everyone about to pull the trigger of a gun
imagined the shell hitting his own family
what a world

if only

everyone remembered how they loved
their teddy bears or dolls, asking nothing back from them
and lived like this for the rest of their lives
what a world

if only

we could keep the environment as clean and happy
as the seaside
what a world

if only

everyone who cut down a tree
planted a tree in its place
what a world

if only

you would add your own deepest hopes to this poem
and all your friends agreed
what a poem
what a world

Michael Shepherd

0006 'Love Is Knowledge'

When first I saw you, I saw but your face;
and felt for you, no more nor less
than others of the human race;
you were as other; that I must confess;

and yet, by some uncharted act of grace,
the grace of you stayed in my memory;
stole subtly through my eyes and ears,
my ears and eyes; stole subtly to my heart;

and what my heart knew, murmured to my mind;
and what my mind knew, murmured to my heart;
they spoke your name; and somehow, listening Love
made instance of it; and this knowledge grew;

I loved you, then; knew more of you – and love;
knew more, myself; so, loved the human race
through loving you; and loved the knowing you;

and all this, through Love's knowing, caring grace.

Michael Shepherd

0006 Prayer For The Condemned

He'll be the next to go.

In the Condemned Block, over many years,
he's moved up the line; now he's got that end cell.

All legal processes have been tested.

Of course his lawyers will fight once again –
a pardon's out of the question, of course,
but maybe just a lifer? (He's spent half of it
behind bars anyway.) At Association Time,
if it's allowed, the others look at him
covertly – how's he taking it? And maybe
know a little more of themselves..

And so, we're asked to pray for him
knowing in our hearts, that he's but
a metaphor for all of us.. so despite his crimes,
there's that in us which feels that we are he...
and redemption's not unknown, to God or man...
are we just praying for ourselves?

But how to pray, and how to pray for – what?
that he be free to be himself again?
but we don't know him well enough to trust
him when he says, he's found God in there...

And if we pray that he remain himself,
but where he is, behind those bars,
to work out his life, like a monk
(who also needs more time, even forever,
to understand ' forever' more) –
there's mercy for you, of a sort,
if he will get that spiritual support
that monks may call upon...

We may pray to God to bring him change of mind,
if it's not too late now.. and here again,
who is to judge, or how may he himself so prove?
'O Lord, please give him one more chance...' –
are we thinking more of him than of ourselves?

Yes, we may pray, deep in ourselves, that human law
may bring together as we best may know
justice and mercy in their godly match..
and in a subtle sense, his death, if it bring
that dedication in our social thoughts,
will have been in some small way
another death but on the cross of life for us;

And for some of us, prayer's not unlike
the action of a wounded animal - as if comatose,
gathering all one's capabilities, and diving deep
beyond words, beyond thought, beyond any wish,
like a surrender of one's living soul
to seek, deep within oneself, that place
where all souls meet...;

Those who live a life of faith
need but to dip into
the holy water of eternity
flowing in the sweet words
of the age of faith:

'Lette goe the teares
of earthlie wepynge -
comende hys sawle
to Cristés kepynge'...

So should we not, when and if we pray each day,
and use the Lord's Prayer, reaching that too familiar line,
'Thy Will be Done',
pause, and remember him in his last hours,
- perhaps remember Him in His last hours -
and live the remainder of our lives
(as we move up the line towards That Day)
slightly, subtly, differently; and know
a little more about prayer; about ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

0006 Saraswati

The name means
wisdom. Perhaps
we should leave it there. For
the human mind loves
to bring the heavenly
down to earth; then bury it:

maybe not wisdom, did they say –
who worships wisdom in these foolish days?
Maybe a goddess then?
We'll name our greatest river
after her; that will help men
to remember wisdom
which flows from heaven
to the tops of the unreachable snowed
Himalayas, flows down and nourishes
the earth that nourishes the seeds
that yield the plants
that bring life to men
who meet together on her banks
and build a whole Harappan
civilisation – so, look –
she's wisdom, and a goddess, and river bringing life itself
and so she's in the heart
of every Indian.

so far, so good; but then –
was it anger in the heavens,
that made the lovely goddess
lift her veil across her face?
conceal her wisdom? Was it
that men forgot to honour her?
Or was it some tectonic plate, slightly tipping,
that turned the fertile Sindh and Rajasthan
into deserts? And the river Saraswati
first became not a river, but
a line of pools, needing the yearly
tribute from the rains of mercy,
brought by men's sacrifice? And then,

finally disappeared?

and so the goddess of wisdom
who is eternal wisdom
and a river, is now
the goddess of the wisdom that's
no longer seen so gracefully flowing there; invisible.

Maybe this purdah
is more dignified; we know she's there,
if we honour her enough
and need her.

The story is not over, though:
the satellites have photographed
her ghost; a veiled figure seen
slipping out in the cool half-light of dawn,
waterpot on shoulder; she knows
that deep underground, her wise water
waits in stone caverns beneath the earth
these 3,500 years; to be drawn on
by wise engineers, to drink again
with awe, with gratitude, or thoughtless...

Wisdom waits,
living a life so deep in poetry,
in metaphor,
wisdom, goddess, water. How
she must love to live
lightly veiled in silken speech,
quietly in the heart, like
metaphor itself.

Michael Shepherd

0006 The Constant Heart

The test is constancy –
the proof, the constant heart.

See that pair who walk across the park -
from the back, it's difficult to see their age –
they walk as if there's nowhere now to go;
for they're so still, inside themselves; they're joined
by that shared stillness. Now and then they glance
deep into each other's eyes – seeing there,
a constancy. Their hearts – you see it – are at rest.

They can remember with an inner smile
how when they met, they put on every charm
to seek to catch each other for themselves;
now they dive, swim, laugh, at rest
within each other's still, warm constancy.
See them walk and laugh their way
across the park; across their life.

* * *

See now over there, the man who stands,
talking quietly, with observant eye;
a group of boys around him who
can think of nothing else but listening:
he's still, he's standing sure within himself.
He's just too far away for you to hear the words he says;
and yet you know – he's constant in himself,
he's constant in all that he gives to them.
They've found a wise man, and they're listening.

* * *

The test is constancy –
The proof, the constant heart.

(with acknowledgements to Shantananda Saraswati)

Michael Shepherd

0007 A Crocodile's Tears For Steve

I shall miss my pet human, Steve.
I loved to play with him,
hear the gasps from the watching millions,
grinning my big toothy grin,
stretching up to grab the snack
knowing well that I could have snacked
on him instead or
knocked him aside, grabbed his baby,
gulp
but hey, who's stoopid enough
to eat their meal ticket?

Steve worked hard for me –
who has a pet that efficient, hard-working?
Better than a robot and
just as predictable.
He made all the arrangements,
kept me in luxury.

And the really big deal,
We crocs get protected world-wide
if we pretend to behave around people
and so do all the animals,
which is a good thing
since we can all, each species,
do one thing at least better than any man..
did you think of that, pet?

So though humans, being the inferior
do-a-lot-of-things-but-badly species,
do lots of idiotic things
that would ruin the planet
that animals run so well
if you let us,
they're OK as pets
if you treat them right
and we have to share the planet
with the idiots anyway

don't forget that animals
always know one thing above all –
is it in our interest
to kill our pet humans?

that's where that stoopid sting-ray
showed itself an inferior species,
guess it hadn't known Steve
long enough to suss that out,
or got swollen head (well look at it) being
on TV, thought it was a character
in Neighbours

What a waste – I'd trained him so well,
I wonder if he really knew that..
anyway, we made a good double act..

I shall really miss my pet human,
Steve.

Michael Shepherd

0007 African Child

What's that dirty mark on the carpet in front of the TV, Mom?
That's just a shadow from the screen, dear.

I feel sick, Mom, I must've eaten something nasty?
I expect it's that film, dear..shall we turn it off?

Is that a boy or girl baby crying, Mom?
Didn't notice dear, why, does it matter?
What's that group of men just off-screen, Dad?
They're just interested in the film.
Then why aren't they with the Moms, helping?
They may not be the fathers, dear.
(She's too young yet, to know about child-rape, honey,
though I guess we'll have to tell her sometime...)

Then where are their real Dads?
I expect they're dead, dear.
Dad you won't die will you, promise?
I hope not, darling, I'll try not to...

Why are they so hungry, Dad, when the TV can go there?
Their country's in a mess, dear.
But they always used to have enough to eat,
otherwise they wouldn't have dads and moms themselves?
It's a long and sad story, darling, I'm not sure
that I can explain it to you. I wish I knew the answer.

Will those flies on the babies' eyes come off the screen, come here?
No darling, it's Africa.
Don't they hurt? Why don't their Dads brush them off
instead of just standing there?
I expect they're used to them in Africa, dear..
shall we turn the TV off?
No I want to watch, I want to help them.
That's very good of you, darling, maybe
when you're grown up? It may be better then.

What will make it better, Dad?

0007 Christmas At Guantanamo Bay

and yeah, I ate too much
but this dream
a guy in a red suit
came from a nowhere sorta somewhere
right on midnight unlocked the gates
and I guess magicked the shackles off

they streamed out the gates
except for some who felt
the company was better inside than outside

one guy mugged for the first cellphone he could
then didn't know how to use it

most of the guys went for a woman, women,
but some changed their minds
when it came to it

some just knelt and prayed

some asked the way to the nearest mosque

some spat at everyone they saw
until they ran out of spit

one or two just smiled at everyone
even got a few smiles back cautious like

as they spread out I had a problem
which one to follow
which one would tell me most
by their actions
about truth and justice and stuff

then I woke up of course

Michael Shepherd

0007 Holding The World

and there's this alleyway
and a passage, then a door,
ordinary, but
the pavement in front of it
has been carefully swept this morning;
you came upon it by chance,
but now you're here, it
seems important;

an old man - well,
old for that part of the world -
probably not long to live, but
erect, still, extraordinary eyes,
they seem to see everything;
doesn't say much, but
ask him any question in the world
and he gives you an answer
you'll remember for the rest
of your changed life

he says, it's all, all love;
and so are you

then there's this dusty road
to a small town
in a country built by faith
now torn apart by faith,
run by political masters from abroad;
a pub that takes overnighters,
an outbuilding - well,
more a lean-to to shelter the animals
on a cold windy night;

a baby's first smile, something
its parents remember all their lives;
it seems to say,
it's all, all love;
and so are you

Michael Shepherd

0007 I Thought Of Her

and suddenly this morning, I thought of her;
not in the Christmas way -
thinking of you at this time,
we must meet, sometime in the New Year...

but with the sense of loss
and the sense of gratitude
so strongly present together
that there's no point
in balancing the two; they live in
two different worlds;

remembering how I would phone you
who had time for everybody
and never looked at the clock or watch
as we talked about ourself until time itself were weary..
(then came the pointed, quiet alignment...)

knowing what a treat it was going to be
but I'd have to be on my mettle..
and when welcomed, and the tea made,

it was as if you rejoined a conversation
about things that really matter
which you and she - well, OK, she -
had been talking about,
gently, seriously, all her life; and yet as if
she had never formulated a thought about it before,
until you brought it up;

and together, you and she
would hear the sound of wisdom
as if it were newborn that day, in that tidy room.

Loss; and gratitude.
A single lady of advancing years,
serious eyes, with a sparkle waiting there,
a smile ready at the corners of her mouth
as if it waited on the prompt of love

in some high golden play.
I'm told she had more annual Valentine cards
than anyone would have known.

Michael Shepherd

0007 Rilke On Solitude

If you notice that solitude is great,
rejoice because of this.

For what would solitude be
that had no greatness? There is
but one solitude, and that is great,
and not easy to bear,
and to almost everybody come hours
when they would gladly exchange it for any sort of intercourse,
however banal and cheap; with the first comer,
with the unworthiest...

but perhaps those are the very hours
when solitude grows, for
its growing is as painful as the growing of boys
and sad as the beginning of springtimes.

To be solitary, the way one was solitary as a child,
when the grownups went around involved with things
that seemed important and big
because they themselves looked so busy
and because one comprehended nothing of their doings.

Be close to things; they will not desert you;
there are the nights still
and the winds that go through the trees
and across many lands;
among things and with the animals
everything is still full of happening
in which you may participate;

and children are still the way you were as a child,
sad like that and happy,
- and if you think of your childhood
you live among them again.

(Abstracted from Rilke's letters to a young poet)

Michael Shepherd

0007 The Transcendent

'The Transcendent'...'The Metaphysical'...'The Higher Truth...'
spooky words used by
spooky people with
spooky minds who belong to
spooky organisations for
those who've nothing better to do?
These days words like this
sure look weird in cold print...

OK let's be cool about this
it could be worth a chat.

When you rush home from school
and at the door
the puppy barks at you and skids on the floor
cos he's wagging his tail that hard
and the cat condescendingly
acknowledges your presence and dispenses
a saucerful of warmth by rubbing against
your ankle or bare leg
and Mum groans in a friendly way
at all the smears on your clothes
you've acquired during the day
and Dad asks you what you learned today son (...uh...)

you're in the transcendental world -
of things that can't be nailed down or measured;
starting with love and happiness and faith and hope and trust
and a lot of other words
like justice, mercy, compassion, care, courage, selflessness,
generosity, humanity, enthusiasm, gratitude, praise...
which if we don't use them occasionally as words
but just take them for granted

disappear

from human mind.

and so poets being poets may take them down from the shelf

or out of the dictionary
once in a while,
dust them
and put them back looking as dusted things do
more noticeable and really rather fine.

Michael Shepherd

0007 War: One For Frank And Whomsoever

There was peace
before there was war
that's when two parties
fight for 'peace'

and after the war
there are two losers

though one believes itself
the winner
and perhaps that
is the most dangerous belief

and which god ever
declared war on men?

if every woman in the world
refused war
the men would not have a chance in hell
the hell of their own making

Michael Shepherd

0007: 2007 - Year Of Revolting Poets

2007, he said, was a memorable year for poetry.

A world conference of poets held
somewhere NewMex way, came to the view
that the rhyming dictionary put altogether too
great a stricture on the structure
of verse, and worse;
it was time, for rhyme
(which came back into fashion
that year with a passion)
to be more relevant,
less of a white elephant;

so
all poets who
wrote in English
(including Strine)
were asked to define
what words should be allowed appropriately to rhyme.

It took a little time;
since they couldn't agree about basic words
(some felt that 'words' shouldn't even rhyme with 'turds',
they thought that any such ditty
would be shitty;
some thought that such a possibility of rhyme was crap,
and would lead to poetic mishap)

So, first things first, what would be appropriate
to rhyme with love?
(which of course some pronounced luv,
others, lurve) :
some felt that rhyming it with 'above'
had just a smidgen
of politically inappropriate reference to religion...

* * *

The whole idea was well meant

but you can see just how it went –

it took until 3006
even just to fix
after long debate upon it,
fourteen rhyming words to cover one suitable sonnet

by which time
those celebrated poets who did or didn't rhyme,
while English tended to vanish,
were writing in Spanish
or Chinese;
bringing American-language poetry to its knees.

then vowelless txt
became the nxt
style
for a while
(which left poetry weakened,
bcs t cdnt b spknd) ...

* * *

But I'll have to cease this sorry tale;
I've a Hallmark card I need to mail.

Michael Shepherd

0008 A Ghazal

I lie awake as the light night-rain falls, listening
to its irregularities, listening

as the breeze blows it now and then
against the window and the curtain flutters; listening

and wondering if I can hear
the rain listening

to itself, as if – I sometimes think I hear this –
there's a moment just before it stops as if listening

to its own decision to stop, as if it sighs,
thinks, that's enough; it could be listening

to the gratitude of the closed flowers, the wet earth,
the ecstasy of roots which are themselves listening

to the flowers sleeping, sighing in their sleep.
But do you wonder why I'm listening

instead of sleeping, this warm rainy night?
What's so important that it needs my listening?

It was the rain that woke me; and as I turned, sighed,
it was the thought of you last night here next to me, listening

not to me, but to your own dreams – which I may never share;
though I may share you in my listening

to your sweet sleep's breath, felt faintly on my shoulder;
and so, there's a question in my listening –

did you awake at the same night rain, you so far away,
awake, sigh, and in your half-awakened listening

know that I too, thought of you?
Sighed that sweet thought, of our shared, single listening? ...

As the perfume of a rose may be more evocative than the rose,
So sweeter, steadier than thought, dream, memory – the listening!

[A ghazal has a rhyme scheme aa ba ca da >]

Michael Shepherd

0008 A Ghazal About Ghazals

A poet friend spoke of a poetic form called a ghazal
and said, why don't you try to write a poem like a ghazal?

They've been revived in recent years in English, in fact
there's even a periodical devoted to the ghazal...

and you're rather keen on that mystical poetry stuff?
and love and such? Why don't you try the ghazal?

My usual reaction to suggestions like that is, no..
but I googled Wikipedia out of curiosity, on ghazal

which told me everything about it except
why anyone should choose to write a ghazal..

which as you see, is such a restrictive poetic form..
And then I found a passing mention about the word ghazal

it said that the name came from the cry of the gazelle...
and that, told me more than anything about the ghazal...

since a gazelle, like any animal, bereft of the power of speech
and thus of poetry, is the very essence of the ghazal

in that, whether from pain, from danger, from love
- or visited by God - cries the same cry of the gazelle - the ghazal;

as poets, seeking to express the inexpressible, are as limited
in their success, as crying animals, in their way - the ghazal

may thus be seen as every poem that ever poet wrote;
crying within itself, one cry alone...So the ghazal

must choose the human word for its repeated call
with care... ah! yearning heart! ... for One or All! ... Ghazal!

Michael Shepherd

0008 A Love Poem In A New Old Language

Wilfrid Chin Sue says that poetry
is about 'about', and thank you Wilf
for that, and thanks too from us poets all
to ngs for reminding us
that lurking in the words between
the words we give most value to
like nouns and verbs and adjectives
are the words that hint,
about the presence of the subtle

so here's a love poem about your about

because when it comes down or up
to it, it's all about just what's about
you – like the scent you loved to use
which brought and brings
you into an empty room

and the things you left about
which speak of you
more subtly even than your scent

and your near... ah yes, your near...that's never far from me

and your around
that made eyes light up, with life and joy and love

and your between
which I shall not speak
(about)

and the because of our true together
which I could write (about) endlessly
because of its endless, its inexplicable,
its because

which reminds me of your beyond,
which I would not write (about) in case
I wept, or failed, or failed and wept

oh so many other, being one
but most of all

I miss your
around

Michael Shepherd

0008 A Woman's World

She was artistic as a student,
sweet-natured, imaginative, not
overly ambitious; a good catch
for him, the fellow student with
the drive, the ambition, the great
family connections.

They married young; she did
what so many girl art students
have done: gave him all her
intelligent support, bore and raised
his children; and in the few brief moments
that she was granted for herself, took out
her student paintbox, and while the kettle boiled,
sat at the kitchen table, and beyond the view of washing-up
part painted that familiar view –
a jug of garden flowers on the kitchen window-sill..

and when he left her for
another strong woman who, however,
sculpted the cutting-edge new abstract thing
she brought up his children by herself

and when they left the nest, and she, now older,
had more time to give to paint,
she returned - as so many artists do –
to that motif, for them an eternal reminder
of that moment when the exalted mind
sees, beyond the kitchen sink,
a glimpse of that great heavenly view
beyond the garden flowers, where
she could walk into that paradise
that eternally awaits
the sweet-tempered heart..

and year by year, the modest
jug of flowers on the window-sill
became herself
and she

became that heavenly view

until the jug of flowers burst into glory
and she did what only ikon painters, praying, do
and gold and silver joined the rainbow paint
to point the way to an eternity
where kitchen sink's now holy path;
that is more now than now

and she became,
the painting is,
a jug of Eden's flowers on a kitchen window-sill
and with all heaven in its sight

Michael Shepherd

0008 The Gift

Who does not wish to give the perfect gift
to those we love – to whom we have already
given the greatest gift we have – our heart?
To choose a visible and outward sign
of love whose meaning's inward, spiritual?

But who would dare to challenge innocence
and ignorance in their demonic bond,
and break the spell of Christmas wish and hope
by telling children, that old Santa Claus
is but the God who gave their life to them -
dressed up in red and white and snowy beard;
and who, in needing nothing of himself,
would be delighted to receive their thanks
and nothing more; and who, we might believe
of one who has all gifts in his command,
might be obliged by those laws he himself
created, out of justice, equity,
to give them that which they themselves have made –
a life of gratitude for life itself –
a life of praise, where all the world is gift
beyond all human gifts?

What parents now
might give their children gold, myrrh, frankincense
with all their love; and teach them by this show
why Christmas gifts are godly metaphor?

Of course, no parents would dare break this spell;
you'll laugh at me for this absurdity;
yet it might build a clear-eyed, praising race
who thought in metaphor; spoke poetry.

Michael Shepherd

0009 A R T

and spoke with authority
about the never before

Michael Shepherd

0009 Cole Porter Hits The Chatsites

Frat boy,
bratboy,
innuendo chat-boy,
why do girlies fall for you?
You're really too good to be true –
and it's true - you're just not you –

your humdrum face
lacks manly grace;
your 'slender figure'
's much much bigger;

your cheatin' heart
has played its part
so what d'you do? you go to
some mag, and steal a photo,

and say you want a 'long-term'
-but boy, is that the wrong term—

for p'raps the joke's on you –
she's doin' the same thing too!

*

but back you go –
you never know,
out there's a she
for whom you're He,
the one you'll give your life for –
(the one you'd leave your wife for..)

*

oh you and I are cynics –
but we've tried all these gimmicks;
once bitten, and twice shy
they say – but one more try –
we love these crazy antic
s – they're just so darn romantic!

Michael Shepherd

0009 Favorite Poem

and you can't remember much
about the first time you read it except
that it held you to the end, but most of all
this one line, which seemed to hold
the key to the whole poem

as if you were opening the closet of your mind
to bring out something which you knew was there
but instead something way at the back
called to you and you remembered
a moment from way back you thought
you had forgotten

and then you read the poem again
in company with the poet and
yes that's it, and the two of you
became friends for life, almost
related.

So, now you've read all their poems,
feel some more than others but
as if you wrote them all in the same room
where you read them together
and you wait for their new book with
a sorta family pride

and like family,
you leave the poems for a spell,
grow up a little, then
come back to visit -
they mean more;
can it be,
you've both grown?
each time you come back to them
you carry them more close to you

in fact you feel that you could write
poems very much like theirs
as if you'd inherited, too,

the family gift

and though you wouldn't of course
seek them out in person except
in a reading where you'd
have to share their warmth
with the rest of their extended family
but not say much since
you are a, well, close relative,

if you happened to be driving a route
not far from them, you'd detour,
park a little distance from their house,
but have it in your sight,
hope you might catch a movement,
wait a few minutes, then
start the car with almost a sigh

half relieved that you didn't have to try
on their cautiously polite doorstep
to find words to say
you love them in their words,
which you almost wrote together,
lived them together;
love them like life itself,
love them

Michael Shepherd

0009 A Palinode

and there was this one
which I was particularly proud of
where I thought I'd caught
just the right pace, then
the change of pace when
the poem goes deeper
and then the perfectly chosen metaphor
with a rallentando
which made it musical
and ended it just
knock-'em-flat
sheer poetry

then last night
I read your poems
for the first time in oh fifty years
and there it was
almost identical and
I realised where I'd got it from
and the part of me that
wasn't bruised ego wept inwardly without naming any cause

and maybe when I've recovered
and demoted my poem in
the collected works of pride
I'll marvel at the power of poetry even if yours not mine
which can lie low in the mind
for fifty years and not only that
but may well, and here we should be careful
but reflective, respectful even awed,
have subtly infinitesimally but significantly
like some homeopathic almost unquantifiable tincture,
altered my whole life. For fifty years.

now that's something

Michael Shepherd

0009 Before Birth: Those Who Will Lean Over Me

Comfortable, oh yes comfortable
but how to explain
the other things

the warnings
that there were to be
others like and not like me
that I was not the only one;
even if I would be the light
of all their hopes, they who
will lean over me with
my light on their eyes
and strange human sounds

and there were promises to be made with
the warnings: that
I'd forget all this
and would have to, must
remember with such help
as I might have; so
three solemn promises,
to try to remember
where I come from,
which I need to return to,
and also why; for there may be
little help in this from them

strange, that all this
which is born into me
and which my first smile
tells those who will lean over me,
how could I forget
all this? No wonder
some turn back;
it's braver, more courageous,
more loving, more adventurous,
than any of you remember,
to be born

so wish me luck of it

Michael Shepherd

0009 God's New Year Hangover

I'm wondering –
with, I trust, due circumspection
with respect to these holy, mighty matters
yet with the open mind
which He has risked mankind and me with,
whether He keeps a tally
or even an annual journal
of mankind's cavortings around God's Christmas...
and how mankind approaches
God's seasoned, ordained New Year,
His holy, spirited Hogmanay.

Does He receive intelligence,
flights of angels pushing their way -
or unaffected, for who knows? –
through cyberspace, the ether, as it was
and is and ever shall be,
bringing news of how the Good News
went down this year;
the statistics, perhaps, of how many
parents explained this season of infantile blackmail
in the name of metaphoric divine love;
or whether His Christmas message
survived Brussels edicts
and Brussels sprouts

giving Him a clear week
before, in the name of
divine justice and equity,
laws obeyed or disobeyed,
Good and Bad,
Virtue rewarded,
cause and effect,
planning His New Year programme for the world -
a catastrophe here, a well-disguised miracle there –
just to remind mankind of who's in charge
of those things not covered by your insurance
touchingly referred to without a hint of political correctness
as 'Acts of God'...(He passed it over to Natural Law..)

Or as some divines assert: powerless,
even He, having set the world upon its course,
its laws – and love, it's said – in Genesis I ch. I v. I
(and its equivalent of course, in other faiths) ,
to do aught but sit and watch
as the world plays out all this
divine comedy with its silent laughs
like some old film that's put on
the TV every New Year's Day;
here We go again, maybe He thinks..

or maybe with a gentle smile
that's not forgotten the Paradise
of those Who Got What They Wanted
regardless of the cost, (for?) at Christmas;
the Hell of New Year's Eve;
the Purgatory of a hangover;

or maybe He's laughing fit to burst – they say
He got the Dawkins book on Christmas Day.

Michael Shepherd

0009 Medieval English Cathedral

Once I had this fanciful idea of recording
the silence in each great cathedral
and marketing these...

As you pull open the worn and squeaky door
there's a strange moment of apprehension as if
you're not sure what will greet you - a fullness
or an emptiness; a football-stadium roar
or a silence; an earfull of praise or
a mindfull of questions...

but the first step inside, and a silent gasp -
it's bigger inside than outside...
and the sound of your steps soars to the high
indescribably glorious roof like a
small bird looking for an escape.

so that you'd like to sing a note or two
to hear them repeated by those
invisible angels of the echo, waiting poised
in the stoniness of the walls and roof
like the mountain cliffs and valleys
from whence the stone was dragged
by devotion.

and you feel an intruder into the space of history
waiting for you to find your place.

How wonderful if at this moment, history unreeled;
played itself backwards; and as the years rolled back,
the cathedral nave would fill with the quietly respectful
devout. Then back again, and the voices would be more raw,
rich with the earth they'd just been tending.

Would the praise, to our ears, sound more heartfelt?
we'll never know.
Reel back again to that almost
unimaginable scene - the walls rising, still part built;
the clambering masons, chisels singing on the stone,

lifted only a little lower than the angels
on wooden planks on slender wooden scaffold,
the squeal of pulleys, the sudden silence of tools
and the call for the master mason;
and up there where the roof is still blue-grey sky,
the occasional bird from an optimistic nest
built the year before in the part-built spire, fluttering,
searching for a crumb or two from
the mason's heady meal

as birds may wheel again over half-there walls
when please God no the roof falls in and
respectful visitors walk down the tidy gravelled path
where once the aisle was walked, bowed head and singing,
but now so neatly grassed where pews and praise once stood,
remarking out aloud or in their heart
how the silence is, still, living, there.

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

0009 Mild And Bitter Thoughts

and I'm sitting in the pub,
fruitful source of people-watching verse,
(Jake will know it)
collecting the strength to walking-stick home
or that's the story,
chilling out,
glass half empty,
heart half full,
a benign haze of love
for all the people in the pub
mingling with an universal love
suspectly

opposite, two sepia photographs
of local scenes, which the thoughtful pub chain
use to decorate the walls:
both are of the local, semi-rural, Tube station;
one's from 1905ish so I'd I guess
from the floor-length skirts,
the birds'-nest hats; I wonder
if the ladies felt the need to think
dress up? dress down? for this
ground-breaking, literally,
new form of transport?

the other's from around the early 1920s:
a glimpse of stockinged ankle, gasp, or manly faint..
I try to place myself, push my sepia way
into gelled history - 1905, and if I still lived round here
the house would be brand-new; I -we- would be so proud;
newly-married with my stable job,
stiff collar rubbing on the neck in summer heat;
and just the right age to fight
for King And Country in that bitter war
that loomed on the expansive, leisurely, secure
Edwardian horizon..how did my widow manage
with all those children?

No; I know too much in my born blood

of that trench war.. let's look instead
at post-war peace - the stiff collar
still chafes, but I walk erect
still in a bowler hat, a waistcoat, a sense
of my place in society, a career
of slow but steady rise in just one firm; and
it's a toss-up whether I might be
still young enough to be called up for
my King And Country around 1939,
or old enough to be bombed at home...

The glass is empty and the crisps are done
(that sounds like Auden, Eliot, Betjeman?) :
I pull myself with sepia suction sound
out of the photos into full colour; and
still benign and walking steady,
take home my fantasies and gratitude.
One lifetime at a time - that's quite enough.

Michael Shepherd

0009 Nowhy Meets Everyhow, Somethen And Anywhence

Every word needs
a good wash now and then –
a good scrub, put it through the wringer
or tumbledry it; hang it on the line outside to dry,
let the air go through it; if it rains
leave it out until the sun shines,
smell it, iron it, check for wear...

have you seen my where around?
I've looked everywhere, it's nowhere to be found,
it must be somewhere; surely you know
what a where looks like?

now you're not going out like that –
dressed anyhow! Not nohow you ain't!
you'll have tidy up somehow!
Why can't you dress like everyhow?

You never tell me why you do these silly things!
If there's a how and a where, when you do them,
why isn't there a somewhy, or a nowhy, and an
everywhy, that you could use to explain?
'Dunno – just did it nowhy...'

And you say you'll do your homework 'then'..
When's then? Somethen? If I know you,
it'll be nothen! I wish you'd do it
everythen..

And where did you put your homework anyway?
What do you mean, somewhere? Nothere I can see....
Yesterday you left it around everywhere...

You're just so untidy, not a bit like your sister...
I wonder where you get that from?
Somewhence, I guess; nowhence that I can recognise;
there's nothing but trouble from you kids, everywhence...

* * *

Words are fun. They're not used up yet.
One moment, they're no-where – then they're now-here...
Guess they made a dash for it...

Michael Shepherd

0009 On Being Caned, Frequently

Ooh! Ow! ...I'm a victim! ...I've got a psychic scar! ...

not in my schooldays,
I have to say;
how quickly the world changes!

Life was straightforward at my schools –
you disobeyed the rules, you got beaten, caned –
simple as that.

And if you were the adventurous type,
you disobeyed often, just for the hell of it,
got beaten often; the heroic aura glowed from you;
modest hero too – you never showed the marks when asked...
though perhaps paused a moment longer
when putting your pyjamas on
if you were at boarding school
to show you hadn't stuffed any foreign substance
in your pants. You quickly learned
that cardboard made a giveaway hollow sound,
soft paper like toilet roll was better,
otherwise next time the ultimate indignity –
'take down your trousers, boy! '
The football stars sometimes took a running kick at you instead.

For minor infringements, you were beaten
by a prefect, all of one or two years older than you
(as you would have to do in your turn) :
taken from the homework room,
'Shepherd, go to the prefects' study' –
justice reigned, you were questioned first;
pathetic excuses were not in the hero's book.

the whole room knew it was coming,
the washroom next door was the place it was carried out:
they listened to count the strokes – usually six;
checked your face for tears in younger years;
if they saw them, turned away, questioned themselves;
later you learned to stroll in, head held high

as if you'd rather enjoyed the experience,
had come out on top..
and savoured the covert, inquisitive hush
that descended on the homework room..
glanced a minute or two later
at your mates with triumphal grin,
shifting slightly on your wooden locker seat...

In fact, I was a physical coward; but soon found out
that holding the record for being beaten
was a good path to status, almost, if not quite,
equal to being good at football or at gym...

Riskier was bad behaviour in the dormitory,
like talking above whisper, or general hubbub
heard by a stalking prefect lurking outside the door;
that meant being caned in your thin pyjamas..
but with a cadet officer's swagger stick –
more bruise than cut as with a cane..
and they were gentle schools –
our hands were never caned...

or more serious conduct would be more awesome,
beaten by the housemaster in his room ...
and worst of all – I only remember it once –
a public caning by the headmaster
in front of the whole assembled school...

perhaps we were a fortunate generation:
misbehaviour; and just punishment; a simple world;
an ordered system; and in such,
no victor and no victim, no psyche to be bruised;

many in those times went on
to be traumatised or killed
in wars less just.

Michael Shepherd

0009 'Pardew, Knave..! ' He Swore, Curbishly...

so Magnusson,
the mastermind that's a joke
of West Hamateurs
has sacked Pardew

a scholarly note here
pardew is old norman French
for by God, as might appear
in some Shakespeare play,
'pardew, wench, thou hast a pair
of foaming jugs, I warrant...'

or in a later century of faith
by God comes victory to the worthy

or on the terraces,
by God it's time he was sacked

while Curbishley sounds
more like a 19th century novel:
'why sack the manager
when it's the millionaire players
who are at fault..',
he answered curbishly

well there you are,
at the end of the day
it's a game of two halves
and creating chances
if you'll excuse
the oxymoron

and talking of morons
the after-match interview
'how sorry are you to have lost today? '

pardew, a curbish lout of an interviewer, i'faith..

0009 Persian Vase, Persian Thoughts

As you enter this quiet and peaceful sunlit room,
it seems at first all space; but then your eye
- as is intended - straightway drawn
to that fine Persian vase which sits
upon an old oak chest, its lid, polished
with the wax of love and years,
a crack across it somehow speaking
of trials borne and overcome;
the tale of life, of time, of history, of lessons learnt.

The chest - it's cedar lined, as aromatic as memory
when the lid is opened - does not now hold,
as when it was first carpentered, a bridal trousseau;
a girl given with fine clothes to destiny -
now, precious family documents
that tell of rights and duties, high positions
and their responsibilities, once held;
past, present and future, public life and private,
aromatic in the memory.

The vase is cool and vivid, curls of blue and white;
a cobalt blue, the colour of far-seeing beauty -
the surface colour seen in deepest sea;
the colour which the upper air, in flight,
seems to yearn for; as if we look
into the vase and through it and beyond it;
the white's so white, it speaks of purity;
and here are touches of an emerald green
which sets off both, as if jewelled thoughts
are never far away from golden minds

I am the potter, speak that vase:
I am the eye that draws your eye,
I am the beauty that may touch your heart;
and to your mind, I bring the thought -
I too was born of dust, of clay and precious water,
decorated with a potter's love;
one day I shall, by that accident which reigns
in life that passes, be broken into pieces

and return to dust...
you and I, our past is dust, our future dust –
but oh, the beauty of the present that's eternal,
the joyous dancing of the here and now...
cobalt blue like sea and sky, innocent as white,
emerald as green fields fresh diamonded with dew..

Michael Shepherd

0009 Railway Restaurant

The staff behind the bar
freely exchanging comments
in their language you don't understand
stare blatantly at you
as if you are a travelling zoo -
that's their perks; that and the odd
pick-up; why else should they work here?

The waiters
take the orders, lay the plates
with silent scorn, concealed disdain
- and, perhaps, a hint of compassion?
no, I think not.. how, they seem to wonder,
could any foreigner be so ignorant
as to eat here?
The drained ghosts of vegetables, and
would m'sieu like his meat
insulted lightly, heavily, or mediumly?
They long ago exhausted their pity.

Their compassion is reserved
for their fellow nationals -
they know that some strong reason
obliges them to eat here - perhaps
a funeral in the provinces. There's
the shadow of an implied shrug
as they lay the plates
with ancient formality,
take the redeeming order
for alcohol in which all sins are dissolved, forgiven

they're secret students of humanity;
they may discuss you and your strange behaviour
when they get home to a leisurely meal,
(a fine cut of meat beneath their jacket) :
dream of opening a small restaurant
somewhere in the provinces;

they'd miss you, though;

for anatomists,
friends are no substitute for strangers.

Michael Shepherd

0009 Rococo Time

It's part of the tourism thing –
you stick your nose, more in duty than in hope,
into the local church;
the flowers at least
may be friendly; the flower arrangers, busy..

you've been in churches which
as soon as you gently push the squeaky door,
frown on you, their fingers
to their lips, and point
to 'Thou Shalt Not' where you expected Jesus' open arms;

and to vast cathedrals asking, it seems,
an unformulated question of you
in their overwhelming magnificence
so that you'd like to kick a pew,
scrape a chair, dropp a hymnbook,
to find out in the echo echo echo
how Nanny says you should behave;

but this one's different:
as you step inside, it's as if
the fraction of a second before that moment,
some huge song-and-dance spectacular
was in rehearsal, Busby Berkeley in full charge,
then 'Freeze, kids...!' and all you see at first is
the lavish set: like a wedding cake, white as icing, giant size,
with a Technicolor sweet-shop suspended over it; while,
frozen in their extravagant body-language,
four golden figures beside you gesture, inviting you,
'Come on in, you too are onstage now!';
these are no evangelists to tell you what
it's all about; these are guys who know that you know too;
so of course you'll want to join in, join the wedding party;
you were part of it before you knew you were...

you've read the essays dutifully before you came –
' this Rococo church is a typical example of
the desperate overload of frivolous and

meaningless detail that betokens
the last dance of a culture in decline; note
the curlicues like sea-spray, shells and wavelets...'

not so; not so; this is the joy of a Creation
whose every move and moment is all joy;
seaspray, shells and wavelets on that blessed shore
which hears the trumpets sounding on the other side;
which cannot find the time and space enough
to shout its joy in gesture, plaster, paint;
this is a church which people rush to enter
to sing and dance the joy of being themselves;
a church which smiling, happy people leave
and fill the streets with love;

this church like some expensive wedding cake
is celebrating, dancing at its own wedding; and why not;
this joyful church is celebrating
the wedding of earth and heaven
and all, all are invited.

Michael Shepherd

0010 A Day, A Meadow, A Miracle

This is the meadow.

It slopes from bright South
down to the West and North
from the primroses in the southern hedge
down through the violets, sometimes white,
in the western hedge tipping down
to the rabbit warren and
down to the wild garlic
in perpetual shadow in the northern ditch
shouting among the nettles

this is where, each morning in May,
the world is made anew;
there are more wild flowers in this meadow
than you'll ever see together –
cowslips, oxslips, pink mayflowers,
wild orchids, red scabious,
yellow celandines, clover, cuckoo-pint...

and as the sun curves slowly round,
and the shadow moves aside,
the flowers, saturated with the morning dew,
shine each with a crystal drop

and it's not until you step among them
and a small cloud of moths and butterflies rise up,
that you see the meadow is so full of life,
sipping its daily bread of dew
and in an hour or so, pollen, honey;

every day this meadow
invites, invents anew
words fresh as dew –
joy, constancy, innocence,
love, freedom, rest,
wonder, praise, and gratitude –

if every day this miracle,
what of tomorrow

and the heart?

Michael Shepherd

0010 Memory

and brought back with her

the first few primroses she did not pick
tucked neat into the hedgerow

a wisp of sheepwool
caught on wire she did not touch

a dewdrop which the sun caught as she passed

rabbits who lifted softbrush ears
paused then hopped away and yet not fast

a slight breeze which did not touch the primroses
which blew the wisp of sheepwool a little for a moment

which trembled the dewdrop into colours
and yet it stayed on the grass stalk

in the night
the primroses sheltered in her and grew imperceptibly

the sheepwool almost touched her
the dewdrop joined the air around her

the rabbits slept close to her
the breeze sighed and waited outside the window

in the morning they awoke together

Michael Shepherd

0010 Miss Elizabeth Bishop Reads At Poemhunter

When we invited her to read to us
(she'd be 95 this year) , should we then ask
if she or we should choose
which poems she might read -
she who had written on manners...?
(and would we then, at question time,
dare to ask her politely
to check, maybe agree,
her 'also read' list? Bukowski, eh? well, well...)

The packed room was a little apprehensive:
might she have read our own poems here?
Though more likely not, we felt – exposed.
(her poems had remained almost uncommented,
uncommended, here at Poemhunter
and not all very highly scored or rated...)

Silence as she entered. Then as
she faced us on the platform, the years fell away.
Her nose seems still too young for her young face;
her face, still that of a girl of fourteen years
going on fifteen, clear-eyed, clear-browed,
eager to face life and find out
what it has in store;
(the girl who sang hymns to a seal
because they both believed, as she fancied,
in total immersion...)

the barest hint, at the corners of her mouth,
of the acquired, polite petulance
of one who has no time to waste,
eager to face life. Watch out.
(she didn't like cold calls and such
on the telephone.)

We'd asked her to read the
Invitation to Marianne Moore –
so that we could watch her face, and
bathe in her love so carefully expressed

('We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping')

and asked her too, to read
her Fannie Farmer cookbook verse – so that for years
to come, we'd remember how she smiled...
(she'd talked with Robert Lowell about having fun)

When finally she read the sonnet
written in the year she died
I thought of Prospero
rehearsing William Shakespeare in his part
(she who'd written about learning
the art of losing)

and as she read the sonnet,
we watched as her light spirit
gently left the platform
and floated out of the open door
like a pet bird, sighingly released,
flying out into space;
like a young girl
eager to face life.

Michael Shepherd

0010 Poemhunter And The Simplicity Of Freedom

Poetry is about freedom.
The spirit of freedom.
The freedom of spirit.

You're free to post your poems here.
People are free to comment on them.
Or not.

You're free to air your views
on poetry rather than people, please
on the Forum
(named after a marketplace
sometimes used as
a place of public entertainment
and human slaughter)
and they're free
to disagree

simply, free -
unless, of course
you wanted something else as well?

Michael Shepherd

0010 The Great Release

We begin by loving our parents,
(said the famous author) :
later we judge them;
rarely, if ever, do we forgive them...

a jaundiced view?
we remember (most of the fortunate) that childhood, once,
was bliss, and life was full and endless
and lived entirely in the present,
skies were blue, or rain meant indoor play;
and happiness and joy was always ours..

and yet, we blame our parents...
violently; or gently; or with unspoken qualifications...
made me do this; held this from me;
gave me too little attention; breathed down my neck too much...
the list goes on; the grudge; the shoulder-chip;
what secret solace that such misery affords!
we are so justified - our lovely, wilful selves!

suppose we believed, as Hindus do,
that something of us finds its way, at death,
into another body, another destiny,
in order to progress - or is it rather, to return -
to our god-given, blissful nature,
full of all we need;

and thus it follows as the night the day
- and as the death, the life -
that this our present life was dreamed up
by previous faults, yet set
by some divine program of mercy, providence,
to aid us, a Stoic show-jump course
so cunningly set out that we might overcome,
within ourselves, what stands
in our wished, natural, entitled way to bliss..

the inwardly courageous may take this view
to heart; exclaim triumphantly,

this is the life I chose me for myself –
I chose my parents, and all these seeming
outward, self-depriving, abusive things
around my rediscovering self – for, no-one else to blame;
today is now indeed
the first day of my real life;

and singing on our way, rejoice
to be ourselves as we would be

Michael Shepherd

0011 For The Godless But Good-Natured

If mankind has dethroned the ancient gods,
then what has mankind brought upon itself?

since - no more prayer, requests – no special treats
for those who offer up humility?

no god above the lesser gods – the One
who favoured those who followed 'our' stern creed;

no longer faith, or hope, or charity,
no longer blest by loving-kindliness?

what shall we place upon those empty thrones
and still avoid the legion of Man's sins?

those virtues which our forefathers saw as good –
which made the gods to smile – have they now changed

and Lying, Cheating, Killing, our new gods?
it cannot be.. so what of Reason's rule?

and what of Love – that even the gods themselves
declared the essence, binding 'them' and 'us'?

so Reason says – what godly things we sought
by some divine decree declared 'out there'

we must now seek within ourselves; as did
the Greeks; as do the Hindus now;

and find a glorious god within, at rest
until we waken him or her, and shine

as godly good in our most inward self;
believe ourselves so wholly perfect thus,

remembering in ourselves, magnificence
which pours out glory as those gods declared..

but where to start? with gratitude; and praise;
for all those things which so enrich our days;

for thanks and praise in life stand by themselves;
they call forth love, which makes all things, oneself.

Michael Shepherd

0011 Blown Rose Wise

How wise
the rose?

near the shortest day,
the seasons all confused this year
even the great globe itself
confused by man

and on this gusty day
a rose throws
itself upon the world
simultaneously hero, heroine, victim
seen calling through the window;
if it were a child alone out there
you would rush out to save it

does the rose know
how beautiful it is?

or is it wiser than we are,
knows more of love?
of law?
looks tenderly upon
man's need for beauty,
frail reassurance
of the beauty of our own soul

any moment now
the wind will tear its weakening petals

yet I saw it while it lasted, as if
the only rose in the world

and before it returned
to wherever the souls of roses
sigh, laugh, smile,
return to eternal Rose

it wrote this poem in – to it –

an unfamiliar language
that tried to translate
its beauty into me

wiser, in some way,
than I

Michael Shepherd

0011 Chet Baker Sings And Plays: A Homage

That's the word we use
for the abrupt suddenness
of the old rubber-squeezed car horn
on the outside, by the driving seat
of the old battered Ford

and unforgettably for the anguished heart,
the bugle on the battlefield
as stretcher-bearers move in gathering dusk,
the final drawn-out, liquid, haunting pa-a-a-rp.... dies away
to pregnant, bloody silence;
death after life; life after death.

and then the sound of the civilian trumpet
in the days of the uneasy, hopeful postwar peace
hitting our eardrums, calling to attention,
stirring our blood
or perversely,
making the silence in between the notes
more silent, more laid back, more significant,
as if to say, how quickly
rest may follow action, action rest,
hot, cool; cool, hot;

So trumpet can be voice; voice, trumpet;
behind them, heart and mind, and mood and mode
sing, even whisper, you're unforgettable,
that's what you are; there will never be
another you; that's how it is;
if you don't know what love is,
I'll play it to you; maybe sing..

his husky, boyish voice,
a hint of Oklahoma on Pacific shores,
sang – sings – the standards tenderly
as if they are the given texts for all mankind
of this new day of love; they apply
to him, and you; and everyone; so
he makes no pretence he thought them first; .

yet, in the long pauses in his singing, he's thinking them into now.

then as the line's still finishing, his trumpet
turns the words to comment, as the cage is opened,
the bird flies out and up, released to joy
in boundless air and space;

as if it were outside the soundproofed recording studio
but recognised the song; and knew itself as free,
soaring high in sad songs or in glad songs,
knowing them the same at heart,
as a trumpet soars its notes
out over the Pacific air as gulls call to the waves,
singing liberty, equality, fraternity -
I'm telling you what love is

Michael Shepherd

0011 Contragulations To Poemhunter's Damnable Mini-Quiz

So, you're sitting comfortably here at the PC
with a few precious minutes to spare -
escaping the family,
or waiting for a message at work,
or the boss isn't around;

you're a poet,
you need to keep in practice.
Now's the time to knock off a haiku
that will knock the Japs off their cherry trees into the snow,
maybe a limerick to throw those
silver-tongued Irish into the murky
black-and-tan Guinnessy Liffey out of sheer envy,
slag off a rival poet (poet!) on the Forum,
generally feel that life's for living,

but no - there's that damn 'quick quiz'
lurking with a wink on the Home Page -
wouldn't you think management could spare the time
to fix the spelling of dropp and delet, instead
of wasting our precious creative powers
on that damn quiz?

I mean, there can't be many people in the world
sailing the 'largest inland stretch of water' right now,
do they care that it's - no, I'm not going
to tell you - water's just water when you're on it

and you'd be pretty silly to set off
in your hired ice-breaker for a jolly weekend
in northern Canadian waters
without knowing which is the northernmost island -
oh silly me - we should have turned right at Baffin Bay...

and either you've read Balzac, Bronte, or that comic strip
the rest of the world never heard of - or you haven't -
and anyway, you've only got to do the damn thing

four times for each question you don't know...

and - oh just a minute - gotta check the stats...
as if I cared that Reece Kay got it all right
in only 12 attempts, I don't know him
but I hate him already...

Bukowski never had this problem

Michael Shepherd

0011 How Rilke Might Have Translated Bashó On Poetry

Be solitary.

Love solitude, and don't look for poetry;
don't seek what former poets sought;
see what is still and changeless;
see also what is changing;
be filled with the true nature of things – mountains, rivers, trees, grasses, falling blossoms, the scattering leaves,
and, yes, humanity too, its true nature –
and the universe will become your companion.
So your solitude will be full of the universe;
and you will watch, unmoved, the reality
and the vacuity of the world.

Concentrate your thoughts, in solitude,
on an object, on each object;
in this concentration,
the space between oneself and the object will disappear,
and the essential nature of the object can be perceived.

Then be quick to express it, while it lives for you;
say quickly what is in your mind;
as a woodcutter fells a tree, or
a swordsman leaps at his enemy, or
as you cut a ripe watermelon with a sharp knife,
or take a large bite at a pear;
this immediacy will be the life of your poem,
for nature will write the poem for you.

The language may be untrue;
but it will live with the truth.

You may feel that writing so quickly,
you may always fail; but pay no attention;
know no other thing than writing poetry;
let it make you penniless, if that is
what it needs, to speak itself.

Then, in your solitude,
which is so full of everything,
the poetic spirit will lead you wherever you must go,
make you a friend of nature,
and every form of existence will reveal
its individual feelings to you –
which are similar to those of men;
and all things, you will know, have their fulfilment.

In this solitude, your mind will be undistracted;
and then, enlightened by nature itself,
you may return to the world,
with a lightness of being, and poems
as light as looking
at the sandy bed of a shallow river;

as a tree untouched by the axe,
seemingly useless,
vulnerable to wind and rain,
at ease in itself.
Like a poet.

(This text is Bashó's advice to a poet. But the medieval Japanese poet and the modern European poet seem to be so close in their search for essence, for being, that some of Bashó's phrases have the same ring as Rilke's own advice to a young poet. I have tried to bring this out discreetly..)

Michael Shepherd

0011 'Living And Dying, Laughing And Forgetting' - Listening To Ferlinghetti

and you've read many poems like this,
on the printed page;
the big words thrown in like some hot curry
where you're short of good solid meat
so rap a few more big words in and
another spoonful of curry powder
or sex, or some current buzz-word
denoting a lifetime of youthful intelligent
rebellion and independent thought...

but not this time.

This is a famous poet of a famous time
and he's just written it, in his eighties
and he won't live for ever and he's here
and reading it with vigour; a husky voice, and
his face flushed with eternity;
eternity, and innocence;
he means every word; and each word
comes from the centre of his life

'living and dying,
laughing and forgetting...'

and listening to him, you could feel
that poetry's too good for the printed page –
it should be declaimed, to audiences
who've walked for dusty miles,
who've bathed in sacred springs,
who've brought their children,
who've been here all day
and who will sit silent by the fires at night,
who are on their knees
listening with their lives

Michael Shepherd

0011 Scrubbing Carrots

Every Friday, a happy smiling man
who says he's a mixture of Spain, Trinidad and England
delivers a bag of organic vegetables
and a bag of organic fruit, and
it's a bit like a child's Christmas bran-tub adventure –
some strange vegetables I've never seen before
and would never have dared to buy;
or eat, if I found them growing in the garden...

but it's worth it for the carrots alone –
they taste, well, OK, like carrots used to taste..
and each week, they come from a different grower, so
they arrive clean and smooth one week,
clotted with earth another, but
as Rilke might say, rich with carrot-ness..

and I clean them with a respect which they
and the sheer living greenness of the greens
and other vegetables naturally demand of me
so that vegetable-cleaning
which used to be a chore done with attention
only at half strength, is now something more -

and in this mood, almost overlooked small great miracles of life
just happen of themselves –
two weeks ago, I watched amazed
as my two hands of themselves
devised a new way of cleaning carrots –
the hands reversed their roles: left hand
now held the scouring pad, diagonally,
and the right hand spiralled the carrot
in the pad... and lo! those etched horizontal lines
of dirt were perfectly removed..

and the isness of the carrot
and the isness of its servant
were together one silent song
where, it seemed,
the forgotten met the remembered

and rejoiced.

Michael Shepherd

0011 Senior Shitizen Or, Old Age

You never did
sort yourself out
so there's no point now
going over all that

all you want to do
all you've got time for
is to open your arms
eyes heart etc
to everything,
everyone

hoping not too many people
laugh or make it
difficult for you
standing bemused
with open arms
on the traffic island
by the crossroad

Michael Shepherd

0011 Synaesthesia..

Sounds nasty, maybe
life-threatening:
'I'm sorry, boys,
Michael can't come out today
and play – he's suffering from
synaesthesia..'

Oho, no – synaesthesia
is Poet Central: it's the description
of what one sense perceives
in terms of another.. like when
Emily Dickinson,
she of the golden pen –
writes 'To the bugle,
every color is red'...

So here we have the soldiers
Changing the Guard
at Buckingham Palace
(Christopher Robin
went down with Alice...) :
the scarlet tunics are loud as trumpets,
the bugles are painting the town scarlet red;
and watching them are Gertrude Stein,
e e cummings, and Emily herself...

In the Odyssey (we're talking
top-drawer Lit, you'll note)
the Sirens sang with honeyed voices:
'Pooh Bear was just going out of the door
when he heard a whisper like a bee
busy in a flower; then a louder sound
like a happy bee taking a rest on Pooh's ear
on the way from one flower to another..
then he realised – it was the hunny jar
at the end of the line of hunny jars,
asking to be noticed...
Pooh sighed an obedient sigh,
took off his scarf, took a spoon

from the drawer, and the smiling hunny jar
from the shelf...'

This was the song the Sirens sang...

And there's one whole song about it:

You're the tops!

you're the Tower of Pisa;

you're the smile

on the Mona Lisa...

you're the metaphor

that's better for

the thought;

you're all the senses

that God dispenses,

all making sport...

so, I'm sorry,

Michael regrets, he's unable to play today –

he's at his computer,

velvet blues on the CD,

tasting words with his fingertips,

poems glinting on the horizon of his ear,

dancing in the stillness of the mind.

Michael Shepherd

0011 Those White And Future Blues - To Chet

Under the ring of linked brown arms,
bare feet, brown feet with whiter soles
drum on the dusty, hard brown earth, stomp the rhythm
as if to wake the gods of earth
to draw the rain down to the roots,
caressing seeds against the growing time,
hearing the tears at the heart of things;

hearing the shuffle-clank
of leg irons listening for some rhythm that consoles
with promise; hearing the blues sung softly, like a prayer,
taken up across the cotton field,
sadness meeting hope in longing patience

and a century ago
the white lady who loved Africa said,
I am weary with the future

*

white boy, you're so young –
how could you hear the blues so well?
are they just around the corner
of every town that's built, as dusk descends?
Do they lurk wherever lips meet plangent trumpet,
in the reeds of mourning clarinet,
the nostalgia of a dreaming saxophone?
Wherever future whispers to the past
and hears the sad reply?

white boy, white boy without a past,
you hear the blues so well,
I think you hear
those future blues,
those old white future blues,
those lonesome future blues.

Michael Shepherd

0012 Ego Takes The Stage

It's a lovely old-fashioned tea-room
in one of those rare up-town hotels
that's still a family concern; well-run,
staff been there for years; prices
reasonable. In fact the whole enterprise
is civilised. Even media types
for whom it stood in angry youth
as all they affected to despise, rather like it now.

It's full though admirably leisurely
every afternoon – all friendly chatter,
silver-plate and fancy cakes. It stands
for exactly what it is, now rare – a tea-room.
Those who visit regularly wear the faintest sense
of self-congratulation. There was one
at every major London corner not so long ago.

Yesterday, suddenly, an intrusion:
onto the dais where a pianist plays
from four to five of a weekend afternoon,
a studenty-dressed chap launched himself
with a rant, which seemed to take in
everything from coffee and class to human rights.

Conversation dwindled; out-of-towners
up for supper and a show
judged it perhaps as experimental afternoon theatre
put on by an ill-advised management;
(the tea-dances there, long gone) :
some of the younger media types
barracked him; the rest of us
listened politely, before he was removed.

Conversation picked up slowly, then
became more stimulated; some of us
remembered the bombings only
just up the road. On the more senior tables,
his performance was compared unfavourably
with what we used to hear in '68. More

hot water was called for; it seemed to have
made us thirstier.

It was, altogether
a very English occasion. A pity John Betjeman
or Alan Bennett couldn't have been there.
When we left, the cloakroom attendants
looked friendlier, as if the tips were a little
larger today. And departing visitors
smiled at one another. We had shared
an occasion in central London,
and lived to tell the tale at home.

Michael Shepherd

0012 Remembering And Being Reminded

'Did you remember to tidy up that room of yours
this morning – or do you need reminding? ...'

that gap between remembering and being reminded
pursues our childhood and right through our life

as if there are two compartments in our brain
joined by the snaky sliding metal walkway

between two railway carriages at top speed,
the air, the ground, our life, flashing by

how close they are, how far apart,
what parts them in the living heart?

as, how can I ever forget you, all the life
we lived together, every little movement

of your eyes, your body, yes, your mind,
your eyes on me, the day

you looked at me, then looked away...
yes, I remember you, in every little thing

- then on the crowded street, before
some fancy high-priced fashion store,

some woman passes, with a dash
of Worth's 'Je reviens' – and like a flash

I'm some old heart, some long ago to now heart, reminded that
I get along without you very well,

of course I do... except when all the scents of you
become our song, and you are you...

and behind, the memory
of whom I like to live and be,

and the sharper, true, intense
reminder of my truer sense.

Michael Shepherd

0012 Basho On Robert Frost

Icy evening road
Lonely traveller

Good choice!

Michael Shepherd

0012 Bereavement

What is it, when we mourn and grieve and cry
for those we loved - and love - now passed away,
that gives our pain such brute totality?

so vital, that we almost love that pain
(our faces sometimes radiant in grief) ,
unwilling to let go pain's absolute,
since there, hides knowledge deeper than belief
of that sole absolute itself, the root
of all our being, oneness that we share
with those with whom we sought our selves to prove?

that pain, which barely differs from a prayer
to know - by suffering deepest hurt of love:
Yes! Let us dive into that holy deep
of total grief and love: then, can self weep?

(2001)

Michael Shepherd

0012 Creation?

Creation out of
nothing, nowhere, no-whence?

How much more intriguing
and possible,
even probable,
if Creation came out of
everything, everywhere,
everythere, everywhence..
alltime, allspace, all,

which is after all - or before all -
what we all wish to return to,
enjoy, and be, and know...

scientists, why not meet
philosophers, worshippers,
and poets, where Creation is all
just a great big work of art
made out of forever-love and therefore-law, as
one and all?

Michael Shepherd

0012 'Only One Life Was Lost In This Disaster'

The water's not so deep
down here, it's still stirred
on the sea-bed by the off-shore tide.
The seaweed waves in slow rhythm, almost gracefully.

Sometimes a crab, going somewhere not apparent
with laborious stubborn intent
displaces very slightly the bone-white skeleton
lying on its back, almost relaxed, almost temporary,
as if waiting for time to give some signal
to turn those stark claws back into a son's hands

or the current turns a few degrees the eyeless head,
the young jaw, as a light sleeper
in a dream, submissive to the tide;

peaceful; down here
in this filtered light
death, grief, tears, a mother's memories
seem unknown, have no place.

Michael Shepherd

0012 Poetry Class

Two o'clock on a quiet afternoon,
and the class file in for their poetry 'hour',
brief daily slot in the packed week's course in many things.

We've been through 'the basics' –
whatever they are these days;
they've been told what, at least,
they used to be; I try to keep all options open,
say 'this is what it used to be', tell them
it's a great time for poetry now, no rules,
just sincerity, the open heart, some models
if they need them, so after this week,
just read, write, as much as they can;
and now, forget about achievement,
just feel really good
that you're doing what you want to do,
being what you want to be - yourself -
saying what you want to say –
feel more like a loving, expressive human being
than you've ever felt before..

A few more basics, just as few as may be useful;
then I say, here's today's offered theme, stay in the room,
or find a place outside on this fine day,
come back promptly please..

Forty brief minutes later, they return;
would anyone like to read theirs, no compulsion?
None of them want to be the first, in case...
I wonder if they know just how much they're loved..
I ask one, in the end; then of course
they all want to read, each with
an apologetic preface first..

At the end of the week, the inevitable
request for a presentation; I've tried
to shield these innocents from that.
I say, it's voluntary... they all want to read.

And so they do. We chose 'Childhood' as the theme
at 24 hours' notice and just forty minutes..
perfect choice. The audience love them
for just being themselves, and what they have to say.

The one who pretends to be a mouse
reads hers; her cheeks are pink with mingled
modesty and sincerity. I catch
the light on the corner of my colleague's eye
where a tear of sheer love is gathering.
Poetry has worked its magic once again.

Michael Shepherd

0012 Re: Poem For Maryliz

God is brilliant. God is cool.

(We do RE at our school)

Michael Shepherd

0012 S T I R R E R!

Oh why must you flaunt and yet again
your proclaimed divisions with others
like some badge of honour?

And yes, I could not note your
stirring, stirring, stirring,
if I did not see it in myself...

Creating this dolls' theatre in our mind,
allotting all the minor parts
to those we think we know,
reserving to ourselves
the role of the protagonist,

and the dramatist as well:
keeping the action going,
sudden feuds and gracious relinquishing,
enemies inflated, lovers too,
claims and counterclaims,
abuse poured on abuse,
fragile allegiances made and unmade,
clowns and ghosts and retributions,
heroes and villains in quick costume change,
larger than life creations empty of heart or mind,
like some gaudy set of children's shaped balloons;

if you had written it, but with more grace,
we might applaud it; but you pretend
to live it, foist this empty play upon us;
it is untimely; we yawn, hate, doze,
and carefully tipping up our seats,
leave your theatre quietly and early,
treading the carpeted aisle,
outside the clattered exit doors
breathing the fresh air of actuality,
happy to rediscover life.

If this gaudy fool's cap fits,
then wear it, or forswear it;

mine's there, hanging on the peg.

Michael Shepherd

0012 Summer E E Cummings In

said rilke
god needs us too

people celebrate spring
spring celebrates people

parks enjoy children
gardens care for gardeners

flowers bless the showers
eggs make birds

flowers choose their pickers
new dresses look for girls

kites drag children
love looks for lovers

and merry is all

with a ho and a hey
for this jolly today
tomorrow will be
yesterday

Michael Shepherd

0012 The House Of Metaphor

After you've negotiated that artfully-conceived
sharp elbow bend in the long, grand drive
through the fields of its estate,
and it hoves into view,
you always gasp – this palace
- no, more like a temple with living quarters –
set deep in the countryside, yet as sure
as one in Athens or in Rome;
yet that too is artfully contrived -
the slight mound it's built on,
the cunning proportion that magnifies,
disguises, with its public face
the aptness of a family home;
its public rooms so grand, just echoing enough
to magnify a public speech; its family rooms
smallish, cosy; love and friendliness
live here. It says to the world,
stability; tradition re-affirmed; yet
this is our familiar family home.

It has its rooms, as rooms should be,
devoted to each family pursuit:
here's the grand library
but here, with books so evidently, lovingly well read;
you almost missed the little girl, her hair and knees
curled round a book, deep in that leather green armchair;
the study, where your breathing seems to change,
there's such a still and living silence here;
the nursery that emanates a lifetime's care;
the children's bedrooms set around it,
through which you ran and laughed and ran again; the window seats
from which you looked so wistfully
as childhood's assurance faded into teenage questioning;
a house to leave,
a house to come back to;

a metaphor
as living, haunting, as the poetry it is.

0012 The Law Of Love

In the eyes of true law,
everyone is equal.

In the eyes of true love,
everyone is the same.

Are love and law, then,
the same?

Or if not,
which came first?

Michael Shepherd

0012 We'Re Sorry - All Our Lines To Poemhunter Are Busy...

Your call is important to us.

Please hold the line.

A dedicated critic will answer your call
as soon as they finish with the last victim.

To help us to allocate an appropriate advisor
please choose one of the following options:

If this is the first poem you ever wrote
but you're rather pleased with it,
press One

If you've just been dumped on,
and hope he'll read this,
press Two

If this is a blatant suicide blackmail attempt,
press Three

If you never read anyone else's poems here
but still want them to comment on yours,
press Four

If you think that rock and pop lyrics are the real 'poetry',
hang up and read some poetry instead..

If you just want to be noticed
and can't even bother to write a poem,
press Five and
you will be connected to the Forum.

For all other ways of gaining attention,
press Six

Michael Shepherd

0013 A New Poetic Language

If we could only find words for

the freedom, the unbounded energy,
the love, the joy,
the devotion, the care,
the seriousness, the play,
the sensitivity, the abandon,
the surgical precision, the anatomical care,
the discovery, the giving,
the pure animal watched by caring human,
the passion, the attention to every detail,
the sublime choreography, the poetry in motion,
the silent song, the music without pause,
the feeling of immortality,
the sense of gods and goddesses at play
at the centre of Creation

of what we get up to
or down to
in the bedroom
or even
before we manage to get there

there would be some fresh and subtle
poetry made, and after

we emerge from this timeless time
glancing at our watches,
lying into our cellphones,
those telltale diagonal ridges
below our sparkling eyes,
filled with memories still in seed,
above our bruised lips,
sensing touch and air
and hunger and fulfilment

perhaps there'll speak
a finer poetry about other matters
which love teaches

Michael Shepherd

0013 Aftermath: London, July 7,2005

Two days after,
when they'd cleared away the mangled
meaningless twist of metal,
familiar red paint smeared with oily black,
its intended destination still proclaimed,
I passed the place on business
and walked more slowly
avoiding the eyes of others
in case they imagined in my eyes
or I in theirs,
some falsity, some failure of the mind,
some lack of the appropriate emotion,
whatever that might be -
almost a guilt acquired
in some complicity

In the gutter, a glove, brown, damp, like a hand,
lying on its back, its fingers slightly curled
as if in mute request
for a reason

but to whom, now, to return it?

Michael Shepherd

0013 And, Friend...

and if you wonder, friend, why I begin
a poem thus – you are to understand
that it's as if
we have been close friends all our life,
friends, as Kabir defined a friend
as if no-one ever tried to speak of friend before –
friends, who share the silences between their words
as much as sharing their most inward thoughts;

so, our conversation's just as much
a continuation of our friendship,
wasting no time in speaking passing things,
sharing some new thought in turn
and asking more for listening
than easy agreement for politeness' sake;

for, we're listening to the allness of the all -
all that has been said and
all that cannot yet be said
but thought in silences, in pauses between speech,
all that we might say
when we find words in which to say it,

and because
there's not much time, to say what we would say
and so, we speak of that which time
can never steal; so there is always time
to speak, and hear the silence
out of which speech comes;
listening for the unspoken
bringing miracles

Michael Shepherd

0013 Basho Reads Robert Frost

This road.

Nobody goes down it.

But it's still there.

(The first two lines of the haiku are in fact Basho's own; and there's said to be a Japanese-Chinese word-symbol-play - mechi/Tao [the Way])

Michael Shepherd

0013 Pink Without Think

My friend the gardener who manages
to combine romantic or ex-romantic
with realist and fine poet and
loving gardener and teacher
and much else, harmoniously,

points out to me that the pink geranium
swinging gently in its hanging basket
in the late September sun, with
an effusive burst of flowering
which it alternates with exhausted,
barely green recovery and dry stalk,

puts on this display simply (simply!)
to attract insects to accidentally
(accidentally!) aid it to
propagate its species..

so I, who am nothing to it
except perhaps a passing Samaritan
who gives it water in a thirsty summer
and, perhaps irrelevantly, perhaps
from deeper cause,
received just now a shout
of pure pinkness from it so that
my senses thrilled, passed the message uncommented
to what seemed like my purest being,

am indeed attracted, my nature to that of it,
animal or human I'll leave others to decide,
and from that vaguest of cosmic relevance
intend to see it through the winter
to the birth of Spring or spring of birth
with what - my gardener friend -
may well be love

Michael Shepherd

0013 Sainthood Via Automated Complaints

Living saints seem to be an endangered species
though nobody complains

so how about the 'sustainable' bit?
How To Be a Saint isn't yet in that
expanding Idiot's Guide series

however

there is a Path, a Way
right at the tips of your fingers
though have your blood pressure
checked first

automated complaints

and I'm sure I don't need
to spell that out for you

the one that you can't even get through to make;
the options that don't include yours;
the hanging on, because
we value your call;
the background music
like that loop from
Mendelsohn's violin concerto
like a continuously thwarted orgasm
without a climax

so here's the perfect practice

run through a checklist
of the required virtues;
western religions tend to run to
quite a few; but Indians
love enumeration – they've been at it
for thousands of years; and now
they're Call Centre International
it could be a growth industry

I've got a fine list here from the Jains
which is especially practical
since they don't require subscribing
to a specific image of the god
who's running all this, remember:

you could take one virtue a day to practice
or just have the checklist there beside
the telephone – I guess
if this catches on, there'll be
an illustrated poster to hang there
in exquisite medieval illumination

so for when you get through to a human being,
or better, while you're waiting,
here's the first nine of the ten:

forgiveness;
humility;
straightforwardness;
truth;
restraint from anger, abuse, etc;
penance; (you could settle there for patience..)
non-attachment;
indifference to any kind of gain or loss;
cleanliness of soul, mind, body;

I guess by now you're
either laughing or crying;
both have their uses
on the way to sainthood;

oh yes, the tenth,
supreme sex-control;
not sure if that applies, apart from monks etc.,
but it might somehow

anyway, there's nine
for you to practice on meanwhile;
I don't need to advise you on
which institutions will help you most by their hindrance;

you already have that list?
if not, press...

Michael Shepherd

0013 The Witness Box

It was a minor court case –
a matter of a market trader
selling maybe stolen goods,
the police attempting, probably not for the first time,
to get clear evidence to nail him...

but for those serving on a jury
for the first time, an occasion
full of all the solemn majesty of law;
the difficulties of following court proceedings;
weighing the evidence; and most of all,
the fear of convicting an innocent man –
even, as visibly here, a slippery man to deal with.
The court was small; almost intimate.

After the grubby, vague, sometimes seemingly irrelevant
prosecution claims (points being made that
a jury would not appreciate, involving finer points of law) –
and, months after the event,
policemen reading from notes they took of the case
which were as evidence, more like a crime half seen, and
half assumed, the accused took the witness stand

and as he took the last two steps towards the stand
I witnessed an extraordinary moment, even with
his back to me – for two seconds at the most, you could see
the burden of a lifetime's criminality fall from his shoulders;
in this moment of pure, beautiful grace:
something within him knew that this was the given moment
to 'come clean' once and forever...

before me stood, for a single glimpse,
the human being in primal innocence.
So when he took the witness stand
and declared himself not guilty
at was, at one level, manifestly true..

He took the stand; swore on the holy book
to tell the truth, the whole truth,

and nothing but the truth;
and lied and lied and lied – so obviously,
that to my astonishment, the judge intervened,
leaned over to him and said in almost motherly tones,
'Mr Smith – why is it that whenever you are asked
a question.. you tell..a lie? '...

In the courtroom, a breathless pause;
(the defence lawyers can't have been too pleased
to hear this condemnation by implication) :

'It's me nature, ma'am' was the sincere and miserable reply..

The police failed to convince us of his guilt – although
we guessed they'd been after him for some time;
we let him off; but in that moment which was unforgettable,
I'd seen innocence and guilt within one man.

Michael Shepherd

0014 Lyric 2

The heart so loves to love,
loves love, beyond the loving all;
The mind so plays, so loves to play,
plays with that greater play
of love, that plays with mind and time;
time plays with love, times out of mind,
but love's the heart of it;
love loves beyond time, love loves beyond mind,
for in the end,
there is no end to it.

Michael Shepherd

0014 A Hindu Temple Speaks

How can I, a temple, persuade you
that the boundless,
the limitless,
the eternal,
the One,
exist?

I could tell you that
only those who are bound
recognise the boundless,
only those who are limited
recognise the limitless,
only those who are mortal
recognise the eternal
only those who feel themselves many
recognise the One

or I could tell you that
only boundlessness tells you you are bound;
only limitlessness shows you your limits,
only the eternal shows you your mortality;
only the One shows you multiplicity

or, if you're still not convinced,
see my sculptured couples;
kiss, and find
what love tells us

Michael Shepherd

0014 From The Koran, Sura 29

Remembering as first and foremost, Allah,
who knows of all your actions in His name,
be courteous to all Children of the Book; for
Arab, Christian, Jew, this Book's the same:
They share with you, God's spoken revelation;
whose God and your God are but ever one;
in Adam, Abraham, Moses, all one nation;
and unto Him all men, as one, return.

He gives the infidels their painful burden,
the faithful and the good He will reward,
for life on earth is but a sport and pass-time;
the true life lives, with mercy, in the Lord.

Surrender to the one God, in His Name:
His heaven and earth for all men is the same.

Michael Shepherd

0015 On The Mental Freedom Of Old Age

What I always say is
when you get older
you can't always remember what
what you always say is

Michael Shepherd

0015 Aftermath Of War

Within themselves, they hold
more than any man or woman should be asked to hold;
they are the unsung heroes of the peace
which clutches at the coat-tails of a war;
and we can never truly know them;
only offer them love, support, respect...

My first school had been an officers' recuperation hospital
or final hospice for the wounded – in their body or their mind -
in the 1914-18 war; now
the dignified head doctor of few words
and his beautifully-mannered, voluptuous
ex-head-nurse wife
had made of it an ideal, loving school
for the new children of a new era after
'the war to end all wars'...

The last resting place of warriors with screaming silent minds
who could not recuperate or
who found death so much more peaceful than their life
became, first the art room,
then the chapel: death, art, God and life
all together in one room.

My second school had as its teaching staff
several ex-officers who had chosen to shroud their memories
in teaching that new generation; but ironically,
were asked to run the cadet force which was
intended to preserve that lovely peace..
the sergeant-major who taught us PT and defensive war
had a face that was a repulsive souvenir –
like camouflage – brown, red, livid white,
almost the yellow-green of mustard gas
that had painted war upon him;
though he saved his lungs...
fine, stern, stiff-upper-lip teachers
shrouding their memories, until
some pupil tested them too far –
then their anger spilled, their canes and swagger-sticks
fiercely wielded, were memories for those (not us) who knew,

of discipline that might shoot at dawn
for the sake of lives then saved at dusk...
today, they'd be hauled into court for passing on 'abuse';
we were taught by heroes.

My third school gave me a housemaster,
another unsung, unsinging hero, a confirmed bachelor
so we thought, who likewise buried unknown memories
in devoted teaching; few clues except
the same occasional, devastating temper when aroused;
in his modest study, a few small
muzzy photos in silver frames, of comrades – dead or alive?
or did it matter? In his late fifties or even early sixties,
some inner torment of his memories transcended,
he surprised us all by marrying happily and producing
a large family. And once again, we had little clue
about the war he fought; or whether the nights
brought him tormented dreams...

We were taught by heroes who were asked to hold
more than any man or woman should be asked to hold:
do we wish – or should we wish –
that we knew then what we guess now?
They, teaching us from all their memories of hideous war,
how to grow up in peace; only to see
a generation of those same boys and girls
demanded by another war..

Autumn again; brown leaves fall like green lives;
soon, November mists and poppies
red as blood, red as children's blood
from a terrible union, of heroism and futility
called war.

Michael Shepherd

0015 Frenzy

There's frenzy in the kitchen:
a pale yellow brimstone butterfly, frantic -
fluttering dashes, dives, attacks,
swerves and retreats
from the naked light-bulb,
again and again drawn by
(is it her?) irresistible beautiful light,
repelled by the passionate heat of (her)
denying presence, cold to her lover...

outside, I'd give it but a glance;
here inside, the agitation is unnerving,
drawing me in as if it bears
a metaphor for life..
a lover that will not learn
that what it most desires
is not to be fulfilled..

I grab a kitchen sieve,
wave it ineffectively,
now talking to the creature like a baby
in some mortal danger -
'we're going to save you..' 'we're going to save you..'

suddenly the butterfly,
as if I had uttered the purest prayer (as indeed I had) ,
settles in an instant upon the sieve's outside,
all passion spent, and
totally at peace; allows
my careful passage to the open air;

leaving some metaphor unformed,
more unresolved questions of myself
than poetry may yield

Michael Shepherd

0015 From The Koran, Sura 55:

The Lord, the Merciful, has taught you this:
created you; and gave you gift of speech;
made order in the world; made plants and trees;
 which blessing of the Lord would you deny?

He made the heavens; set balance in all things,
through laws which, followed, keep you close to Him,
and watches over you afresh each day;
 which blessing of the Lord would you deny?

The earth, its fruits and grain and scented herbs;
salt water in the sea, yet fresh for you;
the good rewarded and the bad destroyed;
and, though you die, His majesty abides;

compassion, mercy, glory, majesty -
which blessing of the Lord would you deny?

Michael Shepherd

0015 'Infectious Holiness'..

Read the newspapers
from the back to the front, instead
and joy can catch you unawares

obituaries: all too often you just wish
you could have known them when
they were alive and glorious..

maybe there's a place for a special
service of celebration, memorial, honour
for all those who read their obituary
and wished they'd known them..so
get together in their honour in the hope
that something happens..

here's Murray Rogers, died at 89,
went from Britain to India to Jerusalem
to Hong Kong to the Mohawks of Ontario
to Oxford... and described as
'a priest of infectious holiness'..

just imagine - you met him by accident
one fine day, and next thing you know,
you've caught - well, they're waiting to see
whether it's a mild case, give it time,
maybe severe or even, terminal..

a bit like around this time of year,
popping into a pub in Bethlehem
or that place just outside the Temple
which is the equivalent of Speakers' Corner
or doing a bit of fishing just off the shore
of Galilee... these public places
are a hotbed of infection at this time of year

infectious holiness

Michael Shepherd

0015 'Intelligent Design' Goes Bats

Once upon a time
in the forests of Ecuador -
but this is a true story,
who'd dare to make it up?

there was and is today
a flower with a deep bell-like cup
whose tempting nectar is just out of reach
to all but one species

In the forests of Ecuador
there's a species of bat
with a tongue 9 centimetres,
that's 3 inches, long
and therefore quite a proportion
of its bodyweight
which is the only species
yes you've guessed it

there's something going on here

it's called something like
species co-evolution -
have they come to some cute arrangement
and if so, what language did they whisper in?

that means, over hundreds, thousands, millions?
of years, each generation the flower's bell
got infinitesimally longer and
the bat's tongue got longer

Had they allowed for the possibility
that one day, mankind,
meddling as mankind does,
might mess up the rain -forests of Ecuador
and suddenly, a shortage of
flowers - or of bats?
the deal's off... but anyway,
who gave these guys the right

to bargain this private deal?

Can it be that Intelligent Design
sticks a offside pass or two in?
A kinda divine joke by Evolution
or vice versa..

Michael Shepherd

0015 Mrs Wordsworth Joins Poemhunter

I love to see the daffodils,
they're just so very yellow.
In jugs upon the window-sills
they make me feel so mellow!

But when the daffs begin to niff
it gives my Will the willies,
so now I buy them market-fresh,
flown over from the Scillies.

Michael Shepherd

0015 Reading A Short Story Of Whose Life

and since they say
you're the greatest American short story writer,
I'm reading the one of yours
you chose yourself

and as I'm reading
I become two people sitting here:

there's the cynical grown-up,
enjoying it yes but
all the time - how's he setting it up,
what's he making us feel? -
now he's slipping in
something a little out of kilter;
now it's all going wrong for
the guy - hero, villain?
now it's coming good again, how's he going to avoid
ending in fairyland or in total disaster?

and there's the little person
sitting in their tiny warm pajamas,
soft, cosy, comforting,
laundered with more love
than he (or she) 's yet earned in their short life,
knowing all this tale
from many repetitions
but loving this repeated game -
suppose
that this time, just this once,
it's going to end differently...?

so only if I listen ev'ry moment
can I make it come out happily this time..

and when it ends - aah - like it should -
my tiny toes wiggling with delight -
and they live happily ever after...
is this the bliss I've not yet earned,
but what I'm due - the innocence

with which I'm born, and which entitles me
to know that this is me;

or am I being told,
this is the tale which I must earn with life? that
these are love's laws for me to keep?

Michael Shepherd

0015 The Couple On The Station Platform

There's this couple
they're standing there, not close enough
to be about to kiss and separate,
one for the train, the other
more slowly back, but close

people pass them, one way, the other,
they're still; they're calm, it's an important decision but
they're sensible people, they're
going to make this together,
give each other space, take it
slowly so that

years and children on from now
they'll look back and know
they did the right thing at the time
whether they're together then or
happily two different families,
two different partners,
no regrets.

if they'd been standing like that for
just five seconds, they'd be simply
deciding whether there was time
to grab a quick snack or whether
to risk what's on the train but

they're still standing there; time
is less important than that
they should decide together so that
they'll feel the same way forever
as they feel soon, when the moment comes
that they know what they'll do

this is not a film, or some poem which
has a beginning and an end
it's now and it's two lives
and I, an onlooker drawn in
a passing glance, into these two lives,

am caring for these two people
I know nothing about, so much that
I cannot bear to know the outcome
in case I know too much
even though I know they'll make
the right decision. I
walk on, slowly, as if I'm
carrying something important that
I'll unpack later.

Michael Shepherd

0016 Amphibrach

A tinker, a tailor, a soldier, a sailor...

'A one and a two and a three and a four, guys...'

The amphibrach sings one of poetry's basics;
a metrical foot – though a difficult one; it
is named from the Greek, meaning short at
both ends – that is, short, long, short, short, long short;
a poet can use it like this for a few lines, or longer;
however, it always seems trying to be something
else – like, some poor donkey who's lame in one hind-leg;
it's happier changing to dactyl or ana-
pest – see what I mean, now?

Michael Shepherd

0016 Christmas Rose - A Spell

Blown rose, wild, white,
thrown by snowflaked winter wind;
summer's tender scent, intense,
dispersed; no mercy; beauty, blind...
perfect petals torn by scorn,
where will weather cast your care?

soon there, new year's bud be born;
pray the maid's rose bless the year

Michael Shepherd

0016 Fathers, Sons, And Families

and next to the world of heavenly gods,
the world of ancestors...

when ageing Indian fathers heard the call
that spoke some other world, they called their son
and put to him three propositions, to which
he might then make three promises:

'You are all things - you are God in everything ' -
this the first, to call the open mind
to gain the widest knowledge of all things;

'You are sacrifice, surrender - you are universal law,
tradition, responsibility...': this the second; then

'You are the world - you are humanity itself—
find this and live by it..'

the father's mind now freed; and for the son,
continuity; and constancy; the good passed on;
all that fathers seek, for family and son;
and so the family lives on, in sweet redemption
of its generations, in its hopes, and in its love.

* * *

And so, I like to think, poets speak for them today
in rituals of poetry; holding in cupped hands
against the cold night winds of chance and change
the lights that pass from hand to hand,
from mouth to mouth, from ear to ear,
saying, remember, you are all things
in all your shining consciousness;
you speak of all good things and pass them on
in all your glorious languages;
you are the world, yourself,
you are humanity

0016 Immortalised - A Not Quaiku

The almond petals
fall as slow as snowflakes
hoping that a poet passes.

Michael Shepherd

0016 Orpheus - Or His Lute?

It was his listening; he listened
to himself; he listened to himself
listening to his lute; his lute perforce
listened to itself; listened to itself
listening to him..listened to
the measures of all things, even
the measures of mankind..

space, air, listened to his listening;
listened as the eagle made a silent,
perfect circle around a centre in its mind
high above Delphi that clear morning;
listened to the silent cliffs across the gorge,
silently ominous in their listening;
the stream which trickles down past the carved theatre,
cool and clear enough to wash your face;
look up the mountain and hope it sacred, holy; it
plashes like curiosity pursued, down towards the river
which is a mere pencil line at the bottom of the gorge
in this so unexpected place;
the sea barely visible in the distance,
misty with its myths unspoken;

space listened and loved his music, allowed this scene;
a cool air, this morning elsewhere hot, descends gently
down the mountain to the gorge, curves past these rocks
where a dark shadow here or there
could be where the Sibyl listened too.

we thought, boarding the hot bus,
that we were tourists; then we looked,
became pilgrims; then something more,
more like worshippers of the unknown god
whose altar we left behind in Athens,
silent beyond questions,
listening to the space
as if the space itself
listened to some instrument well tuned,
a voice perhaps, silent, powerful.

the sun, the sunlight, moved from rock to rock
this cool, clear morning, waking
clumps of sparse bright flowers, woken
again by morning bees
who may be unaware – or born to know—
they forage at a world heritage site as do we visitors,
at Delphi, where still truth speaks in silence;
bees who listen to each other,
dance their satnav trails,
listen inwardly to flowers,
to honey, and what else

Michael Shepherd

0016 Weirdwords

I'm hooking all my tenters,
marching like a frog,
mandering my gerries -
just need a standard for my bog!

Michael Shepherd

0017 And Where The Joy

This, then, the question
for those whom it may concern –

to find a celebration in oneself
that, as outer is, so inner;

that all truth rests within oneself –
for where else can it be found?

to love oneself – for oneself must be loveable,
or none other could be loved for true;

to know all happiness to be within;
to celebrate all this; the world a constant joy;

to find this celebration in oneself.

Michael Shepherd

0017 Sandy Claws, Avenger From The Ocean Of Goodwill

The tale I have to tell, children,
is not a pretty one – so,
PARENTAL SUPERVISION IS ADVISED;
though on the other hand,
as moral tales should, it has
a happy Dickensian ending,
where, as moral tales should tell,
the last state is infinitely better than the first;
and perhaps, who knows, your parents
may even benefit from the telling
though, naturally, without mentioning the fact.

'Twas Christmas Eve. The Smugg family
were sitting around their fine dining table
made from wood from sustainable forests
in their photographable and photographed
Bahamas beach bungalow in its
gated enclave with 24-hour portering and security,
about to tuck in to their Christmas Eve locally sourced
corn-fed free range hand-reared organic
turkey –
Dad, Mom, and their 2.4 children;
Point Four was attended by his personally recommended
Filipino nanny who it was understood
did not take part in the general conversation.

The Smugg family were feeling good in themselves
and let's leave out the obvious wordplay here.
Since October 1, when the calendar in the main
restroom had been annotated 'Start Thinking
About Christmas Presents! ', they had each
in company with their Family LifeStyle Consultant devised
exactly the right present for each other
and their family (Dec 25 5-9 pm)
and friends (Dec 25,12 noon-3 pm) .

* * *

Christmas night (the turkey was rich in vitamins and essential oils) was a disturbed one for the Smugg family - snug and smug as a bug in a rug yet afflicted by nightmares which despite 24-hour security and panic button with guaranteed five-minute guard attendance all shared the same dreadful sound - the sound of sandy claws... scraping... scraping... at the locally constructed handcrafted front door... scraping... scraping... a sound so terrible that not a hand reached out from the bugsnug Smuggs to press the panic button... for how unSmugg a false alarm on Christmas night...

I need not tell you how there were no marks on the handcrafted front door - just the most horrible smell - and... and... footprints of a hideous size leading from the so-innocent blue morning Bahamian sea with hand-raked foreshore sand (Christmas Day: afternoon only) to the front door.. and back again...

The Smuggs, after their fairtrade morning coffee and non-biologically-enhanced cereals, sat around, opening their predictable, expensive presents with feigned surprise and delight but with an overpowering sense of anti-climax, despondency, and all that post-Christmas jaded exhaustion without the Christmas bit before it..

However, their Family LifeStyle Consultant, paid to be bright, and fearing for her job, had the solution on hand - a Roman Style Anti-Event in ancient traditional style, a re-run where however the presents were to be the worst and cheapest and most inappropriate; the games, the ones they all dreaded..

never had shopping been more fun, or games so merrily acted out.

New Year's Eve that year at the Smuggs'
is still talked about; a riot of laughter, fun;
indeed, you could hardly distinguish
between the Smuggs, their family, and
their friends – and that, I needn't tell you,
is Quite Something at this merry time..

There's a moral here, somewhere buried in the sands of time;
the Smuggs' Christmas parties are renowned,
the gated enclave comes together, invites
the under privileged (from 2-6 pm, approx.)
but in their hearts – for in their hearts – they don't forget,
know each, the deep significance, of
the footsteps in the sand, and at the door,
the scraping...scraping...scraping... of those sandy claws...

* * *

(For Max Reif, who introduced me to Sandy Claws...)

Michael Shepherd

0017 Suppose It Said..

Suppose it said – and, yes
it has been said, that
you were made to be
as much the same, as God,
or, The Creator – or
some other word that
means as much – were made to be
as much the same as – That -
as any human being could be; that

this, waits for you; it's there;
cease to deny that that is so,
and then, it will be so...

suppose you hear it said; and
like the sound of it; then
close your eyes for several seconds
and open them again; but, it's all
just the same...

suppose that at that point,
you don't give up, with, as they say,
'a snort of derision'; but close your eyes again,
and think

I don't remember such a big denial
all at once; how could a child
know what to deny, or why;
deny so vast a thing?

or could it rather be, a history
of many small denials? ah yes,
that seems quite possible – like
all those things that we put to one side
as – so the song goes on – 'but not for me...':

some few were overcome – I thought once
that riding a bike was Not For Me;
but thanks to Dad who proved me wrong,

I've thousands of miles of the joy of freedom
ticking on the cyclometer...

but yes, there's much that's labelled
Not For Me; once, poetry
was labelled, too, so great a thing
but Not For Me..

suppose a life
without self-deprivation
where all these small denials were denied,
whom would I be then? Would I be great
in so many small acceptances,
that all that life might have to offer,
should be myself? Would that be joy?
I think it could be so.

Michael Shepherd

0017 The Ironic, The Sarcastic, The Sardonic...

These weapons of literary abuse
so prevalent in the 17th and 18th century days
of literary gents in coffee-houses
have fallen into desuetude
these amicable days

but for the sake of Eng. Lit. studies
it might be useful
to run them through:

they have Greek roots
which we should know; it keeps them tidy
in the first-aid box of the literary mind:

there's irony: that's from the Greek
meaning 'simulated innocence';
in practice, saying the opposite
of what you mean; the Greeks
used it in tragedy – the man who says all's fine and dandy
as the black cloud of disaster gathers;
we use it more for humour; as in
'you're a right barrel of laughs, Mona..'

then there's sarcasm: in Greek, wow,
to tear the flesh; gnash the teeth,
or simply to speak bitterly;
using irony (as above) , to express contempt:
'that meant to be funny, then...? '

and the sardonic: Homer used it
to describe bitter, mocking laughter,
which for undisclosed reasons
was associated with the people of Sardinia..

Imagine, perhaps, a tinfoil
of no-head-to-no-tail sardines
able to read their label..

Michael Shepherd

0017 The Philosophical Goldfish

Doctors' waiting rooms.
Dentists' waiting rooms.
Goldfish etc.

What have goldfish done,
what fishy business have they been up to
in the murky underworld of the unpoliced,
to be incarcerated in public view
of the apprehensive, the fearful,
the distressed out of mind, those bearing
all the myriad aches and pains
that flesh is heir to?

Looking up from the Horse and Hound Gazette
which I noticed I was holding upside down
my eye was caught – or did he, or she, catch mine first? -
as if it heard my thoughts about its welfare

It swam towards me, pressed its mouth against the glass
in perfect O-shape as if singing,
or perhaps sounding some universal Om
(the final consonant difficult to catch for the dry-eared)
and it seemed to wish to communicate.

I sensed it was not a cry for help (and indeed,
what help could have offered, without
a plastic bag and in view of others who still
believed me sane? No, it seemed
peaceful but chatty; even helpfully inclined.

I got up, walked discreetly as if calmly passing time
and – almost tempted to kiss the glass, but instead
simply mouthing a friendly mwaa –
and though my lip-reading isn't all it could be,
I believe I identified this message:

'As above, so below;
as without, so within'

Sometimes one's view of Creation
seems to have been hitherto
singularly unimaginative

Michael Shepherd

0018 Home-Made Thoughts From Abroad - A Modernist Poem

How could anyone
eat a home-cooked lemon pie
when they're really hungry
and not believe in God?

somehow, Thank You Evolution,
or you simply must give me the recipe
just don't measure up.

Michael Shepherd

0018 Man Raking Leaves (Re Jim Morrison Lyric)

The sound of wooden rake scratching concrete.
walk nearer - rustle of dry leaves.

This, the beginning of a Japanese haiku
or maybe a Japanese film -
dry sound first, then rake, then leaves, then man -
that evokes autumn
too near the heart
to need a title

the sound stops. silence. man leans on rake.
then match strikes, there's almost yes an echo
from the dry leaves not yet fallen from the trees
in the forest all around.

then the first tickle in the nostrils
of burning leaves which
the two-year old scrunching through the trees
hand in hand with older sister
will remember all his life
like the silence between
two lines of a haiku or
the silence of the moment when the seasons turn.

and who can say
what the golden-orange-yellow-brown trees
slowly stripping in a rustle as of silken nightgown
to the tune of, more a whisper than a breeze -
what the trees feel
as the incense of their, their, burning leaves
steals like a last caress
for each such faithful
lover?

Michael Shepherd

0019 A Passing Thought

It's a society of rights -
and duties too? Oh, that can wait.

Anyone has the right
to dress up as a black pillar-box
with an anonymous lady inside

or I, I guess, in
the equivalent -
my sex-object status disguised with
hoodie, balaclava helmet

and perhaps a large backpack
with my favourite alarm clock
ticking away inside

wojja mean rights come with duties

Michael Shepherd

0019 An Intrusive Thought In The Bathroom At Christmas

We control freaks like to feel
we have our thoughts in some sort
of order; though yes, we like to have
spontaneous feelings, it shows
that we are human (not just
control freaks, ha) - but we like to feel
we have those feelings, too, within
some sort of mental framework -

Saint Paul stricken, on the road to Tarsus,
with a blinding epiphany
is good to read about - it can happen
to others, great - but, as the song goes,
but not for me...

It happened, with a corny total appropriateness,
on Christmas morning (I almost feel
I have to apologise for that...) : I'd overslept;
hadn't even put the radio on, to work myself
gently into Christmas cheer;
the bath was running; and then

I suddenly felt blest.
No. Knew myself blest.

You'd have to know
the nervous, melancholic, depressive me
to know the inconvenient inappropriateness
of that 'state of grace' as some would say;

my control freak brain couldn't find a mental slot
where such thoughts belong; while registering
that many people would feel only
gratitude for that..

but that was it: it had happened;
now I had it in my memory

for the rest of my life; I had to deal with it; and worse,
I knew that what I recognised
so inconveniently, as the bath filled up,
was something that had a future and a past,
and if true in this brief moment
then had been, would be, true for ever...

* * *

There's a beautiful tradition
that while those who give
are blest, that those who receive their gift
are not blest until (rather like
'pass the parcel' which we play
sometimes on Christmas Day)
they pass the gift along
to someone else..

But this control freak thinks,
try to tell someone else
and you can finish up
not believing it yourself..

I guess I'll have to try
writing a poem about it sometime
but without
trying to find some sorta
mental framework for it
etc.

Michael Shepherd

0019 Anniversary

Today, no looking back and no regrets;
but simply, celebration..

The world turns round with awesome force, and tilts;
its axis, lawful - merciful or cruel -
spins silently its thread which weaves our lives
and adds a number to our earthshaped days;

And here I'm much intrigued
by Indian thought – if never to be proved, alas –
that this same soul or self has solemnly laid down
by previous actions in our previous life
the screenplay of our present life and its precise and
tempting, daunting racecourse, steeplechase,
hard ground and hedges, fences, walls and waterjumps...

set down with glorious intent that we
transcending, lay down in our turn
a further life, and life, and life
so near a glory in ourself, eternity
be seen to be more natural than change...

it would be good – it would be good to ask that One–
if aged wisdom's memory might bring
some misty vision, of how we're 'getting on' -
in this so golden chain of being where
there are no 'others' for ourselves to blame;
to meet that soul won out of previous life
and say 'look, this is what I made
of what you set for me...'; and to our future soul
present our present soul, with all goodwill,
in lieu of meek apology...

Today, no looking back and no regrets –
for this would be too dark impediment –
as law and justice act invisible,
this sunny anniversary;
the flowers peek cautious from the ground to sound their praise;
the air speaks with the best of bread one ever smelled or ate,

and fresh-cut garlic adds its promise, hope, delight and joy,
and through the open window, shouts to neighbours, celebrate!

Today's a day of comings, goings, calls and messages;
and on this keyboard under grateful fingertips
there's just one battered word tap-taps itself:
a sound before a word: before it was, it is;
and yet, today, it's now-born here and fresh,
and echoes through eternity's timed view:
it's boundless, shared, and indestructible:
it's yes and yes; and day by day; it's love.

Today, no looking back and no regrets;
but simply, celebration..

Michael Shepherd

0019 Her Question

(dedicated to Sus Goldner and Emily Dickinson)

* * *

I -
He?

Michael Shepherd

0019 O H I O!

and how many citizens of Ohio
know that when they say Ohio
they're saying what, in the
Senecan language of the Iroquois tribe, is
'Ohiyo' meaning, it's beautiful..
as said originally of the Ohio river;

so, poetry being a place where
the imagination is allowed to roam
as free as any Indian tribe, I like
to think of Ohians today passing
each other in the street every day
and saying 'O-hi-yo! ' with
a merry smile rather as in
'Oklahoma' was it, they sing
Oh what a beautiful morning

or as we do in a telephone call
when after a second or two
you come on the phone and
we say, 'oh, hi... oh I forgot to say...'
mixing greeting and memory

well, there you are, Ohians,
I leave it to you,
whether this daily gesture
towards state pride, heritage, and
just friendliness, could catch on...
it's poetry in action...

Michael Shepherd

0019 Shopping

and as she paused
at the store window
her mind which was rose-gold
that day, poured in a
shining stream out through
her eyes and through the plate-glass
door while the air-conditioned
dark richness of the salon
opened its black velvet arms
to greet her and even the security person
smiled at the star-sparkle in her hopes

and when she'd tried it on she walked
towards the window beckoning him
whom we had not noticed
to come in and take a closer look
honey he said you look just beautiful
how can I look at the price tag when
you look so great in it?

when she came out and he
had melted away into the crowd
as if he had not been
she was carrying wrapped in tissue happiness
the silky slither in a shiny bag
which proved the truth
of what he might have said

Michael Shepherd

0019 Supabug Of The Mind

There's an infectious bug
racing through the British meeja
especially TV and radio,
corrupting every interview,
reducing interviewers and
viewers to mindlessness
and no-one notices,
no-one tries to stop it:

H.O.W.

'How pleased are you to have won this match? ' or
'How sorry are you to have lost this fight? '

That's on a scale of...?

In the legal profession, that's known as
a 'leading question' – as in
'How sorry are you to have killed your wife? '

'Hey, wait a minute, mate, I din' kill `er,
I fort this was menna be a cor' a law...? '

They're all infected – in a mere matter of a month or two..

What are you supposed to answer?
The incompetent interviewers leave
their poor victim - modest, proud, speechless -
squirming on the hook –
how are they supposed to answer?

'Well, not particularly pleased,
since he was an under-achieving also-ran
that my manager picked for this fight
as his last pay-cheque before retiring
and to boost my ratings and
my managers' ten-per...'

'Well, not particularly sorry,

since my manager says the rematch will bring in
even more dosh and
it's a sure thing and paid for
that I'll beat him...'

* * *

So how pleased are you to be alive
to read this useful heads-up,
- on a scale, say, of
Genesis to Revelation?

Michael Shepherd

0019 The Heart's Music

Is there music always in the heart?
Does it sing a fresh yet endless song?
There are times I'm sure it must be so.

Is it singing in its waiting heart
for words to join it, tell itself in song?
Reason says, indeed it may be so.

When a poem goes straight from ear to heart,
its words so musical, it's now our song,
it sings these words: the heart is always so.

(from a thought by Jacques Maritain)

Michael Shepherd

0020 Awakening To Myself

Surfacing from deep sleep, that moment
when the disciplined get up immediately,
the self-motivated can't wait to get on doing their life,
the blest open their eyes with praise upon their lips,
the tardy look with horror at the bedside clock,
or the peremptory alarm floods the body with adrenalin,
while the rest of us pull the bedclothes over our head
to keep the world out of ourselves, or vice versa,
not I..

half-surfacing to some stony ledge
in the ocean of part consciousness
I am at one with every depressive, every would-be suicide,
every spiritual down-and-out,
every being who feels their worthlessness,

as one inspecting carefully the contents
of the fullish bag of a vacuum cleaner
finding there, naught for my comfort

until, if I'm lucky, some passing concern
for another human being
takes the place of fervent morning hymn
and I may feel I have some place,
some part to play in this strange drama
that we find ourselves thrust onstage to play,
wondering if we learned the lines aright;

and after this chastening roller-coaster
of humility, mayhap another chance to seek myself,
I, dispassionately, rise.

Michael Shepherd

0020 A Loving Sestina To Our Lady

1 In Europe, around the end of the 12th century, women
2 began to be regarded by men as more than a good lay
3 and mother to your children; but that contented sorta love
4 that even men feel afterward, could be seen as quite divine
5 and thus related however distantly to the Creator;
6 this gave rise to a type of poetry called the sestina.

6 a troubadour called Arnaut Daniel invented the sestina,
1 so it's said, around 1190; and this new respect for women
5 as being, believe it or not, related distantly to their Creator
2 led to this, to us, rather absurd and complicated 'lay' -
4 that was the rather double-entendre name for the divine
3 love for mankind related to the act of physical love

3 which, though we make this a common metaphor for love
6 today, was new then, to unreconstructed men; the sestina
4 which plugs the same six end-words throughout, divine
1 and human, was supposed to underline that women,
2 exquisitely praised in the poetry of the troubadour's lay,
5 were men's path to loving, through them, his Creator;

5 Creator of man and woman, Adam and Eve; Creator
3 of all things and of, crucially, both human and divine love
2 and this point was hammered home; the troubadour's lay
6 in this somewhat tiresome form of the sestina
1 was supposed to make men respectful, and women
4 feel good about themselves (like Maya) as being divine;

4 but of course, troubadours were also human and divine
5 musicians; sexy and available (OK, blame their Creator...)
1 and, it was envied, did their own share of loving women
3 while going from castle to castle, gig to gig, love to love;
6 which gave rather a double edge to their sung sestina
2 and prompted many a coarse joke about 'a good lay'..

2 however, poets - Dante, Petrarch - found the lay
4 a way of linking human love and the divine;
6 a profound metaphor, in a fine, poetic sestina,
5 that love in all its forms is the very nature of the Creator

3 and that we should remember this while making love
1 and perhaps have rather more respect for women..

Envoi:

5 I hope that this sestina has made its point: the Creator
3 is Love; Love is the Creator; and for most of us, this love
1 arises from, let's say, a very poetic lay; with women.

Michael Shepherd

0020 Bliss

After that first photo-flash in mind
that signalled that there beyond where, might be
a poem waiting to be formed;
and there followed, that strange mixture in the mind
of awe, surrender, thrill, and wonderment;
and as the mind, now as obedient servant
beyond the asking, brought the building stuff
for this new, strange construction (though not, I noted,
in the order that these would be used) –

after all this, and the poem now on paper,
I walked to the front door; and stood; and looked;
looked like a child looks, and expects to look,
seeing the world as gift; as ever fresh;
no thought, no wish, the mind drained, grateful, of all thought
except the awareness of just – being allowed to be –
as the impressions flooded in, the senses sensed,
watched, as all the – all – passed through
without a judgment needed, made;

and that portion of my mind
now free to think or not to think,
superb in that peace that comes with freedom,
made the connection which
was not intellect, but knowledge –
pure knowledge which was
almost silent, wordless worship of that 'that'
which is beyond name and form, yet known -

'this, this, is bliss itself; this present self is bliss'.

Michael Shepherd

0020 Finger Lickin' Blood

At Wendy's Restaurant in San Jose,
California, USA,
a woman 'found' a finger, rather illy
hidden in her bowl of chilli.

The management's reaction -
and this is just no laugh -
is irony in action:
they've had to cut the staff.

The Prosecutor's hinted -
though the amputee's not found -
the culprit has been fingered,
with the evidence...to hand...

but suspicion's bound to linger
and fingers sure to point -
did rivals have a finger
in cutting down this joint?

Michael Shepherd

0020 The Faithful Servant

and when she took the job
of being his secretary, adored
his manliness – his powers,
his integrity, his fierce command,
his piercing blue eyes, and
his mischief...how could she not
eventually, become his wife?
Faithful to her wedding vows, she
miscarried twice, eventually
bore him a son; allowing him
to continue making all the family decisions
which eventually cut them off
from both their families – even
took his side in the many battles
with his disoriented son battling for his own identity;
and when – eventually –
stone deaf, demented, and incontinent,
and fierce as ever, blue eyes blazing
with anger, he became impossible,
she continued to nurse him single-handed;
loved, honoured, and obeyed;
love found the impossible to be the possible.

Who can doubt, the faithful servant
is greater than the master?

This, love never tells; but knows.

Michael Shepherd

0021 Poets' Tree

Spiky, a mass of spikes more threatening than sharp -
what are they fending off, what are they protecting
so fiercely with their green carapace like a thoughtful womb,
dropping their hidden beauties in reflective autumn
so generously despite their ferocity, scattered all around,
rejecting the curious mind of passers-by,
yielding to those who know to seek what they hold precious;
or perhaps to lie uninvestigated, awaiting the invisibility
of the wintered years, the earth's silent fruitful grave,
to seed, to grow, to spread their glorious canopy
some later spring, some future generation,
with flowers as delicate as wild orchids?

Dare to investigate, open their spiky soft protection,
and a beauty without parallel is revealed: like some sculpture
fashioned by a master craftsman in some rich wood;
dare to touch, to lift, to hold: the surface has been polished
with some wax that's more like precious soap,
made by some mind that knows as many secrets
as a tree.

Laugh if you will at this precious toy for boys
which, pulped into pure water, will wash the finest clothes,
redeem their stains, and leave the lightest fabric of our dreams
the radiant, palest blue of heaven itself;

chestnut tree; metaphor for poem and poet,
for those who seek a parable of unity
to join blue heaven with the rich brown earth.

Michael Shepherd

0021 Football's New Rules

I guess you read the news
about the town – soon to be copied –
which abolished traffic lights...
what happened? Self-preservation,
care, and courtesy have won the day..

while the soccer news this weekend was
that everybody blames the referee..
who's after all, just the traffic-lights to this game..
suppose we tried the same daring system on the soccer field..

any player who makes a bad tackle
or an inadvertent trip (deliberate ones
would disappear as a mark of shame)
to apologise politely and offer
a free kick to the other side..

the player who kicks the ball into touch
immediately hands the ball to the other side
or at the very least, runs away – both sides
always knowing very well who touched it last..

shirt-pulling and diving would be
such matters of shame that the player's
own side would stop playing and remain
rooted to the spot until
the culprit offered a free kick..

and any really doubtful events would be referred
to the television cameras for a quick decision;
and all the players might just feel the urge
to applaud and clap a tricky moment fairly resolved?

and at the end of the match,
the players would line up and just like
an international does at the beginning,
shake hands down the line...

while the managers would meet symbolically at centre-pitch,

shake hands publicly on a game cleanly fought,
and even – full on camera – look each other
in the eye..

and we the supporters would feel damn proud
that sport was sport once again, that
football was and is the life-blood of the nation,
and if not more important than life and death
at least a happy occasion of skills enjoyed..

and that, win or lose, chivalry and
the game's the thing..

Michael Shepherd

0021 Santa Claus Franchises Inc: A Public Statement

We the undersigned have been requested to issue the following statement on behalf of Santa Claus Franchises Inc in the light of recent serious allegations:

SCI as an international organisation takes its responsibilities to the public extremely seriously, while at all times being sensitive to contemporary issues.

SCI defends itself vigorously from suggestions that it projects an image of extra-terrestrial benevolence which may lead to later adverse effects of trauma, mental and physical ill-health, etc. All SCI Franchise Outlets have an authorised notice that 'parental discrimination should be exercised at all times'.

There are no similarities to the tobacco industry to be drawn in this respect.

SCI will therefore contest vigorously all lawsuits for breach of agreement and failure to deliver goods as promised.

SCI thus points out that the phrase, 'And what would you like for Christmas, young man/lady? ' does not constitute a legal promise to deliver goods as defined by law. This applies also to our website and email facility, and to telephone calls, which are at premium rate.

SCI affirms that lap-dandling and possibly interpreted inappropriate touching is now forbidden in all SCI Franchise outlets. All our staff have had a criminal record check. Please confirm that you are attending an official SCI Franchise Outlet

SCI defends itself vigorously against accusations of ageism, racism, colour preference, religious affiliation, and the suggestion that it is a paradigm for white colonialism. SCI points out that Single-Image Branding is an internationally accepted form of consumerism. We are however looking into alterations in our franchised brand-image in certain global cultural areas where, for instance, bounty is traditionally associated with matriarchy. The Disney Organisation is assisting us in this.

SCI further points out that it repudiates accusations of pandering to consumerism and commercialism, (while these are indeed essential to a healthy economy) and points out that it is at all times sensitive to changing public requirements. SCI seeks only to serve its public and maintain the high standards of its founder.

SCI vigorously defends itself against the accusation of 'passing-off' – trading on a deliberate confusion with the image of God The Father. This is made quite clear on the officially authorised form to be stuffed up the chimney or ventilation duct.

SCI has no face-veil policy. However, metal detectors may be used at certain outlets.

SCI wishes all its participants seasonal cheer and a prosperous trading year.
SCI affirms its mission statement:
'Yule Be Grateful, Ho Ho Ho'...

[Published at the request of SCI Franchises Inc.]

Michael Shepherd

0021 The Advent Of Commerce

December 11; and through the letterbox
falls like a heavy snowflake, the first Christmas card..
who's so eager to draw
my mind and heart to Advent-tide?

no stamp – ah yes, of course,
it's from Alex the paper boy,
counting his goodwill before it's cashed,
throwing me into a moral tizzy.

My parents, who knew the circumspection
with which the poor must treat the poor,
taught me that after God and the family
had been acknowledged on Christmas Day,

'Boxing Day' was the time for showing gratitude
to those who'd served your family faithfully
daily or weekly – the milkman with his
unsociable hours; the paperboy
(for those who could afford a daily paper) :
and other delivery boys;
the coalman; so, if they called with a delivery
on Boxing Day, your Christmas box
would be waiting in its envelope outside the door for them;
or the promising and friendlier note above the letterbox,
'Paperboy please knock'

only the boldest would have dreamed
of knocking on your threadbare door
to wish a partially sincere seasonal greeting..
though the clop of the coalman's horse and cart
significantly empty of all sacks, on Boxing Day
was known to be a gentle hint..

Around here, the dustmen of the mid-20th century
who were the nearest to the Mafia
in this lower middle class suburb,
(and worked for it, carrying heavy iron dustbins
over their shoulders from your house to the cart...)

timed their bold knock on your door to coincide
with the day your double Christmas/New Year pension
had been drawn at the Post Office,
asking gruffly 'Would you like to sign The Book? '
which meant you wrote your name, address,
and amount (fictionally exaggerated? They left it to you)
so spontaneously given.. so that the whole street could read
and judge their contribution accordingly...

So I'm in a moral tizzy about Alex;
he's worked unsociable hours all year
as the newspapers get heavier with advertising dross,
for just this chance to buy himself (or so we guess -
should we be entertaining worthier thoughts?)
those boys' toys he's been anticipating all the year;

OK he's earned it - though we've never yet received
a thankyou from him... and it would have been nice
to feel it would be a surprise for him...
but the stores sell out these days long before Boxing Day..

and so, there goes another nibble at the heart of Christmas -
the season of receiving.

Michael Shepherd

0021 Under The Bridge Of Time

Oui, c'est beaux, le jardin... at this time of year;
mais... for myself,
a little too overgrown – but Monsieur
prefers it that way... you see him down there
by the lily pond, the nymphées?

He's nearly blind now, yet he's out all day
and nearly every day. He draws life from the garden,
je crois; and though there are some who laugh
and say, his paintings are now
mere daubs, when I see them
and then go out into the garden,
there's a truth there, beyond what we see...
what passes, what floats serene and unaffected...
what floats on time itself...

You may find this fanciful, but I've watched Monsieur
over the years: first he had the garden made,
when he could afford it, and the bridge and then the pool
that slows the river... then he painted the lilies which we planted,
floating on the water, all the colours
of sunshine as you see it through a prism...then he painted
the sunlight on the water... then
he seemed to paint the flow of the water
as it passed... and then he seemed to be painting
time itself, passing under the bridge
where we're standing here, as if
outside time... and now,
qu'est-ce qu'on dit? I think
he's painting the philosophy of time –
Monsieur Bergson le philosophe
agrees with me – in paint; perhaps
one might say, painting
the future of painting...

yet, the flow of time and death came first, they say:
Monsieur began to paint his water-lilies
after he had seen the photos of the solemn river
of corpses in the trenches

in that terrible war; even, it's said,
the same colours of the unburied dead who putrify
are the same colours that he sees
in the water-lilies...c'est étrange, n'est-ce-pas?
a sort of redemption in the painter's palette...
this, I feel, gives these pretty paintings
the vision that drives Monsieur
to find beauty in its opposite...

but it's cooling now; Monsieur
likes to enjoy that glowing light of early evening,
the precious departing of the light...
the light of life itself...
I'll fetch his rug...these artists seem to
lose themselves in what they see...
they don't seem to notice passing time,
it's as if they think they live where time is space;
or perhaps, time's so precious for Monsieur
that he paints it running out...

but I mustn't keep you, M'sieur Proust –
it was so kind of you to find the time
to visit, and you too, M'sieur Debussy –
it has been quite a day to remember, n'est-ce pas? ...
and now for Monsieur's rug...

Michael Shepherd

0022 A Dickinsonian Ode To Hope

Hopes – that soar –
like kites in wind -
above the truth –
with wishes – twisting
in their tail –
pulling at the string
of the heart –
until – soaring -
we, up there too –
looking down on present self –
from our own future –
up there too,
faith, loving-kindness?

Michael Shepherd

0022 November

November, I'm almost ready now
to take you on:
every year
you throw all that you can at me –

above all, that sadness which lurks beyond
the all and any reason; steals into the blood;
taps at the heart with long-forgotten regrets,
drains the energy; lurks with all its
theatre tricks and stage props –

in the countryside, leaves falling like failed dreams,
their smell underfoot, of earth and rain and snow and mud;
in the town, the acrid smell of sodden fireworks; then come
poppies and guns, trenches, death,
and waste of life, futility and war;

draining the light from brief sad afternoons,
the grey depressing drizzle of eternity without hope..
warping thought, draining enthusiasm,
blunting the sharp edge of pleasure;

you'll carry your campaign right through
December if you can...as the spirit wearies, daylight fades,
do all you can to ruin Christmas; already linking arms
with New Year bleakness to complete your ruthless task..

November, I'm almost ready now
to take you on: knowing you
for what you are: the yearly test
of inner resources and resilience,
the soul stripped bare; bare branches
stripped of leaves; king and fool
together on the heath in storm,
bare humanity... so

I'll be prepared – turn the heat up,
stoke the heart's fires;
drink myself sociable; consider charity;

think of others; play with generosity;
remember love; stand fast as faith;
be hope itself; not look outside
for all that's inner to be found;
be all that's Spring and strong
and damn the passing seasons; dance
with merriment and laughter; be
strong as roughbarked tree trunk
bending in a winter gale, standing
stronger from the test;

Michael Shepherd

0022 Unsung Malady

Your messages are so venomous,
your words so loaded with abuse
that I would recommend
a metaphysical health check:
a subtle X-ray or better still, a Why-ray
might show up something in
the spleen or in the bile duct
before it's too late for
poetic irony or
poetic justice

Michael Shepherd

0023 The Truth About Truth, Etc.

Suppose the Greeks were right –
that, though some of us
may seek to climb Olympus
(the rocky scramble exhilarating
in the moist fresh morning,
the scent of coffee, baking bread,
rising from the valley below,
the occasional shout of shepherd to his dog,
up higher, the tiptilt goats surprised,
and then the mist, the thinning air,
the inner urge, ambition
fading, as humility, surrender, grow)

that all of us, fully although seemingly in some degree,
yearn for the True, the Good, the Beautiful,
perhaps not in that order, or at least at first,
and believing or not believing
that ultimately, we may know the state
when in their glory, all these three
might merge, be indistinguishable;

for this, no climb is needed, since
the gods - the Greeks were sure of this -
dwell ever in our hearts; at rest, but
waiting for their call, or ours,
to show us to ourselves, and bursting forth
in what we recognise as enthusiasm..

but for those who love to climb,
who love the view, the upper air,
the risk, the challenge and the sport -
the topmost crags surmounted,
the scree no longer playing its game
of snakes and ladders with our feet and hearts and minds,
the clouds like a white, concealing mystery,
now below us; the gods invisible to ground level eyes
run eagerly to greet us in our hearts; we now
pure oxygen for the others still visible
through breaks in the white clouds of poetry,

climbing on their way; our hearts breathing pure oxygen for them
saying yes the climb is worth it,
the Greeks were right.

Michael Shepherd

0023 Angel, Butterfly, Poem

Glance, as you hurry home from work,
through this lighted window where
a man taps at his computer

he might be writing anything,
no-one asked him to write this poem
which he does not yet know himself

it makes as much difference
to the world as the wing-beat
of a single butterfly
deep in the heart of a distant jungle

but for those few intrepid
explorers of the jungles of the mind
who read it

with indrawn breath
as beautiful as an unknown
species of butterfly
flaunting its vivid wings
in a rare shaft of sunlight
timed to their visit
through the canopy of trees
high above the living jungle
that balances, without telling, the whole planet -
earth, trees, rain, sunlight, leaf-fresh air,
space; and the song of birds

angel; butterfly; poem;
winged in beauty
thus disguised

Michael Shepherd

0023 Thanksgiving

'Thanks for yesterday evening –
I really enjoyed myself...'

What a profound statement, is
that hackneyed phrase!

'Just an impromptu dinner party',
they invited.

A modest house that shines
with their mutual and family love –
his craftsmanship in every detail,
her sense of beauty at every point,

like the vased flowers
which seemed to be growing
out of a spring of love, openly rejoicing
that they were giving their life to us
in the name of love; calling to us to be here, and now,
to enjoy every moment with them..

the perfectly served simple meal; and
the company, the guests:

the very recently bereaved
who was the unspoken focus
of all our attentive care;

the teacher, always smiling and alert,
so that we feel we know him well– yet
really know so little;

the man whose career
has always seemed a series
of ineffectual starts, who in one more disastrous trough
bought a laptop, found himself
as a children's writer; now
there's just no stopping him;

and the others; and over all,
a light, a warmth, a steady conversation
which never mentioned love,
yet was rich with it...
and life, a sheer delight;

so that I enjoyed the self in myself,
knew myself more in that; so

thanks for yesterday evening;
I really enjoyed myself.

Michael Shepherd

0024 Horses In A Field

They seem to be thinking, soft-eyed, snuffling, cropping,
ears awake to many signals,
then move gently closer,
as if they were unaware,
rub muzzles, necks,
love each other silently, almost imperceptibly,
move away again as gently;
solitude in company may hide
what we do not hear; what we do not think

the battle horse long retired
so skilled in life and death,
proud of many battles
he and his master as one
swords flashing, leaning sharply
this way that way
rearing for height flail smashed down
backward now spear and charge
a marriage sealed in blood
his master's life saved many times

the packhorse ridden in haste
through dangerous lands
with despatches that may
signal the start to war, or
sue for peace
its rider impatient to thoughtlessness

the horses of the range
sharing the wild vigour
of cowboys, pioneers,
breathing the air
of a new country
themselves once wild
knowing the hills, the herbs, more than their masters

the racehorse proud we think
to test itself, share the victory,
then at stud, to share its line

knowing perhaps in blood,
aristocracy; or not, who knows,
they do indeed look quietly proud

the family stable horses, knowing
the love of boys, of girls,
besotted with their ponies,
talked to endlessly; too many sugar cubes

the tradesmen's horses,
the ploughmen's horses,
who have learned more patience,
more obedience, than many
of their masters yet
tended well, most times
by those who need them
more than they say; but
how the children of those
they visit, run from the house,
loving to see them again
like old friends

all remember, maybe communicate;
we hope they know - or would it make them sad -
that they too had their golden age.

Michael Shepherd

0024 There Is Here; Outside, Inside

My wrist rests on the desk's raised edge;
fingers splayed on black and silver 'mouse' –
(did anyone tell those focussed scurriers underfoot,
they had a new relation?)

And the whole world of mind
from whatever there may be to know
of the divine and universal things,
law behind laws, love beyond loves
awaits, out there, awaits, in here
to meet these touching fingers, hesitating on the mouse
as if holding some real, passive pet
that yearns to know the world...

I still can taste the breakfast marmalade,
sweet but sharp; it is enough;
but in a few hours' time
the whole world will be tempting me with taste.

Warm in a hoodie; the radiators have woken with a faint vibration
from their dormant summer siesta;
outside the window, I see
geraniums, abundant yet relaxed about it
in the late summer's peace; violet petunias
which seem to know more about
ultra-violet than a scientist could tell;
my eyes roam round, sitting here;
out there, the whole curved world awaits the seeing;

Who notices, who knows, unless
they step to the front door to savour
the freshness of fresh air, the faint scent
of geranium leaves brushed, violet petunias,
the sweet peas awaiting an appreciative sniff,
- who notices our breathing, subtly irregular
as a poem cautiously surfaces? Out there,
a planet, encased in precious atmosphere,
revolves around a sun, blazing at a lawful distance...

A few sounds from the street drift in; just enough
to remind one of the lives of others, as these ears await
beloved voices; while out there,
the world shouts, whispers; a global cacophony
near to, far from, music's heavenly cadences
and perhaps, the music of the spheres;

all this, all this, lives out there; stays in ordered place;
yet waits inside too, in some life invisible;
warm fingers poised on questing mouse,
whiskers twitching as it hesitates
from this small nibbled hole in the universe's floor
where there and here may meet.

(after reading Rilke's 'A Walk')

Michael Shepherd

0025 How Many Steps To God?

What are you looking at, this moment? ..
You can answer this question?

Then you're watching the looking...
And that which watches the watching that watches the looking..

Always, without fail...
Yes

Michael Shepherd

0025 Between (2)

Between each word, what happens in the mind?
what moves from hearing, seeing, through the worlds
of thought; emotion; both perhaps enjoined;
what depth of silent stillness may unfurl?

It's strange: as writer, when the words are set,
I find myself in some quite other place,
where writer, reader, hearer, truly meet;
like talk that's punctuated by deep peace.

For me, each comma, semi-colon, dash,
or bracket, or long colon's pause, or stop,
are moments when our minds may truly match;
communication perfect in that gap:

the punctuated moment, truth may find;
between each word, meet unity in mind.

Michael Shepherd

0025 If You Were Me, I'D Be You, Too - One For Plato

If we were all exactly the same,
what would the effect be?

would life be simpler,
and totally boring with it?
and poetry, unnecessary?

for instance, you'd know
how much I love you
down to the very first and last eyelash of a kiss

so I wouldn't need to write
a poem about it

and you'd know that
and I'd know that

but you'd know that
although I know
you know that

there would still be
the miracle

that when I look at you
I see a finer image of myself
reflected in your eyes

would that go, or stay,
if I were you,
and you were me?

Michael Shepherd

0025 The Godown Of Knowledge

'The godown of knowledge
increases by distribution'..

What a lovely picture
the sages paint –
like a children's story
of magic, of that world
that's truer than you'd think –

A huge warehouse, busy
at the unloading bays,
with thousands of white-clad,
happy faces under the sign,
'Knowledge Godown – Take
as Much as you can Manage',
handing out to eager arms,
while in the office, email, telephones
are busy with the orders for despatch
to those in need who're not so near;
and a glance over your shoulder
from the work station
shows the stock piling ever higher...

a lovely story... except that
that is how it is
in that world that children
just about recall
and sages know.

Michael Shepherd

0026 Listening To A Reading By Robert Hass

There are so many different postures
that may be adopted while listening
to a poetry reading especially
one that's being filmed -
different tilts of neck and head,
some natural, some chosen
to suit the occasion;

it's the panelled reading-room of Berkeley -
lecture desk, a couple of sofas,
inappropriately satin-striped for library use;
various chairs; November mid-day Bay Area sunlight
filters through the high windows,

the room's comfortably full, a number
at the poet's feet, mostly younger girls
and a boy whose clothes say poet;
but just outside the door, pressing in
like the background crowd in an 'important'
Renaissance painting, a horde it seems;
some fire or other precautions have
kept them out, as would
the prissy warnings that precede the video,
that adult themes and language
will be used, and
'viewer discretion is advised'...

Zack Rogow who has introduced the poet
sits back relaxed - he's done a good and generous job;
some sit as if they're on screen all the time - which they are;
some sit as if 'I'm just here with him...';
the girl on the floor looks at her companion
after each poem as if for validation
of some frail cultural bond or fragile claim;
some look as if they're older faculty wives
attending more a social occasion, except that
the one who doesn't like a poet - is a poet;
one girl's got a note-book and a dreamy look -
she's gleaning seeds for her own poems;

that girl with the perfectly chosen spectacle frames
assesses the speaker 'coolly';
a girl at the back tilts her head
as if already practising for the time
in forty years when she'll be a wealthy patron of the arts
who can afford to be close to culture
yet detached – she paid for it...

and the man who's reading to us with a smile
twisted with humour and affection and humanity
in a face lined with the challenge of the inexpressible
is radiantly, the happiest human being in the room
and - his eyes say too - loves them all and individually,
just above, or just below, his love of words and speech.

Michael Shepherd

0026 To Live In Poetry

So often, poets
with their poetic eyes,
ears, minds, hearts, souls,
record actions that
are already poetry or poetic
in themselves
or so it seems
which makes it easy
for poetic poets to write
poetic poetry

as when I watch you
poised so still, sitting there,
your face against the light,
painting meeting sculpture,
still as any animal,
still as any goddess

roaming the cosmos in your mind
seeking, ballpoint poised,
the answer to some hidden
crossword clue

living in poetry

Michael Shepherd

0026 The Other Poetry

It could be tomorrow.
Or the day after.
The important thing will be
that you'll know when it happens that
it's what you've been waiting for
perhaps all your life
you'll go out of the door as usual
at the usual time
but instead of turning right
you'll turn left
just that
and then it will unfold
like someone else's life
and you'll talk to different people,
listen differently
see differently
and then find yourself writing
in a quite different way
perhaps even in a strange language
about emotions you never had before

deep down, it's always been whispering
no singing, in your ear
like when you were a child
and there they were behind you but
you could never turn round quick enough
to catch them. The other poetry
you never wrote but you know it's there
maybe waiting for you
maybe waiting for someone else
but there. So close.
Maybe one day.
Or the day after.

Michael Shepherd

0026 Why Waste Time

Why waste time
on searching rhyme
unless the knowledge wants to sing?

why waste time
on searching rhyme
unless the joy can't help but dance?

why waste time
on searching rhyme
unless the mind is full of sound?

then rhyme with time
and sing and dance
and lose your heart
to happenstance.

Michael Shepherd

0027 In Honour Of Honour And Whauden

You asked me which of Auden's poems
were my favourite, and I sighed
for memory's fade, then walked to the dusty shelf
where next to those volumes of Eliot
with their brown-paper covers for those
precious wartime books allowed
a ration of Canadian paper for
fighting men to read in those
few moments of leisure for the open heart and
the vision of a peacetime world, was

'Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944 '

which fell open at page 54,
'In Memory of (ry 1939) '
'Earth, receive an honoured guest...';
those pages yellowed more than
the others around them as if
read often late at night
under what was still gaslight
with respectful but unwashed hands
after cocoa and biscuits with a scrape of butter

and it all came back: 1953, that was the year
when there was only one poet Yeats..
and poetry and music were the same;
I turned the pages – they fell open once again,
'Time will say nothing but I told you so'...

So many poems there, unread, or unremembered,
how could it be that I abandoned Auden,
not hearing his music, while
other interests began to pull?

Then I sat silent at the thought
that a great poet of great mind, great heart,
was writing, writing, most of my lifetime
while I was wrapt in other things;

sat silent, honouring
what is to be honoured
as best we can;
what is to be honoured.

Michael Shepherd

0027 Dog And Man

Beside me as I sit here typing is a golden pool, of relaxation, alertness, patience and trust, uniquely brought together in one glorious being. Do we really deserve each other?

surely anyone who has brushed the coat of, let's say, a golden Labrador, should be instantly converted to belief in God? Or at the very least, in an evolution which is more miraculous, more glorious than many people's view of God...

the long, smooth, silky, strong hairs on the back;
the trailing, slightly grubby hairs
of that emotional telegraph, the tail,
the magic gradations of the head hairs,
from sleek and flat around the collar; so fine in the ears;
laid so beautifully on the bony forehead which seems
so intelligent as you touch it, gently, on the centre,
watching the brimming, trusting, wary, luscious eyes; with
those almost hidden, expressive eyebrow hairs;
to smooth and wiry snout hairs toward the jaw,
around that moist muzzle, Columbus to the world,
which you may with his permission
touch lightly, as you'd touch
the most delicate of machinery made by man

how we may wonder, what they think of us,
as surely such magnificence must think?
Not so much, whether we're God, or
Domestic Provider, or Leader of
The Depleted Pack, or simply
Today's Elected Master –
no, the more intimate things, like – well, who knows? -

why They don't look us in the eye at all times,
or what They're so busy doing between meals,
or why They just keep a boring straight line when
we go out for a wildness? in that map
of wind and air and smells and trails
and messages and mysteries, written

new every day, which They call
'going for a walk'; requiring Their donning
of more layers of bedding material, never
to feel, poor species, the wind in Their fur
except on that insensitive slightly hairy head which doesn't
even enjoy the world of smell?

but we have our special moments,
He and I; we play that game which is
our special thing; I'm lying there,
relaxed, alert, patient, trustful, sensing
it's the time for wildness; we're together in the head,
sharing the same mind just for a moment;
He doesn't need to make more than that
familiar sound in his throat, the man-music
which as a puppy, I got to know as
'would you like to go for a walk...? ' –
now He plays this game, just makes that noise
in his throat... and my ears prick up – He's mine
for a joyous whole hour, we're going to live it up
where life is really lived – Outside.

Michael Shepherd

0027 Dreaming Truth

Imagine yourself -
yourself, to imagine -
this dream; dream
this imaging:

the water's so far, far below
it's beyond this dark imagining, this dream;
all your attention is required
by this rope bridge,
swayed by nature to some immediate, vibrating laws
of this way, that way, more complex
than steel or concrete bear in mind -
five lines of rope, that's all,
bound from time to time
but only every few and fearful steps
so that they do not part
unless you tread without remembering
all five of them; toe, heel, as you place your foot...

and now it seems, in the illogical
precision of this dream - which is in
league with some dark inner truth
and so, it must be walked - now,
it's not five ropes, any more,
but five strings of some instrument
vibrating, low and high; while tense, taut mind
looks for firm frets to tune each step;
or can you trust their tuning?
is the tuning now the fingers of your feet?

each fallible or faulty foothold
will send its string's own warning of uncertainty:
this bass string, booming failure between the valley's two high cliffs;
this treble string, nerve-searing scream of pain;
ahead, this firm support that holds the strings, now
drops away; the hollow soundbox that's all space,
all sound, all air, all touch and light and flow of sound;
the sound of judgment's stern and justly-tempered final chord -

now you awake: relieved, yet with a question,
born of night, to be resolved by day;
what does the dream tell to the waking thought?
what does the waking thought tell of the dream?
some metaphor for life inhabited your dream;
some knowledge passed, wrapped in a metaphor;
you only know, that it was watched – by whom?

Michael Shepherd

0027 That Baker Boy

and allowing that
records only record what's recorded –
that's, written records – the sounds are something else –

the records say
that for most of your waking life
you were out of this world on drugs
or when you weren't, you behaved
appallingly; excepting when you sang and played,
when, all agreed, you were 'out of this world'..

and yet, you wrote an autobiography
or should we say memoir, that is,
what you might remember, which
is a catalogue of innocence, of purity,
of life as good, well lived...

so I would not like to be
your prosecuting counsel, taking you through
this litany, each deed, each word..
I don't think I could bear the pain..
was it what you really thought you were,
or what you would have wished to be?

I'll settle for the love you whisper
in the 'standards', convincing us they're holy writ;
pausing just where truth itself would pause;
and blowing the truth that finds and speaks itself
between the lips and lungs and trumpet's mouthpiece;

like some ancient seer or sibyl, shaman, visionary,
speaking, singing, truths which yet you do not know
or have forgotten. It seems that genius knows
the greatness of the art of which it is
(apt phrase) the mouthpiece; and all else
is of this world; subservient.

Michael Shepherd

0028 Written While Queuing Two Abreast For The Rodin Exhibition

Rodin
was not a leg man

The Kiss
proves this

He loved the breast
but liked the rest

often

and availed himself of many a jollity
by proclaiming women's sexual equality.

O women, beware your erotic fantasies
of being moulded by a sculptor's hands, like 'Kiss'..

Michael Shepherd

0028 Aw....Bless...

I always liked the idea
of becoming a wise old man
but I may be too old for that
now

however

there are moments when
like today
the sun's shining on the trees
their leaves glinting in the slight breeze
and time seems to be unaware of itself and
and I feel good about myself too
in the same blissfully thoughtless way

that's even better
like a jar of golden promise
that doesn't need a label

Michael Shepherd

0028 Emily Dickinson Considers Her Breasts

White silk gown – Sunday silk – yet
daily donned – tight-cuffed –
cool hands – folded – warm lap –
milk-white – under orange vest – and –
bearing – or to bear? –
two Legacies – from You, Sire –
this simple pair accompanying me –
twin-mirrored –
two poems yet to be read –
two words yet to be said –
to stimulate – a man –
circumferencing – unwritten future – to know – perhaps – which? –

kiss of need? as kid of goat –
little lips – innocent of teeth – tugged
as pulled red berry? Cherries fit
such little mouths. Or –

kiss of love? milk-white skin
brushed first – moustache – then
body's delirious shudder –
ecstatic contract!
two red berries – red-plucked –
this first?
Will there be a morning – mooring –
you as sunrise –
after wild and feathered night,
bondage as play – so sweet?

Or – are these berries – to grow parched?
A rose – cease to bloom – before the flower taken –
autumn berries – heavy-hanging –
dropping – unmilked – unmouthed –
love put away – put in a drawer,
hiding brave face in hand?
I thus eventual – be –
awaiting further chance
of eternity?

You cannot put a fire out –
you love me – you are sure –
but – which is it, sir?

Michael Shepherd

0028 Root For The Vegetable Rights Movement!

It's the inevitable march,
the golden-hearted chain,
of Ultimate Compassion:

yesterday, a group of anglers,
danglers in the river for hours on end
of peaceful anticipation
punctuated by a rare bite
from a fish, which then the most sporting
unhook and throw back to freedom rather than
yet another fish supper

were set upon by a group of 35
'protesters'... you do the math,
how many man-hours to save
one fish? With the courage
of their convictions, the trawler fleet
should be their next sea-green
seasick target... and on a smaller scale,
obviously the shore of the Sea of Galilee
is a high-profile target (assuming that
it's not in the fighting zone at the time...)

And there's more to come –
the Vegetable Rights movement
which so far has kept underground (...)
has a huge task ahead, as it
gains ground so to speak:
those poor baby peas, mown down at dewy-fingered dawn
like army deserters in the First World War,
are the obvious target for our grief;
then the vast plains of America
slaughtering wheat for our daily bread
(and here again, the Sea of Galilee comes to mind –
do miracles have rights too?) these great plains
must come under fundamental survey...

and as the Compassion Movement gathers pace,
there's all those mosquitoes in Africa and elsewhere

so cruelly deprived of their right
to sting like cornered terrorists,
and don't viruses have their rights too?

Then comes a difficult moral decision –
what of animals that kill other animals?
Whose side are we on there? Which has
the greater rights to life and freedom? Brothers and sisters,
bleeding hearts, there's much work to be done...
let's hope that war doesn't interfere with
our compassionate fight for rights..

Michael Shepherd

0029 It's Haircut Day

Oh dear it's haircut day

I guess I should be grateful –
she comes round to the house
and cuts what's left up there for
almost next to nothing, these days

she's a bright cookie but
no conversationalist
so I attempt to make pleasant small talk
for both our benefits I like to think

but if I say something she disagrees with
like who sells the best fish around here
or immigration
she corrects me with such withering scorn
that I feel I should apply for
institutionalisation. Or cremation.

my masculine side says stuff her,
don't even try
so I have to call on
my feminine side
to think, to be like that
she must have had an awful childhood
or adolescence, or both

'Fate with the abhorred shears...' (classical quote)

she's due now – report back later

Michael Shepherd

0029 Hezbollah

Hezbollah, Hezbollah,
raining rockets from afar,
is death really yours to choose?
Suppose that Allah loves the Jews?

Michael Shepherd

0029 Monte Carlo

So this was it. I'd passed through years ago
as a hitch-hiker, spinning out our 25 pounds
max allowance, over three hot weeks of France
until I was sick of tough-skinned monster tomatoes
and baguettes without butter; as we made our sweaty way
to Monaco's, surprisingly, Communist youth hostel
beyond the gas works and the soccer ground,
around the path at the foot of the cliffs...no romance there.

But here I was, as a journalist, two nights in a hotel
of grand aspiration, where guests left empty
the spacious restaurant and its tasteless menu.
Monte Carlo out of season; shrunken to a provincial town;
the waves hitting hard and cold against its promenade.

Tired after a day of work, foot-hot amid white-gloved uniforms,
I felt I should squeeze something memorable from the single day
as the lights went on. Too travel-stained to enter the Casino,
placed where the pier would be in an English seaside town -
but I hovered. It was a stage set which had rashly intruded
into real, daily life; and waiting for a cast
rehearsing somewhere else. I made my way (the phrase
is singularly inadequate) back to the deserted hotel
where even the lights were sad and still.

In the deserted square outside the Casino,
a woman passed me, returning home, I guessed, from the Casino,
but hardly dressed for gambling's evening glamour;
a middle-to-ageing Englishwoman, from her walk. Her room,
I would think, would be small, high
on the steep hill of the working class. She visits
every day; for several evening hours
under the shaded table lights,
everything in the world is possible...The doorman
at the Casino only acknowledges her
out of season, when the locals and the regulars
are tolerated, with their modest bets;
almost seen as staff.

As she passed,
she placed some ticket in her purse -
one of those large purses (as the English call them)
almost hand-bag size; dark soft but rough material, it spoke
of 19th-century gentility in the dimly lit and empty square.
A large purse, waiting; filled with empty hope.

That was my Monte Carlo moment. From that capacious
but not, not stuffed-with-banknotes bag, reality and romance
hit me together, as if my brain had been
bludgeoned with the truth. Here in its lonely addiction
was the tawdry face of the Casino, denying all the myths,
the glamour, the stories, the accretions of second-hand
imaginings, the distant history that might have fired me
in some bygone age, of cigars and diamonds, furs and powdered
faces, champagne and caviar, marcelled hair, wild laughter, eager
for the glittering promise of the best of life; written up
by some envious, cheap journalist.

The square deserted, the smell of petrol lingered in the roses
in the warm, tired Mediterranean night. You, this way; I, that.

Michael Shepherd

0029 Mouse: Rabbie Burruns Updated

Wee, sleekit, scuttling, technological sairrf,

Hwu wuld ha' gaised yu'd lairrn ta surrf?

(sairrf = serf)

Michael Shepherd

0029 Poet In A Wendy House

After death visited,
they opened the house
as a museum

it was easier than clearing it
but as
Health and Safety officials
were not happy, only one
at a time, perhaps two together,
were admitted
by appointment only

there were photos of course
and framed copies
of the better-known poems
some ageing better than others
a scratchy recording
a rather musty smell

a few years after I died
I went back to look
but the house and
its predominantly green writing room
and blue glass which
the sun peered dustily through
with the hideous 1930s fireplace
painted crudely over in 1960s taste in white
looked nothing to do with me
nor the photos
nor the poems

so I abandoned what I'd thought
a rather cute idea of
being a friendly ghost
in my own museum

it just hadn't come together
as a poem should
or a life

but I left the laughter and the joy
for those who could hear it

(For Wendy, a concrete image)

Michael Shepherd

0029 The Past Is Past - Then It Returns

You asked me
to destroy
all your love-letters
as if that
would free you -

from what?

I wish
I had read them
once again
before I did;
that would be
some sort of
sweet revenge -

for what?

Michael Shepherd

0029 This Night, This Night Of Endless Miracle

On this Mediterranean night with its light breeze
scented with the sun-warmed herbs
drifting down from cooling, stony hills,
a million stars you've never seen before
shine on a million crickets singing
as if from eternity to eternity

and you cannot say, and there's
no need to say, which is which;
the trembling of the stars,
the susurrating of cicadas,
join as in endless praise
of the imagination of their maker
who made imagination too

and though the cicadas, singing, may never know
that the stars they sing to
are shining from a thousand years ago
and though the stars may never know
that the cicadas that they shine upon
are a thousand years here from their now,

it's all known, to the mind that made the vines
that made the grapes that made the wine
singing in my veins tonight
like cicadas susurrating in the starlight
as you hear them now
this night, this night of endless miracle

Michael Shepherd

0030 Boldness Be My Friend - From Goethe

How many noble schemes from goodwill's heart,
how many splendid plans and fine ideas
have foundered, lost their glorious craft and art
through hesitancy born of baseless fears?

We do not see the moment as divine,
thinking that those plans are somehow 'ours';
forgetting, too, that Providence sublime
yields timeless good through time in human hours:

the task begun, this heavenly Providence
begins to move; bestows her love's support
with means, events, beyond coincidence;
assistance past all dreams of human thought -

be bold! and trust in Providence above:
she brings to earth God's magic; power; and love.

Michael Shepherd

0030 Breasts

I've only got to say the word...and
I can hear the male murmur murmur right now
mixed with a hurhur hurhur as of naughty boys...
suddenly lips and fingers have their vivid, hungry memories...
while ladies have their own reactions
not unaware of the murmur hurhur and the fact
that some men think they own these, ungifted, as of right...

and some of us, perforce, have memories as intimate,
loving, detailed, at our fingertips:
the years that once a day or twice
I took the soothing cream and powder,
and with such respect and love and courtesy
washed as gently as I could,
dab-dried with even more light a touch,
lifting those still heavy and magnificent creations, then
with first the cream and then the powder
traced with so careful finger, the sweaty sores
that brassiere and human warmth had made
under the milky skin, lightly veined in blue,
the other hand shifting their tender, surprising weight
to make the task so perfect,
all the while listening carefully for
that slight intake of breath that meant that pain
was a necessary factor in this task...

and those days of delicate comedy
when I sought with such care among the women's stores
seeking out the older assistants, prefacing
my potentially kinky or erotic request, they might think,
with reasons: the sores, the preference for front-fastening,
the possibilities of sleep-bras which however
failed to hold those splendid orbs...
the sports bras which might be too tight –
I could have made a career of it...

and when you died, at a hundred years and two,
the skin unblemished, smooth, unwrinkled
on your back and round those lovely breasts

I'm left with that strange, unmasked treasure – love beyond desire,
And fingers full of memories of care.

Michael Shepherd

0030 Motion Picture Features Central Park

The other day in Central Park
a park-keeper said, that urban parks
were motion pictures, before
motion pictures ... except that,
they were the picture; you
did the motion...and
I savoured that remark which seemed
to hover on the edge
of poetic profundity and revelation

and, inconsequentially, threw up a vision
of Garbo, Swanson, Crawford, Davis,
taking a quiet winter morning's walk
behind large dark glasses and an upturned collar;
and my mind, taking too its mental morning stroll
in Central Park, walked with a
new light-hearted springy step, a sparkling eye,
breathing clean fresh cold green air,
the sun catching frost on leaf and
the slow surface of cold lake water,
winter sunshine lighting expertly
the long shot, the camera's focus,
the dissolve, the swelling music
as the credits gently roll out
their farewell to a dream;
the motion picture of the mind.

Michael Shepherd

0030 Your 'My Life' Exercise Book...

Buy a child's red-covered
'My Exercise Book'
like the one you bought
all those years ago
to build a bridge -
now you realise -
a warm reassuring bridge
between school and home
with its firm hand-rail
at both ends;
the river flowing so fast,
so powerful,
so beautiful
between those different banks
in the blank pages
of that book with its reassuring tables
on the back cover which speak of laws
which you may never read

then with the sharpened pencil
and the smell of cedar flakes
faling from the pencil-sharpener
sweet and haunting to your nose
and breathing heavier now
in this exciting, daunting task,
your head nearer the paper
than old schoolteachers would approve
and pencil gripped as firmly
as you would your life
write so carefully on the first white page
as if the beginning holds the whole story
intended but as yet unfurled,

'My Life'..

Michael Shepherd

0031 Beyond The Bounds

Oh it's there, alright
and very much all right
although 'there' is not at all the word
for where it is – or isn't –

all I can say is,
it's 'beyond' –
beyond all the knowledge I've acquired,
beyond the life I love to live,
beyond the happiest of happiness..

I used to fear 'beyond', to fear
the boundlessness –
and yet, between
(and somehow, the between
and the beyond seem real good friends) –
between the thoughts –
the thoughts of what I want, or don't,
the things I want, the things I don't, then
in the stillness and the silence
which I used to shout 'boring! ' at
and run away and play –
it calls, it yearns; the boundlessness
speaks as familiar as myself

oh it's 'there' all right –
how could I know, unless
they were together linked in inner sight –
the bounded and the boundlessness?

Michael Shepherd

0031 A Realist Film Set

downtown
in a street of tired neon
between a yawning whorehouse
and a bar whose regulars
can no longer remember its name
there's a small door with the sign
Bukoholics Anonymous
it's worth going in
to read the sgrafiti
in the restrooms

Michael Shepherd

0031 An Arab, A Christian, And A Jew...

An Arab, a Christian and a Jew
walked into the same Gents loo...
came out feeling much the same...
you get my point? Shit's in the name..

Michael Shepherd

0031 Autumn's Wild, Rough Days

These wild, rough autumn days
as cooling Northern hemisphere
shudders towards its equinox
with gales and rain and blown-off leaves,
all the elements stirred up, and
bringing strange emotions;
everything is between;

but for children living by the sea,
days of joy and awe –
the sea, no longer blue
but savage brown-red, even emerald green,
which all the year
has bashed and nibbled at the cliffs
like kitchen-boy at panfried half-cut cake,
throws all its might as if it hated the whole idea of earth;
knowing that in one night,
it may do mighty things once in a while
that change the maps themselves – blocking estuaries
that have served ports for a thousand years,
with shingle banks; throwing new beaches
across bays, with stones so exquisitely graded
from rock to pebble, that it's said,
night fishermen thrown onto such a beach without the moon
know exactly where they are by size of stone...

but for the child, a magic time:
the air's a gift for lungs, like breathed champagne;
the sea after the gale is calming down;
but the beach is new: new toys thrown up,
seaweed of many shapes, still wild when wet,
along a new high tide line; stuff off ships, carved wood,
deck-mats, green globes that buoyed up nets,
boxes with some foreign words
to remind us that this same neighbour sea
has other foreign shores across the world..

and every stone and pebble, which yesterday
had muted, dusty-coloured, matt-textured anonymity,

now, wet with salty water, are translucent, shining jewels each one,
glass, white marble (and how far has that pebble come,
hassled and scoured across the ocean's floor..) ,
rough granite of so many shades, hard serpentine,
purple, green, some striped; slate-blues, brick-reds, all
fit for a palace; gathered in an eager hand
which sees nothing in the world but gifts and miracles;
this lovely, wild, wild-hearted shore.

Michael Shepherd

0031 Check-Off

'Who was listening
when I apologised
for my life? '

I jotted that down
in a moment of regret
over the wasted things
of life, that is, my life..

and thought, that
sounds a bit like dialogue
or rather monologue to audience
stage or stalls
in Chekhov

so if no-one was listening
well, that's that

but suppose that 'everything'
was listening, and made
changes so subtle that
they'll go unnoticed except
that I find I have
nothing to apologise for
even to myself

Michael Shepherd

0031 Dawn In Bethlehem On The Morning Of Christ's Nativity

This starry dawn - the wise men yet afar -
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?
All birth's a miracle; not less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;
straw is rustling, as they, manger-drawn,
find unfamiliar form- so warm - to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

0031 Miles Ahead

Do you ever get fed up
of playing music
that sounds like music?
asked Miles Davis

so I'm asking you
do you ever get fed up
of writing poetry
that sounds like poetry?

Michael Shepherd

0031 Ted And Sylvia Meet The Marriage Counsellor

'Let me not to the marriage of true minds
admit impediment' – and let me say
first of all, that I'm all for that...
but Dr Freud asked me if I'd call you in –
that is, invite you – for a little chat;
there'll be no fee, of course...
Sylvia, would you sit over here,
and Ted, you over there?

I've read your case notes
which my secretary compiled, from
your previous poems – she's quite
well-read; indeed, I believe she's now applied
for a post with Mr. Eliot the poet...

Now I understand you're both madly in love
and – ahem – can't wait to 'get at
one another' as they say these days ...
I guess the 'Do not Disturb' notice
may be there for days, ha ha?

but a word of admonition..er.. advice:
although in theory two artists co-habiting
is a great idea in theory – you'll understand
each others' situation, help with tax returns,
maybe use the same literary agent –
it's not all plain sailing: creativity
comes in individual cycles; it's known
today as 'biorhythms'; you're down,
he's up; he's down, you're up

and since you already, Sylvia,
have – harrumph – issues,
these cycles could conflict
quite vigorously; with considerable care
you can make this work
to your advantage; we had marked success
with a previous pair in your situation,
Robert and Elizabeth..

But it will require considerable care,
as I said; and there's always the chance –
my Hollywood clients face this constantly –
that one of you may find your public fame
outstrips the other – this can be difficult;
I'm treating several well-known couples
for this very problem; Richard and Elizabeth
were frequent visitors here in Belair...
a marriage of two fine creative artists
can become like crows picking at
the flesh and then the bones..

So I hope you don't mind this little chat;
best wishes, and I suggest
you come and see me again
not too soon – who needs psychiatrists
when they're in love, ha ha – but
not too late?

My receptionist
will see you out...
this Hollywood practice,
though busy and, ahem, quite lucrative,
brings me much sadness, as my
wives have often commented...

Michael Shepherd

0032 Conman

Silver-bronze...that was the beauty of your voice,
deep and rich and flexible,
as you sat yourself down on the bench
in the waiting-room on Kensington High Street Station
almost deserted on a dull afternoon
not long before Christmas

and spun your almost convincing tale
of the African Union scholarship, was it,
of which the monthly payout was late this month...

and I watched myself,
hypnotized by that voice which should be singing
Porgy and Bess up there on the stage,
and felt good, dammit, that I was
trusting a stranger to borrow more than I'd given –
let alone lent – any Christmas up to then...

yes, it felt really good, as if
I'd paid for a lesson in how
to stop thinking of myself as mean, uncharitable –
an hour with a psychotherapist
who knew exactly what to relieve me of...
at about the standard rate

Michael Shepherd

00327 Homage To John Ashbery

We drove downtown to see our neighbours;
none of them were home,
all that was underfoot was lost,
cathexis arrived early in a golden coach;
seems we weren't welcome despite;
dear spit, the week is turning over.

Yes, I can see I am only in the where –
What does the loneliness in all this mean?
How can 'rare earth' be an element?
NB: what is here is certainly not there.
Sometimes I think it's all one big affectation,
Every one has to grow up a little in their life.

My head ached from all those boulevards
rushing in to fill the unthinkable well;
outside under a slappy sky the leaves were right on:
it's coming to a theatre near you.
Like all good things,
life tends to go on too long.

I'd like to write you about all this.

Michael Shepherd

0032from Shankara On The Chandogya Upanishad

8.1.1

Inside the body
is a little place.

you could say that
this is like a lotus
for it floats on the surface of the waters of life
and opens its petals to the heavens,
rejoicing to be alive.

or you could say that
it is like a house
for it is where you return for rest and re-creation
within the love of family,
within the safety of its walls.

or you could say that
it is like a city
for it has a palace and a treasury, and many officers
such as mind and intellect
to fulfil its needs.

yet within that little place,
a space,
as large as the universe itself.

we should know about that space.

within it are comprehended
the heavens and the earth;
the elements, sound, air, fire, light, water, all that's underfoot
that arises from the earth, returns to dust;
whatever is, and what is not;
all in that little space
which because it is space
is unbounded.

it does not age with age,

with wrinkles nor gray hair, nor
with forgetful mind;
beyond all sorrows, since sorrow comes
from separation;
free to have desires,
since it satisfies all desires
and lives in its own satisfaction;
that satisfaction, they call bliss – what else?

you need not seek outside for this;
all this is in your heart.

Michael Shepherd

0034 Going To School To Rilke

We could not have counted on it,
those days when we were children young in years
but rich with a thousand hopes
jostling, pushed aside, forgotten in a day,
turned over in the mind in those few savoured moments
before a happy-tired sleep

nor did we think even to hope for it
or think how it would be to squeeze the honey of it
between our palms into our ready mouths
leaving the wax upon our hands and laughing
together or alone, in rainbow solitude

but now it's here, we can savour the honey of it,
the future which we could not have had before
the days and years had closed like inexorable cupped petals,
into a summer evening's sun-hazed past –

we could not have hoped or counted on nor dreamed -
these days when, all required work now done,
life's evening hours and the late and lazy
golden leisure of fruit-filled autumn branches
stretches out in even though not endless measure –

today I choose to go to school to Rilke,
a choice as free as we think the birds are free,
the animals, the trees – yet know so little,
so very little, of their life –

and pick up the book of his poems at blissful random,
and read one single line –

'I have great faith in all things not yet spoken' –

and sit here, as the world falls, gently, as somewhere far away,
the book silent between my hands, having spoken,
like a honeycomb holding the honey
of some new, untrodden, unbelievably rich life.

0034 Poem With Which To Start A Poetry Reading

Ladies and Gentlemen,
this is my first poetry reading
and I'm very nervous
and nearly cancelled tonight

but I spoke about this to
a friend who's a therapist
and he said,
this is what you do,

you imagine the audience
in front of you
all in their underwear
(as you probably are; but
without the outer layer)
with the men
wearing the most idiotic
flowered Hawaiian
two sizes too large
boxer shorts
and the ladies
in the frumpiest
underwear
you can imagine

apparently it works

so if I look at you, ladies and gentlemen,
somewhat strangely
from time to time
or giggle uncontrollably
or my eyes rest on you personally
as if we're sharing some huge
x-ray joke,

please forgive me
and understand
that's it for your benefit
as well as mine

and that you will have put your outerwear
back on
in the interval
before the next poem

I hope this is OK with you
and nobody's too embarrassed
in fact you could do the same trick
with me if it's
any help
and now
I think I've said enough as
I'm OK now
how about you?

(For maximum effect, pause noticeably at the end of each line)

(with thanks to Ernestine for the idea)

Michael Shepherd

0036 Hanging Garden

The pink geraniums
hanging in their plastic terracotta bowl
twist gently to and fro in the slight breeze
as if they're quietly impatient
for my attention.

It's their third year up there –
I never expected them to last
more than a year, but
half exposed, half sheltering
under what's less a porch
than an architectural feature,
they've decided to make a go of it

this week in late July moving into August,
they're into their later style of flowering –
not the profundity of early summer
when they decide exactly when to burst
upon the world petal to petal in a huge bouquet

but delicately, translucent,
both flower and small leaves, letting the sky pass through
as if they know all about colour slides
and simply, do it better.

after their first burst of flower,
they retired into themselves
as if they were exhausted – although
I never asked that of them; while
my respect for them grows year by year

sometimes I think I ought to feed them
like proper gardeners do,
since they don't have much soil up there
and that's fed them for three years now

but then I think, no, that's
asking more of them than they, abundantly, do
so I'll settle for what they want to offer me

we seem to know each other's there,
but sometimes they call unexpectedly
like today, when I'm not busy with something else,
and when I give them full attention
as if I'm asking them deep questions
which I've never formulated for myself
yet which they're prepared to answer,
they pour out information about
what I'd call God's glorious Creation
(what they call it, if they need to call it
anything, gives the mind pause)
in a list which, as they speak it, quality by quality,
gift after gift, invention after invention,

seems no is, as endless as humility

Michael Shepherd

0036 National Gallery

A 'School of..' painting, it's sometimes on display,
sometimes in the 'Secondary Collection'; rather like
its subject, it's subject to circumstances
beyond its own control. But this is no pupil's homage
to the master; quite the contrary. He's telling us
something very clearly – but, he's just not telling us exactly
what he's telling us - as might a living artist tell
for a curator's fussy footnote; all the 'program';
it's art, you have to look...

So shall we start from foreground? It's a horizontal canvas,
a road runs straight across; in the middle of the road
a golden-haloed, blue-robed saint is being stabbed.
The helmeted pair of ruffians
are clearly sent by secular authority
to do the deed; this we may guess. The saint
at this sharp freeze-frame moment, leans slightly back –
not aback in reaction or retreat; but rather,
to make it easier for the knife to do its work.
Had the painting been two centuries later,
the gesture would be called 'Baroque':
he, leaning back, open hands, as if he's yielding up
an acquiescent soul; surrendered faster than a prayer,
faster than a plunging knife. Might we so wish to go?

His priest companion (they wear the Order's colours)
will I think be questioned sharply by the Order's Governor:
is he simply fleeing for his life?
Is he running off for help? But that's not likely, since
there are would-be witnesses right by the roadside there; or
does he in his wisdom know that what will be, will be?
(In which case, did he really need to flee?)
That's something, someone at the time would know;
It adds to the irony – we're disturbed; the victim's not...

And now a further very visual paradox: right beside the road,
two woodcutters are at work; swinging their axes, quite oblivious -
not, as hoping to be spared, as in 'didn't see nuffin, gov...';
maybe they knew they weren't the target? It's more as if

they represent a world apart; chopped trees an allegory
of life cut down to other world's decree;
but did the artist have to make this quite so blatant?
Another disturbing paradox still unresolved.

And then, in this strange painted layer-cake
of world on world, the top, green layer:
the sloping verdant hill, serene in the lush and dreaming, radiant
peace of summer nature undisturbed; here, nothing untoward
has happened; ever might; beauty's unimpaired.

From this strange layer-cake of art, we'll take
some indefinable visual memory out into the street -

saints live, saints die; man's work goes on; and nature, simply, is.

Michael Shepherd

0037 Ode To The Patience Of A Yawning Audience

O come sweet sleep, and close my eyes with verse!
with drowsy metre, meet a deeper sleep;
to sleep, to dream, I never am averse -
to slumber numbed by poet's numbers deep;

so, here's a verse that's very brief - a sonnet:
just fourteen lines to challenge your attention:
please rest your weary ears, I pray, upon it;
head up; back straight; let go of any tension;

count the passing seconds to that time
-I'll indicate it with a final couplet -
when glorious English in immortal rhyme
blesses you with torpor's blissful duvet...

and after tribute paid to Orpheus' charms,
with stifled yawn, depart to Morpheus' arms...

Michael Shepherd

0037 To, For, Sheila W.

This evening, I thought of you
after, how long, forty years:
you, sitting across the oak table
in the old forge's kitchen, that John had made
from salvaged shop fittings,
his sleeves rolled up, workmanly care
mixed on his face with amused dissatisfaction;

you, looking across at me with a girlish joy
which, daughter, wife, mother, grandmother,
was always there – a girlish joy
that could hardly believe its luck
to find its understanding in another;
enthusiastic excitement rising like a blush;
then a little check of breath, as if
in company, courtesy required
it be controlled, or else
it would flood out and fill the room,
burst open the doors, out across the fields,
to seek out every other soul that welcomed it...

in such a moment shared, (it is as if)
one knows everything one needs to know
of earth; of heaven.

Michael Shepherd

0038 On The Day Of Christ's Epiphany

Their wives were not too keen about it all:
beyond the call of duty, so it seemed;
for, if they read the heavens' portents so well,
what need of proof, of presence at the scene?

And then, to go without due retinue
through unforgiving deserts; foreign towns;
and forests hiding thieves and wild beasts too?
And carrying rich gifts? And worse, their crowns?

And so to risk three kingdoms, not just one?
And for the sake of some religious creed
not even ours? 'Nay, love - it must be done;
we crown our lives and kingdoms with this deed;

these crowns are symbols of our rule on earth,
to yield the King of Heaven at His birth.'

Michael Shepherd

0038 The Stein Way

she said you ask me
what the poem's about
and I'm saying it's about
whatever it's about
to you that's a poem
and there's another poem
which is what it's about
to me so you see
I write a poem and now
it's two poems
that must be good
and poets must be good
to do that yes
we are good like, oh,
parents, and teachers
who make two from one
or three from two
yes good and
yes to good I say

Michael Shepherd

0038 Underthings

See this table top. Smooth, waxed
to a point, a soup stain which perhaps
a finger nail will lift. Beneath the surface,
atoms, molecules, tension and release,
law and freedom play out a drama
which the teacup does not know or tell.

And so, much else. All. And so the mind.
As if, webcamming the family at play,
the screen jumpcuts, plays on the screen
your inner life for all to see; the family freeze, cold,
open-mouthed...

Two years ago, I eased myself into a chair,
anticipating pleasant conversation – but instead
the camera of the mind presented, in full colour,
a glowing red-hot sphere, like
a sunset on a dusty day. Or Mars, more like,
in all its fierce, fearsome anger – anger
stayed on that screen for six whole weeks
while body, mind and soul perhaps
played turmoil with its outcome quite unknown.

Just now, I lift my gaze from the crumbs on plate;
the camera points at what it should now screen,
the window; but the mind sees something else,
as clear as mind but rarely seen in mind.
It's saying something new about myself.
Watch the screen; but watch the camera too.

Michael Shepherd

0038 Why I'M Ashamed Of Being British

It was so easy being a British child
in the 1930s:
everything was – or so it seems to memory's
selective mind - so ordered:
how old was I, when I stopped
raising my school cap
(‘Don’t just touch it, Michael;
lift it! ’) to, not just staff at school,
but anyone to whom my parents talked
or who had talked (‘My, hasn’t he grown! ’
as if this was some personal achievement) to me,
or more likely, over my head, as I
shifted from foot to foot,
trapped in a grown-up world
of politenesses; which however
my mother loved and rightly
as one now raised in her station
from being polite to customers
in grandma’s terrace front-window shop
where homemade cooking was the income
now that the cotton dust had got to grandpa's lungs;
but now the wife of a man retired
at thirty-eight, stone-deaf...

The history books at school were slender – since
we’d won every war – or if some foreigners thought
we hadn’t, it had all the same brought out great courage,
incredible bravery which was a lesson to us all,
fortitude and leadership and deeds
‘surpassing the call of duty’. We’d even
won wars in places which technically weren’t ours,
called The Empire; over which we ruled
because we did it better than the natives;
because we were born to rule..

And we were taught by haunted heroes who’d fought
in the war to end all wars – the PT instructor
had a face like camouflage, white, greenish, brown and red,
where he’d been mustard-gassed; our heroes

were still close to us, although
they didn't talk about it much. That was
another lesson in how to be British.

Geography was happy natives
(only the National Geographic Magazine
photographed their tits, and then only if brown)
moving export crops, balancing trade
and the occasional water-pot – which was always full.
And the sun never set on those red bits on the map
which were the British Empire...

How easy it was to be proud of being British,
and to take for granted
that gift of birth, our birthright
which, unearned, we would seek
to earn anew by living up to it..

But then, haven't all of us, by some
trick of space-time unexplained by Einstein,
lived, as a child, in better times – or at least,
if any didn't, we never heard of them;
or if we did, it was because the missionaries
were putting all that right, if we just simply
put a penny or two in their box, and here's a flag to pin
on your jacket like some painless medal..

* * *

So, no more nostalgic trips now down that memory lane;
let's start from now and work backwards
on why I'm currently ashamed, after all these golden years,
to be British; and despite
all that there is left of those things of magnificence –
fair play, free speech, freedom itself,
not yet quite worn away

I'm deeply ashamed this week
that three British subjects,
despite Habeas Corpus, Magna Carta, and the rule of law,
were handed over – and in irons –
without due process of laws promptly promulgated

by reason and humanity; and
if they did indeed steal a million each on paper
yet never charged here, where it occurred,
we can guess that it's because
such unearned money is
the game of all financial deals,
in City circles, as in other countries...

I'm deeply ashamed as of last year,
that after a history of 'responding to a request'
and just defence of the oppressed,
we made a pre-emptive strike
in the oily name of exporting democracy
while our governments at home
confuse democracy with 'spin'; we are the spun
in the woven lies of history.
We have dirtied the name of democracy.

I'm deeply ashamed, as of this decade,
that we have found no way
to enable our uncontrolled immigrant population
to feel as proud of being British as are
Americans of being American;
ashamed that politicians
put party over conscience;
ashamed that – yes, young and old alike –,
we have lost respect for others
both in action or the lack of it;
that 'neighbour' is now a mere
geographical location;
that we apologise for or demean our religious sense
in a world where those we fight
are more religious than are we;
and last of all, I'm ashamed
that one day soon we may become
ashamed of being British.

(Please read Tara McHale's poem on the same theme, it's a group effort - or add
your own!))

0039 On The Morning Of Christ's Nativity

This starry dawn - the wise men yet afar -
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?
All birth's a miracle; not less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;
straw is rustling, as they, manger-drawn,
find unfamiliar form- so warm - to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

0039 Well, Chop My Prose!

...for that's the way that poetry goes...
and goes...mere pose, tapped out as prose...

Yes, most of us, these days, undisciplined,
approach the temple of pure poetry,
when some thought stirs in deepest heart and mind, ,
with all the earthy tread of careful prose...

yet with a certain hope, a faith, a love,
a purity of heart – that if we tread -
unmetered and unrhymed petitioners -
as pilgrims, sackclothed, ashen from the urn
of some poetic crematorium;

that, as we stumble on the heart's true path,
the Muse, with long and patient, weary sigh,
- the music of the ages in her ears -
will catch up with our steps along the road
and guide us to that sacred, lovely place
where, with a gasp – our verses dropt from hand –
we'll be where goodness, truth and beauty dance
and sing and laugh and love – now three; now one.

(thanks, WD)

Michael Shepherd

0040 For Tara's Friends Named And Unnamed

They're trained to do the work of love
dispassionately
as if they are the most loving friends
that you could ever have
and, miraculously,
there to help you in your hour – no, those vital minutes –
of your need (and ours) , with every skill
that human beings can devise
to save their fellows;
if they were angels,
could they do a better job?

and today, if we tried to thank them
on the phone – they'd have to call us back...perhaps...
that's if we could ever get through – no,
sorry, we don't know their names, that's
why we're phoning...yes, security, I understand...

or if we left a message,
picked up as they, weary, leave their shift
that's been extended due to an emergency or three,
they may have difficulty in remembering
just which that case was, which they dealt with
as lovers even could not,
as angels; human beings as human as could be..

or know how many wept, how many
held their breath, how many prayed;
how many wondered how to pray;
how many are more grateful
than they might ever put in words -

you nameless ones,
I hope that somewhere in your hearts
as you take a few hours' sleep
before your next redemption of humanity
you may take whatever strength you may ever need
from
yours truly and sincerely,

Her Other Friends

Michael Shepherd

00401 The First Time

There's a first time
for everything
said God
giving the Word
to start it all

there's a first time
for everything

I've just read
your poems

and I feel so good
that for the first time
I laughed at Envy,
kicked it around the room,
laughed some more,
kicked it some more

I feel so good

in the corner
there's Envy taking the count

thanks

Michael Shepherd

0041 Goods Train In The Night

Film meets the poetic image,
and in some things never fails – as when

out there alone in the prairie -
the steppes, the tundra,
snowfields, desert -
past midnight, the heavens
a carpet of stars, maybe a flash
over the horizon of Northern Lights,
or the centered assurance of the Southern Cross,
silence broken only by a howl,
was that a wolf,
just one observer as
a camera, a poet, whom
we never see..

and then a distant sound and
one plaintive assertive impersonal wail and
almost too soon, the fast rhythmic rattle
of a goods train on the railway line over there
but near enough to shake the scene, and
seemingly endless; minutes pass? then as suddenly
it's past, it's gone... and the silence following
is deeper, huge, saying something huge
by the absence of anything said...or

back in the city, the child rewarded for trust by trust,
allowed to wander the railway goods yard
next to the gasworks down the sulphured end of town,
miniatured rail tracks leading to the glowing maw
of the furnaces; but all afternoon-sleepy between trains except for
over there, the ceaseless smack and clang and clink of chain and
barely audible sigh of wagon wheels and buffers
as invisible engine and railwaymen shunt and couple,
shunt, uncouple, couple, empty wagons for return
to far-off places named upon their sides...

was this how I learned to make poetry,
shunting, uncoupling, coupling

empty words into lines of trucks that have direction,
to return to heart's-truth and poetry

and timely, late at night, out there in the waiting solitude
to disturb that great silence under a canopy of stars,
singing their rhythm in the dreaming night
with the assurance of human company,
leaving behind them
a deeper silence in the listening heart

Michael Shepherd

0041 In The Rifle's Foresight

In fifty years, when Jerusalem's gone,
flattened by an Arab atomic bomb,
to whom will be the spoils, in this tear-stained land,
lifeless, radio-active in its blood-drenched sand?

Michael Shepherd

0041 Unaraluk The Shaman

In the very earliest time,
when knowledge was love
and truth was goodness
and words had power,
people and animals
lived as brother and sister,
parent and child.

Sometimes they were one,
sometimes they were the other
and it mattered not,
for all spoke the same language
and words were magic
and made things happen.

In later times,
only the shamans remembered
and even they needed
the help of spirits.
Unaraluk the shaman
was helped by his dead father
and his dead mother, and
the sun, a dog, and a sea scorpion

and these enabled Unaraluk
to know everything about
what was on the earth
and under the earth,
in the sea
and in the sky.

Nobody could explain this:
that's the way it was.

Michael Shepherd

0042 For Billy Collins

Chess is more than dancing queens,
hockey's even played on ice;
a little difficulty too
gives poetry an extra spice.

Michael Shepherd

0044 Liste Ye Thertyl Allé Thynges Ye Speke

Allé thyngés speke the name of godde.
Trete allé thynges as lichsome lissom mayde
thatte fore thu yearne to daunce as cheke to cheke
as for to sense the savour of here blome;
Ware thu watchen; thenne alle thynges schal speke
and telle al worldés hiden metodés
than speké not thatte godde speke of him self;
thorough goddes brethe hem brethe thy yeres thereinne
hem sondés, hwile thatte ye stonde and boté stare;
Hwaet thu! Tak boté steppés quicke and close
as alway maydé mak menne brazelich bolde –
for til godde speke thee in Hys allé thynges,
so ware thu watchen; alle thynges slepe inne godde.

Michael Shepherd

0045 In Honour Of Ahmad Shamlu, Poet, Teacher

She so loved Him
was so beloved of Him
that He spoke to her and said
my beloved
ask of Me whatsoever you wish

and she said
without hesitation
my Lord,
fill my life
with difficulty
for at those times
I cry out
for You
and feel nearest to You

and if, for the working-out
of my own destiny
or for the love of Your world
must I be born again
have me born
in the most difficult of times
in the most difficult of places
and make me a man
that I may walk barefoot
and bloody
with only one leg
over a path of swords

Michael Shepherd

0045 Like, Iconic, Man...

Iconic.

It's one of those media buzz-words
coined out of some personal conceit
like 'magisterial' some years back
or 'superbabe' or 'uberdiva'
to indicate a class beyond class

but though, yes, ikons follow you with their eyes
round the room, like a B-list babe spotting
a press photographer –
once done, they're copied for centuries
by wannabees and
less and less well, until
some hep-cat thinks up something new..

so, mmm, I'd quite like, me or a poem perhaps, to be called
'iconic' just once or twice
in the broadsheet press or glossies -
just once or twice only, without
having to live up to it
by being kinda dead

Michael Shepherd

0046 Cursory Nursery Hairy Tail

Can a leopard
change its spots?
'In a way...'
said Darwin,
tied in knots...

Then would
a leopard
spot its changes?
'Evolution
might arrange this...'

Michael Shepherd

0046 Jewel Of Blood

A fine morning and the side-streets empty
then turning the corner,
in the middle of the road
a pigeon - grey-mauve, plump and feather-perfect,
one wing half-spread in flight,
sprawled sideways,
dead

and at that moment the sun shone
cruelly
on the blood that shone on the dusty road by its head,
a jewel, redder than any red,
that shone like a message
as if it were the blood of the world itself
so rich, so rich...

and I felt guilty
that I saw it so beautiful,
that jewel from the heart of a dead dove
of peace,
and thought I should suppress the thought...
and, now, that further thought which hovered in its train
that this whole world in such a jewel of blood,
more precious than a ruby, or than gold, or much fine gold,
a jewel beyond price
is what a devotee at communion or at Mass...

while cool reason
(what has reason to do with this?)
countered
well you value your own blood above most things
don't you? Why not a pigeon's?

but all words spent and poets silent and associations dropped
and thoughts at rest,
that pool of blood
in the winter sunlight that shone on the dusty street
was just so beautiful.

0046 The Measured Life

Here in the garden at the break of day,
the air's been washed with holy water overnight,
and it's so peaceful, as if nature at this hour
replays Creation's dawn; takes a heartfelt pause
before it launches, first itself, then us,
into the business of the day and, so it seems,
to lose ourselves somewhere inside ourselves.

Sitting here, I meditate upon the silence and the stillness
at this thought-free hour of dawn; as if I and nature both
share that sweet mystery that movement, action,
arise from stillness, remain behind it all the day...

To measure out the use of this fine world –
to live, neither too little nor too much;
to be both actor and the watcher of all this,
sitting in delight at one's own play...

And in the kitchen of the spirit,
where rolling-pins and herbs live lives of metaphor,
weigh out with balance, measure in the jug of life
the usage of this world;
in these scales, balance gold;
the gold that's earned, the gold that's given out;
from this jug, pours pure joy.

This evening, bruised and battered by the day
that I allowed to, worldly, use me thus,
I shall return to this same garden seat
showered and refreshed
by spirit's bathing - mercy, grace –
to find again that peace which never left
this seat of love

Michael Shepherd

0047 Ode To The Goddess Of Punctuation

I sing of punctuation....'What? ', you say,
'I've never heard a sonnet on that theme! ';
and thus this modest goddess, clothed in grace,
performs her holy task; unheard, unseen,

except in trivial printed marks (- like this -)
punctilious editors put in - or erase;
yet, she's the Sherpa to the mind's high bliss
who leads our thoughts to peaks of silent praise;

immortal consort of the god of speech,
handmaid of mind, bestowing measured pause
between each thought; their silent truth to reach
by resting mind in mind's divine true cause.

O worship her, her power so great and blest,
whose shortest silence, wildest mind may rest!

Michael Shepherd

0048 On First Reading Rilke

Out of the cage
you had not known you were in
with a freedom
beyond what you thought it to be
into the spaciousness
which was boundless
and a joy
which redefined itself day by day
around a firm centre
which was everywhere

for Joanna

Michael Shepherd

0049 One For The Inner Child

Me, I prefer a long tale
with a happy ending,
said the python
glancing at the
Readers' Digest
on return from
the restroom

(for Jerry,
who likes
short poems)

Michael Shepherd

0050 Margaret B.

You knew her better than I – you'd
looked after her when her splendid
eccentricity which the English do so well
went beyond the bounds that others set...

I only write obituaries, dear Margaret,
when asked; somehow the others can be messy;
but now of course, I wish I'd known enough...for
how do we know, when we're so busy
enjoying their company, their joyously,
modestly eccentric company—no showing off –
that we'll so miss them, when they're gone?
Who wants to question and accumulate,
with obituaries in mind?

In the 1930s, the only child in that foreign school
to refuse to Heil Hitler before class... that set the tone;
the young ATS, sergeant-major, was it,
who made her way in tin hat, through the wartime bombs,
to attend the evening philosophy and economics classes...
and later, possessed of a comfortable private income,
spent a life of good deeds and giving generously,
money too, in utmost secrecy...

Wartime leaves its traces – for the serving ladies,
it's often booze or fags (and of course,
romances never spoken of) : but even her unsteady steps
as we met for what was supposed to be serious work -
an hour or two of joyous laughter, at the tragicomedy
called life – her walk was ladylike, as if
the alcohol was drinking her, not she drinking it...
and when after a life of love for others,
she discovered sex in her late 70s...we did not tut or pry...

And when you said the other day, who knew her well,
and loved her like a brother,
'she was a hurt lady', I was at first surprised,
then poised to feel compassion; but all
I could remember was laughter and

open hearts and goodness.

The rest I'll leave, dear Margaret, to you and God.

Michael Shepherd

0050 Morning Rain In Early Autumn

Today the soft rain is
not falling, rather blessing,
as gentle as mercy,
making the air
more airy, if that can be,
nature's air conditioning let's crudely say,
and the geraniums blessing, in their turn,
the front door to my heart's home, are, manifestly,
exhibiting pleasure.

It's almost a century since the Indian, Professor Bose –
mark the day with unpicked flowers –
was drummed out of the Royal Society, no less,
for demonstrating to his satisfaction
and the delight of non-members
that plants had nerves, felt pain, revulsion...

and it's pretty obvious that the
subtly-named Venus Fly Trap
has very effective, non-rust, non-gymnasium
vegetable muscles

while Hinduism, I read yesterday,
completes the picture – plants
feel pleasure as well as pain
and show it

so from today, no idle chat over the garden fence
like 'the geraniums are perking up...'
it's 'the flowers are pleased today! '
and stuff the raised eyebrow...

I, who normally treat gardening as
a spectator sport, now in the light of
this clearer knowledge, dead-headed,
yesterday, the geraniums which looked like
the week after the week before,
a serious hangover after a burst of private
garden show, and today I look at them

tenderly – on this day of soft rain.

And, I feel dead-headed too; maybe today
a poem is flowering gently close by
the heart's open door; and the geraniums
are – if not, anthropomorphically, pleased –
showing pleasure, in the measure
that Creation permits them to; and I
am pleased; for them; for it; to say the least.

I'll leave that door open
on this day of soft and gentle mercy.

Michael Shepherd

0050 Tears Stolen From Tara

tears and fears,
run away;
run as fast as
fears run high,
run as fast as
tears run dry,

yesterday
is now today;
nor should sorrow
think tomorrow;
tears and fears,
run away,

(with apologies, wittth love)

Michael Shepherd

0051 From Plotinus: Enneads 4 And 6

Often, I awaken to myself,
as from this earthly body lifted up;
and feel external to all other things,
myself the single knower past all thought;

I marvel at the beauty I then see,
a beauty all around, yet seen as one;
then, know myself to live the noblest life,
at one with highest being in that realm.

Only when, from this high state past thought,
I afterward descend, I ask myself
how can so great a thing - that soul I own,
take mortal body? How may these things be?

And this, the life of gods and blessed men:
alone with the All-One; none alien then!

Michael Shepherd

0051 The Blackbird Of Truth

Waiting for the train, listening
to the blackbird singing
across the railway line
I whistled a musical game with it
of call and response,
variations, show-off riffs;

the blackbird listened,
held its head a little to one side,
crisply hopped onto the iron rail
and I thought myself mighty clever

as we played our musical game, and
it flew across the line, a few yards nearer,
swiftly, with clear intention
onto the platform two yards from me

and the whole world turned on me
as I realised I had no idea
whether it was playing at
blackbird makes friends with man
or whether it was planning
a swift dart at this rival's eyes

and I felt humble, stupid, ashamed, and yes scared,
to have intruded in this blackbird's life;
stopped whistling, turned away
and pretended it was just a game,
knowing now
it wasn't.

Michael Shepherd

0052 Herrick On His Julia's Clothes

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
Till, then, methinks, how sweetly flows
That liquefaction of her clothes!

But when she dons her miniskirt, me-
-thinks but briefly; asks her curtly -
Mistress, let's get down and dirty...

(for Marcy)

Michael Shepherd

0052 English Fore Forriners

Look - I can spell it - 'tongue'!
Now isle never get it wrongue!
And see this bottle - 'Lite' -
Now isle always get it rite!

Michael Shepherd

0052 The Child In Me - A Postmodern Lyric

flutter by,
butterfly..

no crime
to rhyme

or sin
to grin

Michael Shepherd

0053 More Heartstone Than Headstone

Here lies the grave
of the very, very brave -
pray mark it with a song

who died defending
the arguably right
from the army of the
arguably wrong.

Michael Shepherd

0057 Strict Tempo - A Poem To Dance To

One Two Three Four
One Two Three Four
Forwards. Sideways.
Sideways. Back...

Victor Sylvester, Victor Sylvester,
I thought of you yester-
day, white tie and tails,
trousers as tight
as a ball without a ballroom,
Cuban Romeo moustache and
patent leather hair...
drumming out strict tempo
the tempo of our lives
learning to dance girlfriends
into bed or into wives...

do they still teach ballroom
to your hissing records,
down in Cheam or Purley,
head up, shiny shoes,
pressed tight, breast to breast,
adolescents wondering
if a jockstrap would be best?

now it's coming back, I see,
One Two One Two
swing her round and pronto,
but watch, don't dropp her onto
that shiny shellacked floor...

Ou sont les disques d'antan, je me demande?

....gone and played, the yesteryears..
our sweaty-sweet Sylvester years..

one two, one two,
our memory's locked embrace...

0059 Another Tribute To E E Cummings

Much we have from ever,

much we fear from never.

* * *

(with thanks to a j saywell for the inspiration)

Michael Shepherd

0060 Melanin

Melanin is a polymer, most often of
two molecules with very long names,
indolequinone, and dihydroxyindole carboxylic acid,
which are in all of us, affecting
skin and hair color and even
present in the eye and its color
and the brain too; the word
comes from the Greek for 'black'

It is believed that all of us whose ancestors
lived near the Equator, and
that could be all of us yeah
originally had black skins,
inherited suntan if you like
but that those who moved up north
got whiter – which helped
to absorb Vitamin D from the sparse sunlight and
stave off rickets and such.

All pretty cool so far, right?

My clever schooldays friend
later researched melanin
finding in the course of his studies
that a rubber factory in South America somewhere,
tires I think not condoms
used a compound that accidentally turned
black-skinned workers into white
which caused some social consternation

So, are you wondering where this poem
Is going? Or is it a bit too obvious?
Well, I'll stop there, and
you can follow it up yourself.
No point in spelling it out
In black and white.

Michael Shepherd

0062 Robinia Pseudoacacia Alba

Its trunk is right next to the front gate
so that as I go out, there's a faint flicker
of guilt and anger - next door's insurance company
want me to have it cut down, which I resent; it's just
so beautiful. It calls out love.

All of four feet high when I bought it,
slender, almost unnoticeable, and a glorious mistake
since I'd confused it with a 'real' slow-growing acacia;
now it towers over the house, superb, generous and delicate,
gently shaken by the breeze as if to speak of eternal youth.

It's the one you see punctuating with its bright green fountain,
urban 'developments'; unaffected even a few feet from a 24-hour freeway, as
incongruously itself as a geisha at a bus stop.

It hasn't forgotten it's really a forest tree, and reminds us daily
with aristocratic pride and a generous beauty,
which should shame those same 'developers'
who know it'll melt the hearts of photographers and clients alike...

If I pause at the gate, I see its bark - rough, pitted, gouged,
as if it has put in a lifetime of the most arduous work
to shame our human lives. An older substance
than a human lifetime, too; the more you look at it,
the more ancient in its knowledge.

What is it protecting, like some old and wizened man,
his arms around his grandchild? Within this aged bark, in some mysterious,
magic way, substances are on the move; so well
protected, and disguised - to unfold, like some divine magician,
those delicate, pale green fronds of leaves, through which
the morning sun shines translucent like an unearned blessing.

At night, its leaves fold up upon themselves
as hands in prayer. This is a tree to love. And it is loved.
It deserves this poem; which though it may not be divinely inspired,
celebrates a tree which surely is. And there we meet.

0066 The Cell

The cell was smaller than a bedroom
or a life sentence
but the second night,
the first of sleep,
S. was awoken
by a knocking on the wall
and so the wall that separated them
joined them

when walls
become shared words
we are in the presence
of ourself.

With acknowledgements to Simone Weil

Michael Shepherd

0068 The Connoisseur (2)

Is there a god
sleeping in this room?

even the doorhandle, gently turned,
seems to speak a message
before the room entered, the first breath taken
of the room's own air

and on the table, the grey-green vase seems
to be the host; the silent messenger: the furniture
somehow eternal in its order; every line and curve
within the room speaking of some
divine geometry; the shaded sunlight seems
to fall on tiptoe, touch in silent praise;
the air, to be refined; and the silence –
what does the silence say unspoken

as if it holds some god-smiled word,
some solemn laughter, about what
is there and is not there, has made
of this room, this ordinary room,
a shrine where one can worship without form
oneself?

the vase too holds itself both
open and reserved; its perfect curves
the subtle decisions of a history
of centuries, of generations
of human hands; of things made
for oneself, for others, for all else
where all else is known;

silent the vase; the room full of its sound.
Is there a god
sleeping in this room?

you; moving forward with respectful quiet step
to touch this grey-green
Chinese vase

Michael Shepherd

0074 Spider Spider...

Do spiders do what spiders do
with no alternative?

Or can they wake up one fine day
And think 'today I'll LIVE!

'I'll take the morning off today -
no repair work - (miss my lunch...) :

'then move my website far away
from that poetic bunch...'

Michael Shepherd

0075 The Connoisseur

Do come in. I'm so glad that you came –
it's good to have someone to
share one's pleasures and delights with.
Some of my family think I'm
some sort of misanthrope, hiding away
with my collection of Chinese porcelain...

I tell them, it's the opposite – I feel that
I'm in touch with the finest work of
contented men, creating some sort of memory of
perfection, for others to enjoy – I guess
you feel the same way about those poems
you write? Now –

your hands are clean? Not because of
this celadon Sung vase, let's start with that –
but I'd like you to feel the outer layer
of skin on your fingertips touching
the surface of the vase and yet
not quite touching, feeling
the air between – silk on silk,
almost – I was going to say, the skin of
a young girl's cheek greeting
another young girl's cheek, but that wouldn't
sound quite right – you must have
the same problems, with choosing just the right
similes and metaphors, that are
thrilling without being 'clever'?

I don't want to be pretentious about
all this – just feel the surface: not matt,
not shiny, the colour not bright, not blatant,
but not in hiding – and see
how the potter takes the vase's curves and contours
from neck to belly, like a yacht,
like a horseman, like a lover – put
this vase in a room to itself and its stillness
fills the room with presence...

they talk a lot of nonsense about
connoisseurship – it's just loving what
is fine, and long reflected over, and
as human an activity as can be. You meet
the maker in the art. And yes,
there are other connoisseurs who
love the roughness of a cracked, irregular
Japanese tea-cup, a one-off from a woodman's kiln...

I expect you feel just the same
about poetry? How fortunate
we are, you and I..

Michael Shepherd

0075 The Events Of 12.25

the stable door shakes in the cold night wind;
the cattle snort and snuffle in the straw;
by city wall the lanterns glint on steel;
what will become of Mary's child this year?

for are we sure that miracles stay true -
if lost to mind, to heart, to memory?
will Herod have the last laugh, one year soon?
wise men and shepherds miss the heavenly?

will children fail to sense, soon, in the light
that glints on tinsel and bright packages,
the holy present in the gift's delight;
nor sense the angels' textless messages?

this baby, gift-wrapped in its shawl and stall
just may be - may still be - the Lord of All?

revisited

Michael Shepherd

0078 Thanksgiving Day

A celebration of the grace
of the past, or
a celebration of the grace
of today?

For thousands of years,
the Native Americans
whose origin is so mysterious
held, as do all the peoples in the world,
a celebration of the harvest
now brought home, rejoicing
in its abundant wealth and
offering gratitude to that source
from which it comes - as do we...

And how ironic, looking back,
that the Pilgrim Fathers, unprepared,
as many townsfolk among them were,
for the art of farming in a foreign land,
were taught, from those thousands of organic years
of experience, by those very native Americans -

Wouldn't you like to have seen, been there,
that day in 1621, as settlers
and the invited Indian chiefs
sat down together to celebrate the harvest
in brotherhood?

And then, today: beside remembrance of the past,
how beautiful to dedicate a day
to thinking, listing, all the many things
which we may be truly grateful for.
Will a day be long enough?

It's said, that every year
the day after the Thanksgiving feast
the wild turkeys of America, gathering,
as Native Americans of ancient, brown-faced line,
with lively turkey-trot and song and

stuffing themselves in rather
more natural ways, celebrate
survival

Michael Shepherd

0081 The Metaphysical Path Of Love

Of God Himself can no man truly think;
Creator He, beyond all human thought;
yet questing intellect oft scans the brink
of what of Him may yet, in truth, be sought;

and if that questing grow to firm intent,
it clears the mind of all that blocks its path;
takes on a godly aim, all on Him bent,
and sharpens our devotion's godly dart.

And yet, though God's not thought, He may be loved;
so, leaving all those things that we can think,
take up - our mind now clear - the path of love,
and choose in love, that thing we cannot think.

God's grace: when thought surrenders all to love,
Love's bounty showers thought from heaven above.

2002

Michael Shepherd

0082 The Myself Place

When you were a child, where was it? For there's always
some place: somewhere you go, when all you want
is just to be yourself - because
it's all too much, or not enough;
you've lost what matters most, or
not sure just what you're really looking for;
and so there's nothing else to do but go
to that friendliest place on earth, that's all your very own;
the myself place.

Street cafes, bars, can sometimes be that place:
the sun shines; relaxed, you watch the passing scene
with an assumed slight superiority
that goes with the seat price;
or alcohol soothes all in friendly gaze:
they're just the actors, extras in your play; so sit; enjoy;
smile at the world with goodwill, even love;
a few more visits, it can soon become
the myself place.

Porches, stoops, verandahs -
what a brilliant idea:
put it all aside; you've fed well, so now watch the play
from the best seat in the house:
you're there in lordly public stage box, if they want to stop and talk; and
backstage there's love enough to script your every dream: meanwhile,
the myself place.

Michael Shepherd

0082 The New Grave

You brought your watercolour kit.
For it's so picturesque – the smallish church
in the centre of the village
like a mother hen at drowsy midday
surrounded by her chicks;
the red-white flag of Saint George
the only sign of life, fluttering like
an aerial footnote to history
(or for some, a corner of a foreign football field...)

but there's a new detail in the picture
since last you sketched here:
the newest arrival is the oldest: death;
the oldest signifier is the fresh-turned earth.

The uninvited thought squirms across the mind
like the exposed worms of that rich soil,
how reassuring to be buried in this ideal
picture-book of continuity amidst the change,
a country churchyard. A cemetery
has no geography and thus no history
save in the hearts of families;
here, all is reassuring
except to broken hearts which time will heal
all but the scar.

Already, the bunch of daffodils
in the empty honey jar
have bowed to that same death;
reminding us that graves are spun around
a hundred and forty years of family history:
she'll remember how she loved her Nan
who died at seventy-something
for all her own seventyish future years.

Rest in peace means something here.
Meanwhile, the daffodils thrive, dotted
among the graves, as unconcerned
as the soft rubber tyres of the hearse

now catching at the Spring's reaching foliage
as it approaches at a perfectly-judged pace
down Church Lane, returning peace to peace.

Michael Shepherd

0084 The Quiet Room

Into this quiet room; with sweet relief
the sense of oneness with oneself returns;
the glorious, restless world no longer thief
through thought, of all that for that oneness yearns;

and now, in peace, outside the window shine
all life's specifics; all its passing show,
now from this peace, seen as a play divine;
all restlessness now gone; time, ever now;

and in this heavenly peace, the heart's laid bare
in all its nature, born from heaven above:
a nature that with all its all may share;
since in reality, that heart is love.

O that self-education thus might bring
to all who thirst, love's ceaseless single spring.

Michael Shepherd

0085... Ne'Er The Twain...?

So many centuries of Indian thought,
so many saints who found their inmost soul,
so much of observation of the mind,
so much of consciousness itself revealed...

and all this given due language and due terms -
that we, the distant heirs, yet that same self,
may struggle, in our word-hoard so much less,
to stretch our minds to comprehend this wealth;

thus, make a virtue from necessity,
and as perforce the English mystics did,
with heart-warmed mind, speak true simplicity;
with mind-clear heart, reveal what's God and hid:

and trust that godly silence, godly sound
shall yield that self-same truth to Western mind.

Michael Shepherd

0086 The Radiance

a radiance.
sometimes you can almost see it.

those who see it
keep it to themselves or
take it for granted, as
a sort of birthright, though
sometimes, later perhaps, or
even too late for you to hear
or to themselves with regret as of a gift withdrawn
remember it and marvel

you yourself –
does it ever dazzle you, or
is it too soon followed, smothered,
with some guilt, a burden born and borne?
or for a moment, quiet at home,
dazzled, ecstatic, heart melted by that radiance?

you, sitting so still in the waiting room or
patiently standing
at the bus stop, in a crowded train,
radiance withdrawn, disguised
as no-one, anyone,
everyone;

mother

Michael Shepherd

0089 The Top Floor

Up that top flight of stairs
whose old, unvarnished wood
scrubs up so well and welcoming,

where it's so quiet at the top of the house
that even the sunlight enjoys the silence,
there's a room kept ready, welcoming,
for every poet I respect:
and yes, for you...

Open each door
and there's such a subtle, same-yet-different,
fragrance in each room - eluding definition,
yet so loved, and so familiar:
a field of wildflowers in the sunlit morning dew,
or grateful after later April shower,
or is it freshly laundered sheets dried in the wind?
a hint of that precious, faintly perfumed scrap of silk
from Grandmother's wedding dress?
A dried rose in a drawer lined with cedarwood?
And just a hint of honey-soaked tobacco,
and once-a-year, and very fine, cigar?
a horse's sweat on crisp and frosty day?
the zinging air on pebbled beach in aftermath of storm?

or freshly-showered skin,
and all the wild and gentle
scents of love?

All that, in these so living rooms,
peaceful, welcoming,
and full of you

Michael Shepherd

0091 The Scholar - A Dutch Portrait

The scholar, in his book-lined study, sits,
walled in by printed thought in black and white;
silent; by a pool of lamplight lit;
now still in reading, or now drawn to write;

inaudible, the music of his mind,
invisible, that dazzling light, his thought;
unknown, the destiny of human kind;
unwrit, the future glories to be sought;

he like a human hour-glass: single grains
passing into future mind from past;
and in his presence, all Creation reigns,
the history of the world from first to last.

this secret glory, scholars are allowed;
so fragile; mortal; subtle; noble; proud.

Michael Shepherd

0092 The Signs Of Love

What are the inward signs of truest love,
beyond the smile, the kiss, the touch of hand,
that joins our actions to the heaven above;
that constant love which shall for ever stand?

I see two inward signs above all else:
the first, expansion of the bounds of mind
so that no barrier stands 'twixt that and this,
'twixt one and t'other, or 'twixt 'mine' and 'thine';

the second sign, a fine attention brought
to every single action, every need,
as if in loving care, there's but one thought
from constant heart flows into every deed;

these two - a boundless mind and ceaseless care -
pass space and time: the proof that love is here.

Michael Shepherd

0093the Soul's Wedding Chamber

Night falls, so gently, from the darkening sky,
soft calling us to leave all that the day
has shone upon; from universal light
to turn to homely private lamp, and seek
what evening's quiet brings our close-knit souls.

Then, love, as midnight calls us to our rest,
lay down the things of day, and mount the stair
to that so private chamber where our love
may seek the oneness in our otherness,
enjoy distinction in our single sight;
put out the light, lay down the he and she
to seek the god and goddess of sweet night.

Thus is the soul to God, and God to soul;
in loving dark unknowing, love known whole.

Michael Shepherd

0095 The Title Of This Poem Comes At The End

If you've read
136 poems
by one poet
in, uh, an hour plus,
which is a stupid thing to do
normally
to any poet
and insulting
if you think that way

at least when you do this
you get an aftertaste
of a sort – you get
tired beyond boredom, or
the guy has only three things to say
again and again or
he's posing as a poet or
subtly unloading his negativity
or his hatred for life or
exploiting your emotions or
even more subtly pleading
for your sympathy

but no
I don't feel any of these things right now
I just feel
a huge huge love which
somehow isn't
just focussed on you and
I've even tried to set against this
cold lit-crit sorta thoughts
but no

I see you as a man
who looked the ordinary
in the face
and didn't want to alter it and
asked nothing of it but was
contented in a way

beyond definition that
I can understand
would piss off anyone
with ambition or
so-called American values
although many of your poems
are the stuff of ordinary Americans
in the bar chatting about life
over a beer in B movies

but I'm thinking that maybe
this is the way God sees the world –
'this is what you've made
of what I gave you and
so be it'

I'm a little scared too
that if I met you face to face
unexpectedly with that
wise beat-up face like a
thoughtful ape I might
recoil or something
and be ashamed afterwards
but I hope not

I just hope that
somewhere deep down
you loved yourself
as much as so many people
and you can read them here
love you
for real
and as is

the title of this poem is
A Homage to Charles Bukowski

Michael Shepherd

0096 The Two-Left-Feet Waltz - For Jerry

(to the tune of The Blue Danube)

The
Two-Left- Feet Waltz
...left...now
what do I do?

The
Two-Left-Feet Waltz
...left...I'm
feeling blue, too..

The
Two-Left-Feet Waltz...left.. I'm
treading on you...

I'm through! You, too? Let's vamoose.

Michael Shepherd

0097 The Vintage Of A Lifetime

As some sun-ripened vineyard-owner, rich
in slow maturing wisdom gained through time,
before that noble rot of trodden grape
yields untold harvest of a well lived life-
and proud that with his daily-tended skills
he'll win a vintage he will never taste -

so I, who seek to daily tend life's yield,
distil a vintage I shall never taste.
Mayhap some pencilled notes from wisdom's root
shall grow new generation's richer fruit.

Michael Shepherd

0098 New Term At Evening Class

Sit here, in the entrance hall which
they've cleaned to spotless in the vacation
and watch them arrive,
early, one by one;
that's much more fun to watch.

Some walk a little faster than they need
as if impelled by their decision
to make this time full of worth for them.

Some walk slowly, yet deliberately, with a relaxed quiet;
we guess they're teaching staff; while
the ones who seem in a controlled acceleration tonight
are probably on duty.

Some seem almost unrecognisable
from your memory of them last term;
something magnificent must have happened
in the vacation; you wonder - do they know?

Some walk slowly, as if they belonged here
before they arrived; they bring the purpose of the place
visibly to light, as if bringing it back to itself;
even, as we watch,
bring ourselves to ourselves; as if the school
has come to life before a word is said;

if this were an ancient temple,
(and why not?)
they would be in solemn, joyous procession towards
the stone or place that is the building's centre,
bearing in upraised hands
a gift of gratitude, with shining eyes...for
who can forget that Greek statue of the 'calf-bearer'
who walked this way, shining-eyed, to that temple; who walks
for as long as marble lasts?

But this is today; we watch them in their street clothes
on their way down to the cloakroom,

two brown leaves, damp between,
shed on the doormat.

And now, elevated by this passing show
so, knowing now humanity always this so beautiful,
I too go down to the cloakroom; where in the perfect mirror
I see a person whose face has softened;
and yet who's taller, with some almost unfamiliar authority which
I did not see when I last looked at me
in the steamy bathroom mirror back at home -

yes, this is a good place to be.

Michael Shepherd

0099 The Reading

The EX IT sign in the Town Hall Theatre
was lit by gas. A smell you never quite forget.
It serves to pin the memories of those other times.

The sister of the junior mistress at the local school
was here to give her reading: 'Scenes from Shakespeare';
whole scenes and all the characters.
Imagine.

But she had a very special voice.

Oh who can know
the where and when
that life may give its life to life
and give it full, and give it whole?

And who may know
how many years
before the fruits
burst in the soul?

Or what the lights
and where the sounds
and what they speak,
and where the whole?

The performance ended.
As the lights came on,
the audience were still for - seconds? -
as if they had forgotten they were not already at home;
then walked out into
the rainy darkness of the seaside town,
past the gaslit EXIT sign;
the sea a distant seethe and roar

and some were changed for life.

So, poetry.

.

Michael Shepherd

0102 This Is A Disposable Poem

This is a disposable poem.
Under each stanza
is a perforated line

you may read it stanza by stanza
and throw away each as you read
or having it read it through,
shorten it stanza by stanza

since many poems on this site
benefit from curtailing
because amateur poets
tend to be uncertain
about their work

and as a result either repeat
the essence of their poem at the end
or comment on it which takes
the power out of it

you might want to save that
previous stanza but as for
the other stanzas, here's
a suggestion

enjoy being a critic and
dispose of them with a flourish
in one of these ways
certainly not both for reasons
which will become apparent

one method is to place
a waste-paper basket so called
at an optimum distance
far enough away to enjoy throwing
the ball of scrunch-up

but near enough not to miss;
do it with a flourish,
feel good, feel judgmental,
feel superior, feel right

or alternatively take this disposable poem
into the smallest room to read
for as long as it takes, this varies,
then put it behind you so to speak

again with a decisive gesture
though of course due care and
you may wish to accompany this
with some rather biblical utterance

such as, I shit in judgment upon
the works of the ungodly
and as for the works of the infidel
I put them behind me

and they shall be carried away
by the waters of righteousness yea
as though they had never been

- - - - -

aaah that felt good

Michael Shepherd

0103 These Late Autumn Days

these late autumn days
leaves fall like poems
green as new thoughts
yellow as wisdom
red as late summer love
brown as old speech
dry as the past

these late autumn days
old poets
look out at coming winter snowclouds
but hope like trees might hope, unknowing,
for a miracle of rebirth
beyond their dry boughs' reach
of words

new buds
green as
new songs

Michael Shepherd

0105 To A Nam Vet

You came back to the USA, but you never made it home...
and yet, you're still around
for us to meet and greet and thank
or try to avoid, or to forget,
or try to join, in some vague sense of shame...

At what level of experience
may we try to meet you, back from hell
with decorations visible, wounds invisible?
What use are words - they just make us feel smaller and inadequate?

Just perhaps, to be there for you,
silent.
But there.

You're still around...but is life worse than death for you?
We don't like to ask; and we certainly cannot answer.

But you're still around, even just to remind us...
We the embarrassed. You're still around.

And God - God is not mocked.

Michael Shepherd

0106 To Rilke

Unending one, you've shown myself to me.

In the place you wrote into being
where the image of God made Man
and the image of Man made God
meet – there, in that friendly place

where such daunting names quite disappear,
where the eternal becomes practical
and the Word is heard as if I spoke it,
and myself is every self,

and I am free of all preconceptions,
neither Christian, Jew, Moslem, Hindu –
the place where all may be discussed,
where all may be heard,

where two voices become one certainty,
where unicorns may be seen,
where there are no secrets,
where poetry arises

in that place
you've shown myself to me.

Michael Shepherd

0106 To Rilke From Poemhunters

We're living just as the century begins.

A great leaf, that God and we
shall cover with our writing
turns now, overhead, in strange hands.
We feel the sweep of it like a wind.

We see the brightness of a new page
where everything yet can happen.

Unmoved by us, the fates take its measure
and look at one another, saying nothing.

And we write.

(Following Rilke's poem I,8 in his 'Book of Hours')

Michael Shepherd

0106 Winter Sunlight In China

The cry of the stork echoes
from the cold cliff where the mist
is clearing for an hour or two
this winter morning
so that when nature has found a place
among the stones at the edge
of this broad slow river
for this empty
Coca Cola bottle
it may catch the sunlight
between the clear water and wet stones
and find itself beautiful

Michael Shepherd

0107 To Jh On The Birth Of A Daughter

She'll love you 'til her dying day,
and just to prove it
she'll take it out regularly on her Mom,
frequently on her sisters,
and later, sometimes on her partner.

You got yourself a deal.

Michael Shepherd

0108 Today I Read A Poem

just now, today
and for a moment, thus
forever,
the heaviness of devil-darkened thought,
death in some disguise yet to be called out,
threatened grey ruin to the day
which is not mine
as that same devil, named, will not be mine -

so pushed aside my dinner plate
and read a poem

and rejoined the world of now
of sunshine, families, all
the heart loves
and mind turns grey

and into devil's grey, and death and life
stepped gratitude.

Michael Shepherd

0108 Two Poems About War

see that woman
flung over her son's dead body
howling from the depths
of her womb

what has she
to do with war
or war with her?

* * *

if all the mothers in the world
denied war in their mind
and in their speech
what would happen
in the mind of men?

what is the powerful
compared with the power? *

(* ancient belief: man is the power-ful, woman the power)

Michael Shepherd

0109 Upon The Feast Of Saint Valentine

roses are red
(well, some are white) :
Saint Valentine says
he needs poets to write...

roses are red
(well, some are pink) :
Saint Valentine says
he needs hearts expressed in ink..

poems are read;
that's the good news here;
Saint Valentine's day
could last all year...

Michael Shepherd

0110 Visiting Billy Collins

The gate opens easily -
someone's oiled it quite recently.
There's fresh gravel on the path
this winter day.
There's a dog kennel out there and
a single warning bark from inside the house but
your shins are safe.
Those neighbours of his seem
quiescent today..
The doormat has said
WELCOME for
some frayed years now.
There are lights on and
the door opens quickly although
they weren't expecting you so soon.

'How about a walk around after
coffee, this crisp morning?
Just as far as you like? There's
lots to show you..'

We walk further than
I intended, laughing
over the word
'accessible'.

Michael Shepherd

0111 Visitor's Card

I love a poem that
you can walk into
as if you know the owner,
settle into,
wander around,
stay a few days,
return to visit,
find a secret room,
and be surprised

I love a poem that
you can love
without wasting time
admiring it

Michael Shepherd

0114 Winter Sunlight

Delicate, so frail now, almost
apologetic for their presence,
like the longtime bed-bound
taking their first unaccompanied walk,
hardly able to believe their fortune, on
this unexpected day of sunlight
offering hope to weakest winter body -
yet exploratory, determined, in
their frailty; invisibly heroic –

the tendrils of the jasmine explore,
survey with vegetable mind, the frontiers of the empire which
they plan to flood with scent some secret
time ahead; how can a stem that looks
like fine, dead wire, carry all the ruthlessness
of Nature's will, in so tentative disguise?

the sunlight on this white winter wall,
as a slight breeze waves the exploratory tendrils,
throws up the sharp shadow of this filigree
like twin explorers of the year's new world
dancing with each other;

a Japanese artist, seeking a new kimono
patterned to show where nature,
truth and beauty meet, might feel the need,
confronted by so delicate a sketch
of Spring's new plans,
to grow as this jasmine,
exploring the unknown so carefully.

Michael Shepherd

0115 Windows Nothing Reading

Windows nothing reading
thus goes
pretty letters
human companion
immediately
mentioned rich

surreal life
nonsense
surreal poets
make sense
now
everyone
today
ngs
gertrude stein
our language
new
fresh view
you too

the first stanza
comes with
acknowledgements
to Miss Laurice
who hoped
to slip her
special offer
of Viagra's
love Niagara
or Cialis bliss
penis strength
orgasmic length
through the detumescent
Puritan fathered
filter
into my email
using this
surreal text

random-scandom
this sober morning

but alas
and alack
Miss Laurice's
surreal thesis
like stockyard sow
is labelled now
(but wham and bam
and thank you, ma'am...)

as Spam

Michael Shepherd

0118 Wyeth County

We knew the history of the area, of course;
reckoning that with a Heritage Site
just over the hill
planning permits would be hard to get
and the rolling landscape, and our own prized view,
would stay that way.

Clearing the ditch beyond the orchard,
by the line of old trees,
I found it.
A musket.
still loaded (I realised later, cleaning it up)
and a scrap of disintegrating coloured cloth
still with a button on it.

A button.

It was the button
that put paid to my former life:
as if with the harsh scrape of iron cartwheel on stony track,
the past had arrived;
stolen the present from our comfortable grasp,
with a cartload of heavy, worn,
war-weary baggage,
and taken up residence in our front parlour
with its proudly sourced 'folk furniture'
that now looked like imposters in hiding.

It was when I drove into our small town next day
and the faces of the locals whom I thought I knew so well
looked at me with eyes that seemed to own
clothes heavy with history
and fierce division
that I knew that the past had claimed us
and that our lives would never quite be ours again

And that we must discover, not war but human pride
under the no longer picturesque
landscape

which we can no longer
pretend to own.

Michael Shepherd

0119 You Great Ones

How is it, you great ones,
when I read your poems
whether with
too quick an enchantment
or, impatient again,
almost giving up
in the care to know exactly
what you mean

that you are in the room with me
watching as I read
listening as I read
without judgment
watching, listening,
with the sublime detachment
of the immortal

while I, have learned
not to fear your judgment
not to be concerned
but just to read

in the radiance, the radiance
of your presence

(for Hugh Cobb who reminded me)

Michael Shepherd

0120 A Tribute To James P., Poet

Every five years or so
since you were a boy,
a slender book of
maybe a dozen poems

gently human, like
a summer seashore
lapping at the heart,
leaving washed bright pebbles
like jewels

for each five years
a quiet poet, bright-eyed
with an inner smile
has walked around unnoticed

waiting for a poem to come to him
and yet
leaving the air around him clean
like a walk by the sea-shore

cleansed by the listening sight
of a world full of unwritten poems

Michael Shepherd

0120 Child On A Swing

playground
higher and higher
the swing squeaking, creaking
but firm
the child laughing
testing the limits of freedom
the freedom of limits
sensing but forgetting
the firm post on which it swings
firm as a parent's love

unmoving stillness
the child swinging
both held in love

for Skadi meic Beorh

Michael Shepherd

0121 4 A.M.11 November 1918

A still night; crescent moon; the faintest breeze.
Some wit might say, 'Peaceful, innit, Tommy? '
Two hours before the usual time for attack.
I wonder what they've got up their sleeve for today.
A bit too quiet right now, I'd say

Careful how you breathe or talk
this chilly night, out there in the open trench;
frozen breath will draw the sniper's rifle sight

The sharp nose of some human terrier
passing over the familiar smells -
cordite, rifle oil, linseed for the wooden butt, the stench of death,
yesterday's corpses half submerged -
may detect, just over there, the unmistakable smell
of fierce French 'Caporal' cigarettes;
there in front, strong German 'Zeppelins';
round here, cheap Woodbines linger in the air

hardly a human difference
worth fighting over.

Michael Shepherd

0123 A Grave Judgment

Sometimes sentiment sublates the stark cold truth
On gravestones, memory's mourning heart to soften;
This stony judgement I'd carve for myself:
'He loved not wisely - but he loved quite often.'

Michael Shepherd

0124 A Dead Poet Comments On 'Comments'

Erstwhiles,
of candle-laboured hours and screwed-up eyes,
the quill scratch-scratching, the paper ragged rough, the ink
unwieldy, black and unredeeming
as a judge's cap –

fame – or barely fame,
the least to be hoped for, a mere 'name' – a
mere sheet of scrawled, curled paper
passed around a smoky coffee-house: they
so shrewd of eye and savage oft of wit;

or at the best, the whim of jobbing printer:
then, fame or forgetting lay beyond this life.

The grave's a humbling, private place
where even poets labelled 'metaphysical'
begin their education quite anew...

and yet, and yet - some centuries ahead,
some divine post-classic irony may devise
a means of universal access
to poems quite unread
(alas, and oft unread their readers too...)

and so, humbled by cold grave and death,
there's one more humbling yet to bear:
the stripling's comments on a verse that lives,
the poet – would he know it – dead:
'Not so great – keep writing'...

raising in these bleachwhite bones and grimjaw skull
the faintest meta-physical, unseen
ghost of a smile

Michael Shepherd

0125 A Footballer Kicks A Cliché Into Touch

(British readers only)

At the end of the day
that's what it's all about

sunset

Michael Shepherd

0126 A Longstanding Question

It's rather a delicate personal matter...
I could of course say I'm just asking for a friend...
but I guess You'd see through that, from what I hear...

I wouldn't trouble You, but
it's not a question that concerned Adam
since he had no comparative physiology
any more than he had comparative theology...
so it didn't matter a figleaf to him...

and Moses had the bigger picture in mind, and in his position
had to keep up with the Tablets
to use a medical term which
we might refer to later...

as for Jesus, well it didn't affect him personally, of course,
even as Son of Man,
unless of course the Da Vinci Code is true
but I'd rather not pursue such maudlin thoughts
with You...

and the new Pope hasn't yet pronounced on this
though I can guess he won't be keen
even if he's slept on it;
anatomically, at least...

it's like this:
I get an awful lot of emails from complete strangers
who seem to know my wife's mind better than I
suggesting that, well, she'd be happier if,
you know, my *thing* were longer
(and presumably thicker, though
they make less of this...as if that's slightly indecent...)

and then, they go on to say that my wife
(who likes her eight hours, and
I have to leave early for work)
would be even happier if
I took certain tablets...

even insidiously suggesting that
if I don't keep up with the Joneses in this
I might lose her to Mr Jones...
I guess they haven't met my wife, or Mr Jones,
as I was saying to Mrs Jones only the other evening:

Now as the Creator of men, who seems to have handed out
a pretty wide variety of these anatomical details, rather
than, as we might expect, a Standard Size (and I don't like to
question Your authority, but
it has led to some heated thinking and emoting; perhaps there are
other factors of justice, destiny, etc., involved here?)

and as Creator too, of eternal laws at all levels, which means
that science can only make these things with
Your – indirect, of course – consent, and
human ingenuity (not that I'm trying to throw
the blame back onto You...)

but as there are, as Donald Rumsfeld says,
things we don't know we don't know
like side-effects we haven't dreamed of, which –
well I won't say, tear apart the fabric of society
as that's a bit of a cliché, but You must know what I'm getting at...

or can this be some giant step for Mankind,
in the providential, ongoing plan, the Intelligent Design,
of (Your) evolution of species?

I hope You see my problem (well, it wasn't a problem before, and
Mrs Smith has no complaints, at least not yet, she doesn't
read the emails) , so I'd be grateful for a brief response to my
longstanding ...(excuse my little joke) ... question?

A postcard or equivalent would do; I wouldn't like
to inadvertently spamtrash Your email. Or a quiet word in the ear
during prayer. But not the confessional box route please; I don't think
this problem has arisen for my local priest yet.

Thanks.

Your humble servant,

(retd.)

Michael Shepherd

0127 A Poem About Gertrude Stein

a poem slept
the poem slept
nobody knew it slept
it did not know itself that it slept
it slept like a baby
and that was refreshing
it refreshed itself before it was born
as babies do
it did not then know itself that it slept
but when it woke up it knew that it had slept

while it slept this poem had a dream
it was a good dream
it did not know that it was a dream
it dreamed itself awake
but when it woke up it remembered
that it had had a dream
it remembered that it was a dream
when it was awake

when it woke up
it remembered itself
and dressed appropriately
and told itself to friends and strangers
it told itself the same way to friends and strangers
that was its duty because it was
it did not mind whether they were friends or strangers
because it was a poem

I know
I know this
I know this because
I know this because there is a because
I know this because the poem told me
I know this because the poem told me it had a name
A poem about Gertrude Stein

Michael Shepherd

0129 A Sketch Of The Poet At Work (Wcw)

a happy man
saying,
life

Michael Shepherd

0131 A Quiet Word About Peace

Peace is natural.

Peace is life-giving.

Peace will remain for eternity.

Anger is unnatural.

Anger is life-consuming.

And that's how it is.

Michael Shepherd

0131 A Sufi-Ish Reflection

walk the world in wonder

and think who created thought.

Michael Shepherd

0132 A Tribute To Ws Merwin

You know when you meet them,
they're going to take you somewhere
you didn't know was there so
couldn't know you wanted for them
to take you there

there being a there to where
he has a secret key which opens
a connecting door between
nowhere and somewhere
and anywhere and everywhere

nowhere being a little scary
to be there but then with him it's
somewhere which is an interesting
where to be and when
you're there with him he unlocks
anywhere and you look around
and it's all new and now you look
why look it's everywhere

and everywhere is new and strange
and you're living a new life where
what you thought was the ordinary where
full of nothings and anythings and
not worth a passing thought
is everything
and now you have to look again

and it would be scary if he hadn't shown you
how it all connects and how
the pinned-up sleeve of the one-armed boy
is there to tell you about everywhere

Michael Shepherd

0134 All Things Shine

Everything is full of its own essence;
so full, it shines beyond itself
and makes its own space,
an inner space so great
that it meets ourselves in its own radiance;

so full that if we name it –
blade of grass, thunderstorm, darkness, angel –
it sighs to be named, lowers its eyes in sadness,
silent with a certain regret
at being parted from the name it shares

and even when we say that name –
say it quietly, listening as we breathe,
call it some name like God, or poet –
even then it sighs a little
like a child knowing its first fear

yet shining with forgiveness
like a tree, like an angel, like a feather.

Michael Shepherd

0135an Informal Note To God

In case you were on holiday, this nice sunny weather,
(and may I say, what a great idea the Sun is?)
I thought I'd drop you a line to say, in case you missed it
that our great President, the Bush
who burns with virtue like an oil well yields,
approves that 'Intelligent Design' should be made
along with the Theory of Evolution
a cornerstone of the education of our great nation.

So just in case you felt a little reduced in function
and come back from holiday to
'Oh, were you away? We hadn't missed you...'
and your new official status, that you were simply around
(around? hmmm) to 'flick the switch'
while two something-or-others got together
to evolve a Creation with its quaint old ideas, like love,
(and by the way, your bright idea
of one, two and three, etc., was cute, too...)

I'd just like to take this opportunity to say
that in your modest role of
Intelligent Design
you certainly flicked the switch on
a pretty spectacular show - including those laws
which, understood by some quite impressive intelligences,
enabled the rather smaller, but impressive
'intelligent design' of the space-shuttle
to.. er.. 'evolve'.. and
to fly a fraction, Icarus-like,
nearer the sun...yep, some show...

So 'intelligent design' would be, like,
from those two proto-thingies that happened to
to meet across a room crowded with...emptiness? or everything? -
to whatever intelligent design might be needed
from Now, and every new 'invention' in the world
until...well... Then...

That seems something even better than Evolution

and a bit similar to Providence and
well, sort of.. eternal...? And universal too...

So if You are still enjoying your seventh day of rest
this pleasant sunny weather (somewhere
ecologically balanced, like the seaside, may I hope?) ,

thanks.

Michael Shepherd

0136 Agitation In Hundred-Acre Wood

'CR..' said Pooh, holding his paw tight round CR's hand as he did when he had a Disturbing Thought, 'how do you pronounce St? '

The Animals were agitated. It was like a day in March when the wind blew leaves and things to finish up where they shouldn't be. Some tourist had thrown aside an academic paperback with an essay on 'The Divine Symbolism of Dante and Hundred-Acre Wood' by someone called Po... (the page was torn just there) .

'St, Pooh? That's not a real word...'

'It says I'm really St Peter, CR, and you're Jesus Christ and Eeyore's St Thomas... CR, who's Jesus Christ? '

'Oh that's a swear-word that grown-ups use, but it must be a silly book, 'cos I'm not allowed to say it anyway... Silly old Pooh' said CR fondly.

'Oh that's all right then. I thought I might be someone else and not know it', said Pooh. He relaxed his grip on CR's hand, and the boy and his bear walked happily together down the path towards the Poohsticks Bridge, the occasional twig cracking under their feet, like they do after a mad March wind has put them in the wrong place...

Michael Shepherd

0137 Afternoon Love At The Lawyer's Chambers

I kissed her therein, wheresoever;
hereinunder she cried 'Furthermore...! ;
we conjointly set down notwithstanding,
ensconced thereupon heretofore.

Michael Shepherd

0137 Around Botticelli's Primavera - For E E Cummings

so the blue-with-cold wind came from
onto the country-awkward girl who spoke florally with
stepping easter-dressed towards
while Cupid aimed an arrow without
and hit Chastity of course since
while Apollo reached with his wand for
and the clouds revealed
while the golden apples waited with
and all the while Love for
in the centre of the merry-go-round when
all lovers love to
looking modestly not mary-blue as if
extended a toe delicately in a dance describing how
the blue-with-cold wind came from
Michael Shepherd

0140 André Agassi

Over the years, his business-like humility -
as if he's here to serve our sheer delight -
his human sweetness - rarely so visible
in the male of the species - and
that inner beauty that seems
to shine through human eyes -
they've just grown, so that
just seeing him makes me -
makes you? -
feel good about being human

and an artistic note: over the years,
especially with his pate so shaved,
his head is like a sculpture in itself -
more and more like some informal
Egyptian, Persian, work in baked and coloured clay
gazing over the centuries
as if to say
come win, come lose,
here is a man

Michael Shepherd

0142 Buttering Bread

Yesterday

I was buttering bread for sandwiches
when I saw myself doing this
as I must have watched you all those years ago,
and forgotten ever since 'til now -
the butter firmly spread right to the edges of the crust,
pressed into the yielding bread,
and then the surplus gently scraped off on the knife

with all the careful but not mean economy
of a family which after your father's lungs
gave in to the cotton dust of the mill
where he worked so proudly for John Bright
the reformer (and there's a thought)
and your mother opened the front door of your home,
whose street-front window now became
a front-room shop for home-made cakes
so that the neighbours' help was charity with dignity and fair exchange;
the butter for the scones
you made before you left for morning school
came from out of a wooden tub
from the 'Italian warehouseman' or
the very first Co-op, down in Toad Lane...

Whether the tears poised at the corners of the eyes
were of sadness or of gratitude
for this so unexpected memory of the living dead
I couldn't say. But now,
gratitude. And, and, beauty.

Michael Shepherd

0143 Coming To A Retirement Home Near You...

Stop me if...

The story is,
The Queen visited our local
Old Folks' Home (well, it's called The Senior Enclave now...)
and walking along the wheelchair line, drawn up
like some parking lot along the promenade
but without the view
stopped at one old dear who looked
as if she hadn't quite got the point of this unwelcome
change to routine, and said
(in case the old darling regretted later
she'd missed the great occasion)

'Do you know who I am? '

'No dear - but ask the nurse,
she'll tell you...'

Michael Shepherd

0144 Clickety

Clickety.

The old-fashioned slide machine you thought that
you'd abandoned long ago
suddenly goes clickety out of nowhere, and throws up
an image you didn't particularly want
to remember. And you wonder why
it's still there, and why now, and why then?

I was cast as the visiting celeb in Midsville, when
all I wanted was to drink it all in
without being anything except
a privileged observer, fly on the wall, tourist with a visa. No dice. So
I had to do the things that go with a paid ticket which
they don't tell you with the invite -
I had to meet the local press and TV. That was
part of the deal. I felt that
the egos, maybe even careers of others
depended on my unscripted performance. Who was
this stranger in the town? Who was I, for that matter?
What part was I to play? Uncomfortable.

Was it a small town in big America,
or a big town in small America,
big-town aspirations in small-town minds?
Money lurked behind culture;
oil wells jiggled in rural fields;
that was uncomfortable in itself;
I was sponsored; that seemed to be significant;
I felt I'd left one class structure for another,
the same differences, a different sameness.

We lunched at the local exec's club, I guess:
black professional staff crisp in white,
well-scrubbed smart white students
also in black and white. Silver service, impeccable;
aspiration I'd not met before in my previous laid-back world.

Then I saw her - the press.

I'd never considered the phrase, 'bandbox-fresh' - but
she could have walked straight onto the set
of Meet Me in St Louis, and her make-up girl
and costume designer would have been looking on proudly;
I guess she wrote the social column.
She interviewed me. I doubt it got printed. I had the feeling
that whatever she was looking for, I didn't have it. But what was it?
All I wanted was to love America. Just that.

Other people's everyday lives; my American Moment.
A frozen slide in the forgotten film of life; and
I'm none the wiser.

Clickety.

Michael Shepherd

0145 Chinese Landscape

The old pine tree
leans out from the rocks
over the still lake
with respect
though no-one guesses this

once a month
the pine tree is silhouetted
against the rising moon
though no-one knows this

its roots drink gratefully
from the generous water
though no-one sees this

its branches murmur to
the lapping lake-water as old friends
though no-one hears this

except you and I and the artist -

nature

Michael Shepherd

0146 Contemplation's Metaphysical

The height and depth and length and breadth of God -
that's what is promised to contemplatives:
and God, the sphere whose centre's everywhere
and whose circumference is nowhere found:

geometry without coordinates
and integral beyond all integers,
description of the indescribable -
can this reveal the measure of godliness?

God's height: the soul, which knows but upward flight;
God's depth: the depthless deep of human heart;
God's breadth: the mind with limits beyond sight;
God's length: how long He'll wait, while we're apart;

this does but limn the sphere which yet awaits
the soul and heart and mind which contemplates.

Michael Shepherd

0147 Do Only Poets Know...?

Do only poets know
how every word is born,
comes winging from eternity,
to be tasted, savoured on the tongue
and then returned
with love, humility and gratitude
and that huge thing, the human heart;
and just a modest hope
that others will accept this thought, this offering?

Do only poets know?

I hope not.
Otherwise, what's the point?

Michael Shepherd

0148 Dear Jenny Joseph...

Dear Jenny Joseph,

How are you getting along these days?
Now that you've hit our 'top poems' list?
I'll bet that, as a National Treasure
you're asked to give readings
at a minimal fee
with the request
'please wear a red hat and a purple cloak -
our members would like it...' aw shurrup...

I'm contemplating a parallel
to raise the status of old men
God knows we need it...

Where shall I start?
I guess the secret is
it's fun confounding expectations,
so, first on the list,
anything that labels you British - out!
(then we can start again from scratch) :

out with the stiff upper lip -
weep in public - preferably a full rush-hour commuter train
from Surrey or Gloucestershire
or Berkshire would do;
and watch the men freeze
into emotional ineptitude;

Get on a jam-packed tube train
around the evening rush hour, when they think they're tired,
those poor 20-year-olds who clubbed all night on E
and say very loud
'Which of you young people is going to give up your seat to me?
(And if there's no move
and everyone hides behind their papers or suddenly closed eyes,
repeat the question louder and louder
until even the kind-hearted of your own age
hate you...) :

When the train stops in a tunnel
and everyone goes quiet,
whistle out of tune one that everyone knows;

And don't forget that
garlic and an open mouth
can gain you valuable personal space.

Open doors for all ladies, and especially those
wearing pierced noses and lips and eyebrows, tattoos,
SM gear and/or short haircuts
and when they walk past without a glance
say 'Thank you...?' very loudly;

Walk round the snootiest 'boutiques'
and the more the assistants bridle,
stand near you
or raise their eyebrows at their fellow assistants
the longer you hang around, natch,
and when you say 'Just looking...'
look them in the eye
like Clint Eastwood who just hit town;

At formal weddings,
when it gets to the butt-clenching 'just cause...?' bit
clear your throat loudly
as if about to speak...
it will give the dry cleaners
extra work.

Talk to all children with their parents
especially those whose parents quickly pull them away;
feel free to embrace all and especially sundry;
just check you have the address of your Citizen's Advice Bureau
for free legal representation;

Talk to Friends of Friends whom
you're meeting for the first time
as if you know them well;
it's amazing how many 'friends'

you can cross off that way;

Cold callers

who introduce themselves
with their Christian name
(even though Hindus calling from India..)
and are pushy (be kind to the others...)
- pretend you know them
and discuss some past
scandalous relationship with them,
then accuse them of misleading you;

Be natural - but very very publicly so;
in Victorian times, you could pee in the road
on please, only on the offside of horses;
so don't choose motorways
(though the central reservation is OK - I mean, who's going to stop
to be offended in the fast lane, or ring the police on the mobile while driving?)

and if anyone objects to your peeing in the gutter
that's what gutters used to be for
and who asked them to look anyway?

Clothes-wise, it's up to you -
though of course if 'dress-code..' is requested, well, that's obviously
inviting trouble - do they want to see you in person,
or what you bought or hired?
Or are they wanting free film extras
in the home movies of ego?

Oxfam permitting,
wear the clothes that 15-year-olds do -
that really pisses them off.

If people dropp a word
about your undone zip in public
and they're polite about it
thank them with a smile
perhaps explaining the circumstances
in friendly fashion;
but if they comment disapprovingly

threaten
further measures.

Sitting on the pavement, that sort of thing -
well, that's personal; if you enjoy it, do it...

Above all - Embarrass Your Children. Mortally.
' D-a-a-d....! '

(This Poem is an Expanding Poem -
there's more cringe-making stuff to come just here...
as Rusty says, that's what parents are for...)

Doesn't sound very exciting, you may be thinking?
OK, just try one of these, and see if
you can't cut the atmosphere with a knife.
-That's not yet court evidence, but it could be,
in a nanny state - 'The witness observed
that you could cut the atmosphere with a knife, m'lud...'

But I'm very open to suggestions
from others, to make this
second childhood
even better than the first, OK?

And Jenny, by the way, are you married?
It could be fun...

Michael Shepherd

0149 Donald Rumsfeld Meets Descartes

which is why the Greeks
trudged off to Delphi
to find out
if 'Know Thyself'
was consumer-friendly or
as sore-footed a path
as Oedipus trod

and if you think this
doesn't concern you personally
let me ask you about a 'known'
that you know, but don't know
that you know
- or have forgotten...

that moment in childhood
that we've forgotten that we remember
when just for a moment, time stood still
and we knew we knew something
with absolute certainty
but didn't know what it was, that
we knew...

you remember?

Michael Shepherd

0151 Donald Rumsfeldt's Guide To Love

As we know
(or like to think we do)

There are known knowns
(we all need more love)

There are things we know we know
(we're not getting enough of it)

We also know
(like I know I love you)

There are known unknowns
(but will it last?)

That is to say
(according to me, anyway)

There are some things
(especially about love)

we do not know
(is there someone better around the corner?)

But there are also unknown unknowns
(scary but exciting – flip those sex-tech tomes)

The ones we don't know
(and hey, who cares?)

we don't know
(and, will we love it when it comes?)

Michael Shepherd

0152 Ecology Needs A Fine Balance

An active eco-warrior he;
he loved all trees and frogs;
that's why, before he drowned, he upped
and shot the legs off dogs.

Michael Shepherd

0153 Eine Kleine Morgenmusik

Dawn entered on time. The warning flash
of lightning like a conductor's upraised baton
demanding thunder's drumroll
echoing round the mountains. Salzburg
was never so musical. In his garden
a pulsatilla flinched with joy. Beneath
his fast pen, music wrote itself. In this house,
the waterpipes made music with the cistern,
doors made harmony with window catches; wet shoes
with wooden chairs scraped back. Mathematics
scrawled on walls sang number.
Piano lessons were from youth to age,
no need of cane for errant fingers. Yet
too many masters still to come; for him
never a false chord save in life.

Michael Shepherd

0155 Dreams, Dreams, Dreams...

The phone's just rung: 'Hi this is Rosie
you've been selected for a five-day
luxury cruise to the Bahamas'...

dreams, dreams, dreams

one of the few things all religions, all philosophies
are agreed on: it's the state
between waking and sleeping.
beyond that, they're rather coy.

for Freudians, precious clues;
for Jungians, universal archetypes;
for other theorists, just
a mental and emotional shit, conveniently
achieved without a convenience

but for religion and philosophy, pretty much
a keep-off territory: maybe there's a church somewhere
where they sway and sing
ah'm dreamin' YOU sweet Jeeezuzz
and if so, does it work?

and we seem to have such individual dreams:
mine are such a bore, forever
missing that last train; the more I walk
the further home's away...

whereas a friend who lived through the Nazi occupation,
beloved, inventive grandfather,
actor, writer, director, teacher,
dreams without cease of killings, murders –
surely he deserves better of his dreams?

another friend claims he never dreams;
this annoys me intensely for some un worthy reason:
but how can I prove him wrong?

maybe it's the last frontier for

the good starship Commercial Enterprise:
'Dream yourself to all you ever wished
in ten easy lessons: send
a stamped, self-addressed rainbow
to Somewhere Over Inc....'

do we really have to leave it to Hollywood?
must all our dreams these days be violent daydreams,
regardless of expense? or do we need that violence
to wake up to a loving kiss; to love life's pastel shades;
to smell the roses round the door?

Michael Shepherd

0156 Edward Estlin Coming(S)

[Back](#)

loved her
every green garden

loved the amazing

and the how
of the grow

in her
every green garden

Michael Shepherd

0157face Beyond Face

Sometimes a moment of the highest grace -
which comes as unannounced as does our sleep -
allows our vision, resting on some face,
from the familiar, pass to unknown deep:

and there, beyond the contours made by thought
is shown to us a finer, nobler brow;
magnificent, heroic, wise; yet not -
and this so moving - far from whom we know;

this wonder makes me humble; questioning
what duty might this vision lay on me,
who's seen that self in self's own fashioning:
am I to act, or simply let it be?

But this is certain: all man's self-respect
be known, should self in others so reflect.

Michael Shepherd

0158 For Fjr; Here's To Poetry

This is the illicit still of poetry
half hidden in the dry ditch beyond the hedge
firewater drunk from an old tin mug
it takes the skin off your throat
and drops it into your glowing stomach

and you don't ask but maybe
wild crab-apples, turnips,
a handful of stolen barley, an old boot,
perhaps an incautious rat
who drowned in the middle of
drinking a wild dream
such as rat never had before

this the raw stuff
untaxed by rules
out here in the unfenced fields
not much spelling, punctuation,
vocabulary, grammar,
metre, euphony; if Emily
had been a prizefighter
she'd have breathed like this

but drunk, frozen breath steaming in the night air
seated on an old apple box
the stars never were so bright
the heart so near

Michael Shepherd

0159 For Jerry Hughes

Who can doubt that
the heart is greater than the body,
Jerry?

Michael Shepherd

0160 Happy Poem For Danny

'Everything that lives
is full of the Lord'

observed Eeyore,
his mouth full

of thistles

Michael Shepherd

0161 Heaven: Thoughts From 1350 Ad/Ce

Heaven is not a place; it is a state;
not in the clouds, nor here on earth beneath;
heaven's not in front, behind, nor left nor right -
and yet, in love it comprehends all these.

God is not found by silence, nor by speech;
not found by fasting, nor by finest food;
not by seclusion, nor by company -
and yet, within all these, and all around.

There's nowhere, thus, to go; for all is here;
and nought to do but, present, here to rest;
and resting, wish and will and love God dear
with full intent; no other interest.

All's within the heart, so vast, so great -
for heaven's not a place; it is a state.

Michael Shepherd

0162 Greatness

How great is greatness? asks my questing soul:
scenting behind that quest, eternity;
that dark which, studied, lights the dazzling whole
and brings to finite thought, infinity;

as when great singers sing, all hearts can sing;
great dancers give us sense that all can dance;
great actors speak for all of us; we think
to know all painted greatness at one glance:

we know already, greatness' unfenced whole,
we know that boundless place, the human heart;
Creation is no secret to our soul;
all being sings its song in every part.

How glorious those sages who can see
in everything that lives, totality!

Michael Shepherd

0163 Gratitude

It's a curious time of year -
one day warm and sunny, mild,
the next cold and rainy;
one night frosty, the next night mild;

a pointed reminder that we're about to be
overwhelmed by an abundance of beauty
which we call summer, and which -
can we pretend we've earned?

a little hesitancy on Nature's part,
a little touch of hope deferred
does wonders for the grateful heart.

Michael Shepherd

0164in Mind

It's only now, only now, that I remember, that I can see,
how you made your presence felt so often;
so long unlooked for, seeing only absence, never believing presence;

for in the subtlety of your wisdom, the wisdom of your subtlety,
you leave reminders of that presence in that secret place
where it's as safe as childhood happiness
forgotten, then remembered...

for you speak a closer language to a child,
closer than the growing child comes to believe.
When was the first time - now I can remember who you are,
when you first spoke to me?

Wasn't it that day when I could toddle unsteadily
but with wide open eyes, where the lion's head
poured water from its mouth into the basin?
and in the paving of the bricks - which anyone could see -
you left me that private, secret message,
knowing that I'd not notice, (so I'd not forget) ,
until one day it swam out of memory?

For this is your so secret, open generosity: you leave every one of us
this secret message: that moment when we knew
that we knew something certain - and yet,
did not know what that something was?

And then, that time after a year or two - a lifetime for a child -
when you announced your presence by your so painful absence,
and I made that solemn decision for a four-year-old,
never to trust a grown-up ever again; not because
of being a helpless child - but because there was that in me
which knew when you were there, and when you weren't?

Then you left so many messages I did not need to heed
-or so it seemed, because they were so obvious -
and only in your absence was your presence felt:
the day after a gale, the ozone of the beach, the sea
now brown but calming, seaweed salty on the stones;

the field of flowers and dewdrops –the moths in ecstasy;
and in that silent glade of woodland, as if you had made that space
between the trees, to leave a message loud and clear: that
you live in space, so visibly invisible...

then later, on the tennis court, green grass just newly cut,
that exhilarating smell; lime-white lines just newly marked;
and when the ball hit the centre of the racquet, just so,
I missed your message, in the will to win...

And then, grown up: how are we to know – until we know –
your messages left all around, in so many places, all so different?

When, like the unicorn, we know we'll never see you,
yet know we know that in our minds, you live?

That single horn upon its clear-eyed brow,
that dips in recognition of innocence,
how could we miss your message, so gently elegant,
one-pointed image of yourself, in mind?

Michael Shepherd

0165 Ironing

On the top unlooked-at shelf
of the cupboard rarely opened
there it was.

A tidy, self-effacing, neat and ordered pile
of mother's ironing
- after how many years? -
of those seldom used, worn almost to holes, frayed,
white things, for the house and family:
their worn yet serviceable hems and stitching
ironed with a jeweller's perfection...

and suddenly the living and the dead
were intimate and closer than any sought or unsought sentiment,
and I was a child again
silently watching,
taking in without commentary
as children do,
yet in every fine detail,
a mother's love;
a love simply watched, observed;
not, for a change, demanded
or expected
as a matter of course:

the iron nosing with supreme care
across the smell of hot and just-wet cotton
with a little, smooth, smooth swish,
over the warm bed of cloth and blanket,
taken from their special drawer;
the hand and elbow moving with a dancer's grace.

and I knew then,
in the nose, the nub, of that just-rightly-heavy iron,
the whole love of a woman and her life -
repetition and care, duty, love unspoken -
all the emotions raised by family
who'd never dream of thanking Mum
for the ironing...

'Where's my special shirt?M-u-mm....? '

No wonder that so many women hate
this incessant, unthanked act
of holy communion.

And I reflected:
every child should have the chance to watch
without commenting - as children do -
but seeing what they will remember all their life,
in every fine detail,
some to imitate it and remember;

some to find it after years,
on the shelf unsought
within the cupboard seldom opened,
(in the rose-garden, beyond time,
and time past is time present; and the time is always now...)

this act, this ritual
of purest love.

Michael Shepherd

0166 January Sunlight

January
and the afternoon sunlight
lasted that little bit longer
like an unexpected, perfect Christmas present
that got delayed in the mail
and I'm filled with a sheer gratitude
that somehow passed me by
in long, hot, lazy, selfish, glorious
summer

Michael Shepherd

0167 Just Beyond The Angel's Reach

I don't know much about what I'm writing
except that I'm writing;
I don't know much about what I've written either,
except what I read;
I don't know much about what I'm going to write
except what I hope;

but I do know a little about where I'm writing:
it's there, in those paintings of The Annunciation,
between where the angel's outstretched hand with lily,
and sometimes open, sometimes closed, but silent mouth
and Mary's crossed, clasped hands, her body
curved in obedience and humility;
eyes downcast; so be it unto her; there

just beyond the angel's reach,
just in front of mankind's hope,
where nothing and everything is happening,
and your eye runs out to the distant horizon
only to focus on infinity;

that's where I'm waiting.
that's where I'm writing.

Michael Shepherd

0168letter To A Troubled Youngster

you come from a family that –
well, I've known better and,
I've certainly known worse..
but all you want right now
is to get right away from them,
live your own life, make
your own mistakes.. and
half of you is looking forward to
doing just that, and
half of you's not sure..
OK so far? I'm trying to be fair...

now here are some sketches of
what life may hold:

there's the random, no-plan plan –
life happens; no plan, no control;

or there's the existentialist view:
I make my own life, I'm in control,
and then I live it; that's it,
I'm strong.

or there's the Indian view:
that in some timeless way
which may be, how you played it
in a previous life; or right now, as outside time;
you've set yourself this scenario which
you've got another chance, now,
to improve, resolve, in order to..
live fully? be your own real self?
be happy? help the world? ..
fill this one in yourself

or there's the view that God,
the gods, the Fates (fill this one in, too
or leave it blank for later) , anyway
Someone Up There or
Someone In Here

has – as the Stoics believed –
set your life as a series of
lessons to be learned. The right answers
that you may or may not have got right
may or may not be at the back of the book
but with a bit of luck, you'll have a pretty clear idea
with this in mind, of how it's going

But whichever, the great thing is –
treat all the hurdles as
challenges to overcome; even,
if you're that strong, look forward every day
to what may happen; and when it does,
be glad, whether it seems 'good' or 'bad',
give it your full and glad acceptance, 'cos
that's how it's going to be, anyways..and
you may learn more that way

and have a lot of fun in the sense
of freedom, that this view will, shall, bring

and sorry if all this is trite.. it's the best that
I can do; have sometimes done;
and no, I haven't always followed
my own advice..

so enjoy, and good luck.. for, who knows,
it may not be just luck

Michael Shepherd

0169 Lines In The Sand

Is there a greater privilege
than to breathe sea air? And here, it's like
a front seat at the greatest
open-air theatre in the world:

I'm sat here on my coat upon the rock
which reappears each time the tide recedes
leaving the sand so smooth as if
the sea were demonstrating beautifully
the relation between its ferocity and power,
and innocence, perhaps forgiveness; there's
a little runnel of water around the rock
where I sit, notebook and pencil, just as if
this must be the very centre of poetry
in the world;

the notebook blank
as I watch the long-haired dog
taking its master for a walk; its poem
is the ballet it makes, leaping, racing, panting,
looking back, leaving its long hair
patterning the sky a fraction after
every leap; does it know
the ballet is entitled, joy? If I say,
poetry in motion, will you read it
as if you never heard the phrase before?
Racing towards me now, hurling reckless limbs,
one sniff at me, but then there's something else
more interesting here in the sand to paw.

Some long intoxicating sea-breath minutes now, of mind's content
to be and just to be; the page stays like the sand,
innocent, as white as salt and white as surf;
and I, the silent poem that nature has just written.

Michael Shepherd

0170 Love

Hopes die;
dreams fall;
and, subtlest stroke of all,
love sharply, cruelly, hides her face,
lives lost within the mind a space;

until one day in presence new,
love - whose love was ever true -
leaves the cold, hard, hungry heart
and plays love's everlasting part;
and once again, the wiser we...
are wild and bold again
and fools again;
so, love

Michael Shepherd

0172 Love's Nosegay

Celandine, saxifrage,
buttercup, needle whin,
tormentil, vetchling,
agrimony, cinquefoil,
nipplewort, hawkbit,
ragwort, groundsel,
biting stonecrop, yellow bedstraw,
crosswort, comfrey,
bog asphodel,
tansy, sneezewort,
crowfoot, scurvy grass,
mouse-eared chickweed,
stitchwort, goutweed,
water dropwort, cuckoopint,
bryony, goosegrass,
ramsons, mayweed,
pennywort, wintergreen,
grass of parnassus, burdock,
figwort, lady's mantle,
heartsease, cinquefoil,
scabious, loosestrife,
plume thistle, knapweed,
bugle, fumitory,
ragged robin, saintfoil,
dove's- foot crane's-bill,
lousewort, rattle,
corn cockle, willow herb,
cross-leaved pink heath,
blue bottle, vetch,
milkwort, harebell,
wild succory, speedwell,
viper's bugloss, alkanet...

there's poetry in wildflowers
and rightly so.

Michael Shepherd

0173 Memory's Fast Rewind

Sometimes memory
runs back like an instant fast rewind
like it's said to do at death
and hits you wham between the eyes
with your own life

today – what, November 19 – I was
chilling out in the pub
again
relaxing into life
and there, framed in the window was
a lady (as she was today) crossing the road
dressed, this cool-cold day, in black tights and
a woollen two-piece suit in Christmas red, and
the red...
took me back so many years
that I didn't know whether to be grateful
for the glimpse, or
regret the fast grey years between...

it must have been when I was two and a half
and for the first time in my life
my parents sought a hint
(first time in their lives too)
about The Big One for my Christmas –
walked oh so casually with me through
the glittering store as if for
no-one, everyone, anyone
but me ... and there it was –
the pedal car in gleaming, buy-me red
with all the details I still can't bear to describe
enamelled like a glimpse of paradise

and sure enough, come Christmas Day
there it was – except –
(I punctuate like Emily D when out of breath...)
in blue

how can a child be adult enough to be

grateful for a second-best? And how
can parents be a child again and know?

I had forgotten until now how the seasons had their colours –
pink Valentines almost merging into complex mauve in
Easter cards, and icing, marzipan, and yellow chicks, summer days
needing no coloured herald but the sun
then autumn colours ambivalent
with the apprehension of new classes, and
new threats...

and all this time, at just this time of year
Christmas red shouts loud its herald's trumpet
of paradise; promised; lost;
perhaps, regained

Michael Shepherd

0175 Love's Butterfly

As butterflies with beauty grace the air,
so love cannot be lazy in its love;
true love brings lovely energies to bear;
love's actions grace the true contemplative.

devoted action is the path we tread
when stirred at first by love of love's first cause;
to purge our souls of that we wish us rid;
such tasks may grace our caterpillar days.

humility - which is to know pure self,
seen clearly as the light of bad and good -
brings contemplation's share in godly wealth;
those shining works which are love's neighbourhood;

then we God's goodness, truth and beauty share;
as butterflies with beauty grace the air.

Michael Shepherd

0176 Letter To A Well-Known Contemporary Poet

I wanted to write to you about your poems,
that is, about something I couldn't quite put my finger on
so I didn't write in case it sounded inconsequential
and it's silly to write to a poet who handles words so expertly,
inconsequentially..

Inconsequential. That's it. I appreciate that you want to stress
life's inconsequentiality - this happens, that happens, but
we're none the wiser - that's a modern concern, I appreciate,
no neat wrapping life up with a brisk end-rhyme...

but how can I put this tactfully, inconsequentiality
or is it tangentiality
can seem to the reader eager to extract meaning
that is, the poet's meaning, as near as can be...
inconsequentiality can seem...obscure...
for this very reason, since it's difficult
to share the same inconsequentiality
if you see what I mean

and this unintentional obscurity
can sometimes seem
of course I know you wouldn't
but let's say to an uninformed superficial reader -
like pretension?

I hope you don't mind my mentioning this
it's only because I do admire your writing so much
and I know that the prizes and awards you've won
proves that no-one could possibly accuse you of pretension
it's just that I thought I should say how it seems
to a very ordinary reader. I hope you will read this
in the spirit it's meant. And I do look forward
very much to reading your next book
now the library stocks them.

Michael Shepherd

0177 Merde!

It's the word you hear
when anti-French views are aired -
MERDE!

when their secret liaisons have been publicly bared -
MERDE!

when they lose a lover for whom they deeply cared -
MERDE!

when a planned seduction hasn't fared -
MERDE!

when a promising mistress is running scared -
MERDE!

when by censorship their free speech is impaired -
MERDE!

Le ci-dessus
c'est pour vous
Marc (Ronberge) ..

Michael Shepherd

0178 Mother And Son

I'd known her all my life,
nursed her for seven years
night and day

yet when last night I lay down to sleep
I heard myself say
as if to someone else,

what a splendid lady,
I wish I'd known her better

Michael Shepherd

0179 My Parents

'We begin by loving our parents; '
said er,
'later, we hate them;
rarely if ever do we
forgive them...'

I'd like to live long enough
to forgive them;
then,
go somewhere where
I can tell them I love them,
always did, always shall.

Michael Shepherd

0180 Let Sleeping Dogs Lie

At the far edge of the expanding cemetery
in its uncertain spiritual limbo,
its small gravestones re-emerge only in late summer
like a clipped coat, the tall grass annually machined; of
those who made no will or testament
that we know of and we may be wrong
nor do we know their last thoughts if thoughts
nor do the stones reveal the names they knew themselves by; and
was the human love their inscriptions indicate
less or greater than that evoked
by their own kind? What sort of peace
do they rest in?

It's not the most imaginative corner
to have chosen. There's a perfect place
by the 16th tee of the golf course,
high on the hill, facing west,
riddled with a rabbit warren
where on a summer evening
more rabbits than you'd guess, of every size
bob around and sun themselves
and seem to feel so safe that they ignore
the humans, dogless at that hour,

an elysian field where dogs might dream and twitch
for eternity; repent, or lie down in peace with brer rabbit,
their natures everlastingly fulfilled;
where in the summer evening sun,
facing the glowing sky and gold-tipped clouds
cottontails and men might sit, philosophise and speculate
together, about the little that the species know
of each other's knowledge.

Michael Shepherd

0181 Mr And Mrs Andrews Seated In Their Estate

Beware, if you're a portrait painter,
of being born in England. And if
you're skilled at background –
the rolling landscape which they're
so proud to own – or painting highlights
upon a silk or satin gown...be doubly hesitant –
we ruined Holbein and we ruined Van Dyck,
with our demands to make us victorious,
happy and glorious, long to reign over others
in our stately home, later in
the auction house, in
the 'collection' of the recent millionaire, in
the public gallery; though while you live, Sir Portrait Painter
we'll enrol you in our club as temporary gent...

Beware - if you're a potential patron -
of being painted by the great:
in the corners of their flattery
whose price you resent but need in greed to have,
lurks truth. You, sir, looking so judicious,
why are your lips so meanly pressed?
You, young man, aspiring to a lordly rank,
why are your eyes already lined
with wenching, gaming, debt?

Beware - if you're an 'art critic' or a lecturer -
of your so ready, easy, redbrick politics
which masquerade as 'context' – for
there may be traps..

'Here, ladies and gentlemen – would you
stand back a little so that everyone can see? –
are Mr Robert Andrews of Sudbury, Suffolk, and
his wife Frances, painted by that
enchanted painter Thomas Gainsborough
around 1748 to 1749... they chose
the right man for the job: here are the rolling miles
of this royal throne of kings, this
sceptred island, this jewel set

in a silver sea, this earth, this realm, this –
England – which they have the impertinence
of the nouveau riche to think they own – note,
in contrast to Gainsborough’s customary lovely touch,
how awkwardly they pose – is this the
first black cloud that presages the fall
of ancien regimes? The first comment
on social class in England’s much-delayed
Enlightenment? The socialist critic Peter Berger
says of this revealing document in paint...’
etc.

Alas for theory
about this awkward pair: the painting’s raw
because it’s not quite finished and now
over-cleaned, no mellowing brownish final varnish;
and notice the bedroom shadows under
her eyes, above the prim finishing-school mouth
that almost smiles: they’ve only married this very
month: he’s twenty-two, she’s just sixteen.

and they have had their
first lovers’ tiff: should Gainsborough
paint in the pheasant which her Bob’s just shot,
which is already outlined in her lap -
and spoil her new, so sky-blue satin dress?

They haven’t yet decided; Gainsborough’s left
the painting unfinished, while they kiss, make up, decide;
he has another appointment booked.

How much more interesting than what we know
is what, alas, we don’t.

Michael Shepherd

0181 Ouch! You've Been Prioritised....

You quite like going to school,
'cos your best friend's there
and you hang out together;
then this morning, they're with
their new best friend..

don't take it personally,
you've been prioritised

You like your job,
you're doing good work,
and the boss knows it,
gives you the special jobs;
then this week someone else
is in the boss's good books
and due for promotion..

don't take it personally,
you've been prioritised

You have the happiest,
most secure relationship
you could ever have hoped for;
then as you dance in your elegant outfit
cheek to cheek, your partner
looks over your shoulder, and
looks... and looks again...

don't take it personally,
you've been prioritised

and you wonder
what angels find to talk about?

Michael Shepherd

0182 Parents (2)

OK, you don't have to believe this;
but it's worth thinking about.

Here's the theory – it's as beautifully
simple, and as subtle in its implications,
as any mathematician would enjoy:

In the succession of our lives,
leading by so many, many rebirths
to our perfection, each life
is shaped by our actions
in the previous life

and, deep, deep in our soul -
which wants only the best for us,
while we live through what's laid down
by our past – some sublime reasoning
sets up the handicaps which we must
transcend in our next life; that is, this one

rather as if a jockey or a show-jumper
sets up the hedges, fences, walls, and water-jumps
for themselves, so that they themselves
may test themselves to ride a greater course,
maybe a perfect round..

I'll cut the moral, here. It's all
beyond acceptance, and personal forgiveness, though
that's a start; just a lifetime of
opportunities to 'make something of yourself'
knowing in your heart that ultimately -
that is, right now -
it's for the good

so, for a nice friendly family start:
you yourself chose your parents..

OK, you don't have to believe this;
but it's worth thinking about?

Michael Shepherd

0183 Poem For Kay

Praise be to Him,
our One Creator
who built into Adam
the Great Vibrator.

Michael Shepherd

0184 Poetry's Triumph

When that strange stirring to a poem comes -
half-heard, half-formed, some seed deep in the mind -
the heart lights up, so eager to explore
the unknown path that listening may find:

obedience, awe, devotion, humbleness
all rise to meet the offering of the word,
and gently, like new father with his child,
tend precious stranger granted to their care.

Then silence turns to music in the mind
and all too solid words form, black and white;
behind the magic of the manifest
remains - less noonday, than unbroken night...

The poet's failure? No, his Muse's power -
if readers hear that seed which spoke the flower.

Michael Shepherd

0185 Political Incorrectness

Sometimes a single misprinted word
brings a daylong smile to my cynical face:
as today, when the next month's political campaign
was said 'to have cliched into place'.

Michael Shepherd

0186 Praise

'Whatever that you think you lack - give that! ' -
this saying, heard, lodged in my mind a space;
like seed that seems inert - yet, not inert;
its hidden clock an instrument of grace;

the mind, that soil which meanwhile does not know:
it neither knows what lies in its embrace,
nor its own precious nutrients which grow
that seed; nor knows the Sower; nor His grace -

until the day that in some Spring of light,
I realised: I, meanly, denied - praise:
the praise of human beings in my sight;
and thus, the praise of that one source of praise.

so sought occasion, each and All to praise;
now Praise, with golden hand, seeds all my days.

Michael Shepherd

0187: 1580 - Ish

Round 1580 - so some scholars write -
the finest poets of England sought accord
on what fine form of verse might most delight,
and render fullest homage to our Lord.

They found iambics, in a five-foot line
tuned best with English speech to native ears:
more simple, steady, musical in mind
than Racine's stately tread of French hexameters.

The thoughts sublime which these our poets teach
-Sidney's sonnets, Shakespeare's poems and plays -
enter our ears in childhood, shape our speech,
and tune our hearts to hear, and speak, God's ways;

in still and silent rapture there to find
the music of that other world: God's mind.

Michael Shepherd

0188 A Marvel To His Coy Mistress

me, the bow,
you, the cello;
me, mc squared;
does it follow,

sexual activity
relates to relativity?

my energy,
your mass;
can we equate
such love,
my lass?

Michael Shepherd

0189 A Maybe Tribute To E E Cummings

it was the sound of
the daffodils
growing
that woke
the ear of their ear

on the sun's birthday

and the lilacs of the scent
said it's time to wake up
so we can dream

and the amazing
of the roses
woke the eye of their eye

and the words tumbled out of bed
and took an April shower
and dressed by the wrong which was right

shook out the box
of breakfast food called freedom
and rush-houred street-wise see them
words came tumbling

dogs they grinned with mastered feelings
cats were caught off-guard washed
to recover their dignity pretty girls felt prettier

as the words sang
no-ones became someones
anyones became everyones

nothing was as it was
because was wasn't
and isness filled the air

the words danced in the squares
and smiles peopled

the words laughed through the graveyards
dancing on dead minds

laughed through the brothels
making tired whores to smile and
schoolmasters ate their words
in the eyes of their pupils

and the words shouted through the letterboxes
of critics called nameless shameless blameless
come out and play tomorrow with your
yesterday

words played leapfrog round the toadstools
with each's other
hand in hand with strangers
laughing till they cried
crying till they laughed

all day it was all day
and therefulness and thenfulness
until the words had scattered
hello among humanunkind

and forming perfectly irregular lines
danced a song and sang a dance
at sunfall dayset nightrise
all happy tired like children
into a farm
called joy

Michael Shepherd

0190 A Novel Fairy Story For A Poetic Multi-Faith Giftmas

'Cinderella' (I'm using this pseudonym to protect her identity, now she's ex-hot, ex-famous) , while sweeping, dusting, fire-lighting, all that deprived childhood stuff - felt that she had more to offer; had not realised her full potential; so in a cheap exercise book, wrote her fictionalised life-story, suitably worked up, in her spare moments; even, when short of incident, setting up some neat situation with her ugly sisters etc.

thanks to her friend Buttons who was computer-literate, hence his name, ha, she self-published and, with a wand-wave from her Fairy Godmother by 'sheer chance' when her sisters had a famous critic and, unusually, discoverer of talent, to dine, hit the headlines – Booker Prize in an off-year, interviews, weary book tours of the US, life-style articles, all that, - a gift to journalists, rags to riches story – was courted through many photo-opportunities by ex-hot celebs in search of boosting their waning reflected glory... in short, Hit It Big. 'We always knew her talent' wrote her botoxed sisters...

until one day, her Fairy Godmother winging past late as usual and slightly tetchy with it, reckoned that Our Heroine had had her fifteen minutes and wondered what to do to slap her down; until she remembered that she'd fixed that too – Famous First Book Novelists

have to spend the following year
while the rest of us are having fun out there,
seeing their name fade from the headlines
and the gossip columns and
the stories planted by their PR
and cutting down on the parties
and those they do go to, they
are only half-there as they watch
for 'material', as a break from
sitting at their desk while confidence
dwindles into self-doubt
and the critics sharpen up their talons, as Last Year's Winners
scrape out that Second Novel..

and the Fairy Godmother (who
doubles as the Wicked Witch, it's
a divine joke) chuckled in a somewhat
double-edged way, whilst checking
the time and remembering that for fairies,
arriving late increases the dramatic tension.

there's a moral here for poets too but
to point it out would be
uncool

Michael Shepherd

0192 Abundance

I am overwhelmed
by the abundance
in my poverty;
the riches that I find
in knowing that I own nothing

I am dazzled
at the ugliness
in my mind;
seeing
the beauty in my soul

I am humbled
by the truth of my lies
when I understand
that to lie
one must first know truth

I am radiant
in the invisibility
of goodness
when I close my eyes
to all else

(to Rilke)

Michael Shepherd

0192 Always There Is Wisdom

Always there are wizards.

They don't hide themselves.

That would be wrong for them.

They don't advertise themselves.

That would be wrong for them.

They wait.

That could be boring. Or painful, even.

But that's their job.

There may be one in the next street.

You need to look.

Then they meet you halfway.

They may look like anybody. Or nobody. Or everybody.

When you go to them, they may dress up in cloak and pointed hat.

That's just symbolic.

Just at the point of the hat, there's space.

That's what they'll tell you about.

That space is full.

Like your heart.

No one cares much about wizards.

Except those who seek them.

Wizards are wise.

But only if you ask them questions.

Then the answer comes out of space.

And lives in your heart.

Of course.

Michael Shepherd

0193 American Poetry

Pithy, precise,
wry, wise,
flinty, real,
democratic,
true

that's how it's
been defined

you'll question that
of course

as you should

I'll leave you to it

how powerful
eight words
can be

Michael Shepherd

0194 A Boy's Vision

The boy walks past the window;
you can see he's
got something clearly in his mind;
walks firmly on both feet as if
he walked on grass;
his carriage upright,
a half-smile on his face;
his eyes are bright;
he swings his hands from side to side
in front of him.

He has a vision.

Ah yes.

His captain's just tossed the ball to him;
it's his spell to bowl.

This is what he was born to do;
he has the skills;
he knows he can do it; can't wait; but
no hurry, as he's confident,
switching the ball from hand to hand,
warming it with his love.

The boy walks past the window.
He has a vision.

Michael Shepherd

0194 At Last

At last I'm old enough

old enough not to be
embarrassed when
it happens

it can be when
some athlete stands
and mouths the words of
their national anthem
as the flag waves

or a young musician
makes their first, fresh
debut playing some
often played classic
as if it had never
been played before

or a cloud passes and
the sunlight reaches into
the room and says
look at this crystal vase,
look at this flower
look at this dewdrop

or someone who was anyone
a moment ago
smiles

oh so many so little big things and
my chest heaves, shudders,
and my heart not my eyes
is shaking with tears which
cannot be explained but
only recognised for
whence they come
beyond tears

at last I'm old enough
not to be embarrassed
by this joy
though
I make the excuse
to go into another room
in case

Michael Shepherd

0195 Autumn Gardener

Gathering rosebuds with my rake;
the wooden tines scraping
over the gravel path
bringing a token of order
to the autumn of a life;

rosebuds, nipped at the neck
by frost; dead leaves
curled like begging or covetous hands,
coloured like rich memories, red, orange, brown,
dry husks, spilt seed,
now crisp, eager to surrender to the fire,
its scented smoke curling like a pyre against
a cold blue sky now welcoming
a tidy offering up; □
how clean, how sharp the autumn air

darker under the trees
the leaves still wet
limp and flat as hope defeated,
pressed together as
words not meant, or
something missed;
next year the leaves
will remember innocence,
the tree broader, eager,
brown as wisdom tipped with exploratory green.

gathering rosebuds with my rake
the season with its woodsmoke, evocative,
tempting to metaphor, hovering,
a garden of lost meaning;
no longer, this cooling autumn, a construction,
but speaking its own seriousness.

how clean, how sharp the autumn air
scented by surrender

0197 Being In Mind

Poets seek in poems, a truth that's yet to be:
to catch those glories half-formed in the mind,
those tantalising visions which we see
for fleeting seconds; fear may never find

again; yet leave a presence in the air,
the evanescent substance of a dream,
like half-remembered, half-forgotten care,
but known to be more real than they seem;

like friendly ghosts who share our rooms awhile
and conjure memories of their treasured kind:
a scent; a taste; a light; an echoed smile
from knowledge of some farther truth in mind:

O these are angels, heralds of the whole;
a golden rain that showers the dreaming soul.

Michael Shepherd

0198 Buddha Meets Christ, Says Nothing

The Buddha (is that one or multiple, theologically?)
sits at his total ease in our back garden
such as it is
in his plastic only partially disguised
pool, with today a white ranunculus
floating at his feet

he's externally nicely moulded of fine concrete
and since the fig tree with its leaves
big enough to make yourself an apron of
though you'd need apronstrings, –
has been cut down, he's emerged
from the shadow of it which made him
unpleasantly greeny-mouldy; but now the sunlight
has dried him into a light and Springy green
which is almost fluorescent and sorta floaty

he gives interest to the garden, makes a space
of his own and also makes the garden
shapely, a focal point or some such
decorator term. He seems very happy there
-perhaps anywhere; he certainly makes me happy
to see him; he wipes thought away.

It would be poetic to say that
he was already contemplating all peacefully
when dawn broke this day of solemn days,
the Good or Bad Friday depending;
but then he seems not to worry about time anyway
under his demure, downcast eyelids

but he's so there he's here, and was and is,
no mere garden ornament and whatever
he sees inside, it's there in me too
as Emerson said of this sweet contemplation

what he makes of the events of this day
is certainly a question – just suppose he'd been there
discreetly in the crowd, saying nothing, just

contemplating the scene;
and the roving cameraman spotted him
and asked for a quote

big answers deserve big questions;
maybe this half-formed question
deserves more contemplation.
I'll just shut up and go look at him again

as the evening light reflected from
the windows of the house opposite
bathes him in an intense sunset burst of glory
with no apparent source so that he
glows with a radiant promise of peace forever
to all men; a promise as Christ's prayer-book
puts it so memorably –
past all understanding.

Michael Shepherd

0199 Constantinople

Two sisters separated soon after birth
one dark-haired, one fair, both beautiful, with shining eyes
run towards each other, eagerly, yet shyly, wonderingly,
from the two ends of a bridge
high over the water that joins and separates – run to meet:

Constantinopolis, Byzantium;
a city never here and always there,
a city made of images in the mind and heart
its jewelled, aqueous, shifting light
promising and hiding
like a jewelled dancer swirling, whom our senses yield to
but may not touch

provoking us with mystery, clouded fables,
many interpretations as to her history
to which we bring our own uncertainties;
choose what we can, but, transfixed, gaze upon her seduction
and marvel at her,
glowing invisibly with an imperceivable unity,
a knowing of a history of bloodshed, odious intrigues,
with a dazzling sense of the divine, of holy wisdom,
defying us to judge her, by her charms;

like an oracle,
speaking with her silence;
like an ikon,
gazing at your soul;
if you lack perception
her smile will seem like sorrow;

she asks nothing of you, yet
waits to greet you as graciously
as a goddess; as a queen.

From the Cypriot Greek of Vera Korfioti

0200 Dementia

Now what did I come upstairs for?

Of course I haven't forgotten your name,
young lady, it's just that I can't remember it

Why am I going upstairs?
I only just got up

No dear, you're wrong,
I always pay on account

Where's my bed?
Isn't this upstairs?

Take the paper back
to the newsagent, someone's
already done the crossword

Of course I'm undressed,
I just came upstairs

Of course you can sign my name dear,
they know me at the post office

Why is it so dark downstairs,
I've only just got up

Why should I give you money for the gas,
Young man? I don't even know you

I'm sure there are more stairs
than there used to be

Stop being so insulting, young man,
it's only money

No of course I don't need help with the stairs,
I know my own house

No dear, you sign for it, I'm sure
your boss will understand

Somebody changed the stairs
when I was out, they
aren't the same

Why are people so rude about
money these days?

Ask my father to speak
to that young man

The stairs are steeper than they were,
somebody's changed them

Who are you, I didn't
ask you to come in...

Of course it's my house,
it's just that you changed the stairs

Tell the bank manager to
come and see me in the morning.

Why does that man upstairs
move the stairs at night?

Michael Shepherd

0201 Two Skins, One Thick, One Thin

No, don't open that door. Don't try.
It's locked anyway. Or should be. Some people say
it's worse than seeing their first dead body
half dead half alive, they never quite forget it.
Me I'm used to them. Them? Well OK,
I shan't let you look but I'll tell you.

It's my two body suits.
Thin skin, thick skin.
When I go out in the thin skin
life's more exciting but god it's tiring.
A trip on public transport and I come back finished.
I see things, feel things rather, that are scary.

I see people's next lives they're creating for themselves.
There's this blind school round the corner;
I saw them all on the station platform once and I could see
those who were going to see properly, next time,
those who were making themselves blinder...
then next day I saw an ordinary 'seeing' man talking to a friend
without using his eyes, just dead ahead...how could I tell him?

Another time, I sat next to a man
who looked as if he'd slept rough
but the scary thing was, he was giving off such intense heat
that I knew sure as sure, he'd just murdered somebody...
I never knew that was a clue...

I see everybody's perfection and their present self
simultaneously. You might think it's wonderful.
Yes and no. Not when you're wearing your thin skin.
Yes, of course it's great for poetry...that's why
I bought it, why I wear it.

The thick skin's for business, interviews, being fired,
the Editor's office, the dentist, the doctor,
the mother-in-law, the footfall
in the dark alley, all the times you just
want to be tough, insensitive, eff the lot of them,

guess I don't need to list all that?

And yes, sometimes you can go out in the wrong one.
A friend tells you of some awful family disaster
and you think, thick-skinned, well that's their problem,
let them sort it out... and hate yourself for even thinking it.

Or someone looks at you on the wrong day
like you're looking at me now,
sorta disbelieving, disgusted and pitying..
gotta go. Seeyerlater.

Michael Shepherd

0202 Elocution Practice For Verse Speakers

The life
on Mars
meets mainly in
the bars

they're found
by Underground,
that is, the Metro
they're mainly
hetero

so you may meet your
Mr Right
or maybe just
a meteorite

a Mars bar can
mislead a man.

Michael Shepherd

0203 Evensong

As the evening cools
and I go out to water the front garden
watched by the guys
who lounge outside the house opposite
as it opens for its illegal evening business,
looking at me as if I'm expressing
some unnamed insult by my presence
on their turf

I wonder if they are as awed as I
that as the evening light from the west
glows radiant, boundless, just as the sun disappears,
then slowly pales to dusk,
the reds and crimsons, scarlets,
magentas, madders, vermilion, rose,
infuse with an almost ultra-violet tinge, live new lives,
and glow with the passionate intensity of prayer
in their vibrant evensong as if they know
that colour can outsing
any works of man when lived
on petals that know only innocence

Michael Shepherd

0204 Every Dog Will Have His Night

The prick of tears around the eye when reading poetry
is reassuring - that despite what happened
this morning, yesterday, in childhood,
in your last life, whatever -
you're still human.

Philip Levine - whose poems prick my eyes
so often that I'd like to think him
to be the heart of America
or ought to be,
reckons that man is the only animal
that has visionary power.
But I wonder. Can't do more than that; but wonder nevertheless:

my dog,
who lays him down on the hearth at night
with a sigh that shakes his whole body,
as if he's not planning to do anything between sleep and wake,
twitches his hind legs in dream;
and I, unimaginatively, assume he's chasing rabbits -
too intense a twitching for just some playful thrown ball:
does he catch them, or like in my dreams,
get further and further away, the harder he tries?

But psychologists of the human mind
reckon that dreams are the sewage farms
of emotion: cleansing the mind of fears
(and, it seems, for an astonishingly high percentage of Britons,
having a very friendly afternoon tea with the Queen...) .

Which suggests that those chases of failure or perhaps ideal success
that my dog dreams, cleanse emotions too
- and who can doubt, seeing his dog hang his head in shame,
with that strange straightness of the neck like human spine
which can touch his master's heart like nothing else,
who can doubt that dogs have emotions? -
imply that dogs could have ideals
(and am I God, or just
the leader of his pack - how do I, then, measure up?) .

And if they have emotions, and ideals, then
should we not enquire of them more closely
what is dreamt of in their philosophy?

My dog, haunched here beside me,
looks up at me with liquid brown eyes
brimming with faith, hope, and love;
trusting that I'll make the right decision about all this.

Michael Shepherd

0205 Front Porch Days

London, six o'clock in June, two-o-o-five:

These streets were built in nineteen-five or thereabouts
in unimaginative grid, on London clay and previous watercress beds
by builders and those, quote, 'developers',
whose sudden stroke of luck was that the Tube line was diverted
and foreshortened, now to pass this way all overground;
it took a century, and climate change, to prove
that cracked-out summer clay and winter watercourse,
and building onto earth, are not the best foundation...
but these terraces of modest houses
(alternate houses gabled, bayed, to suggest they're twice the size)
have stood the test of time, when, often, underpinned;
intended for the aspirational working-class,
they've now become, these last few years,
'first homes' for the equally aspirational middle-class;
tonight the streets are nose-to-tail with silent, gleaming
four-wheelers looking down their grilles
at nifty runabouts - some, I regret to say,
parked where suburban front-gardens once declared respectability
in token concrete-and-flower three metres square of space
as subtly expressive in miniature
as any grandly-vista-ed and avenued ducal drive.

All is very quiet at this hour; doors firmly closed;
front gardens are for show just like front parlours were.
Across the road, for all I know,
(for this is London; one does not often chum across the street)
our neighbours may live sunburned Southern lives
in long back gardens which face West (ours, East and overshadowed) :
while on this side, just one front door is out of line:
like some beached whale (or dolphin sounds more cute)
providing a double-take but just too late for passing pedestrians,
I sit at open door with paperback, in jasmine heaven,
which may last - three weeks? but which in this first year of flower,
is both a song of praise and Southern holiday;
it's lost its first exhilaration, but acquired
a subtle maturity so that, one lungful gloried in,
one's ready straightway for yet more perfection;

a week or so, and its poignant sharp-sour scent
will bring back memories of summer's ripe Venetian back-canals.

This new-found gazebo, to you in Southern climes
will be just commonplace - as afternoon front porch,
or sociable evening verandah or leisured stoep,
where West Indians, for instance, wait to pass the time of day
with passing neighbours; for me, exotic new delight;
so that I'm quietly proud when the Trinidadians from two doors away
take my presence, sitting there, as invitation to pause there at my gate
and pass the time of day.

On one side of the door, vermilion geraniums
survived a mildish winter; their colour in this evening sun
incredible: blazing colour from one petal, sun-glowed in another;
can vermilion really be, as reason and art-teachers say,
a mixture of yellow in with red? Not here, today...and so, itself,
that you can feel it hit the retina and demand
more than the physics of the eye can stand....
and then, the other side, the pink geranium
sings quite a different song - one hears, but cannot say
just where the difference lies in colour's music scale.

Metaphysics, for three thousand years or more
in East and West, has held in high debate
whether what, like this, the senses' scene, provides
may be direct connection with what's called divine;
or whether this must be transcended in some mindful way.
The answer, here, today, for me is in
one glimpse of sunlight through geranium.

Michael Shepherd

0207 Hover Fly

The hover fly
that's just demonstrated
that it's one of the Creation's greatest
and smallest, most compact miracles of lawful
imagination (imagine flying, then stopping
quite still in the air, no slowing down,
just, zap, like that, dead steady,
and it's smaller (!) than a helicopter, wow)
right here in front of me in silhouette, but
illuminated on one wing by the PC screen,
and pausing for a freeze-frame moment of eternity
as if to tell me something
(illumination, too?) -
all this, and yet it
doesn't know I'm writing about it.
Presumably.

Michael Shepherd

0208 If Poets Had A Tail To Wag

As your beloved, faithful dog
returns to his dear master's hearth
after burying deep some promising fine bone
as hostage to the future,
and with the long-lunged sigh
of those who know they could not have done better,
lays him on the hearth (with nose too near the falling coal)
to pass the sleep of a blissful clear conscience
broken only by the twitchy dream of chasing rabbits
(and like humans, does he never quite catch them before he wakes?
we'll never know...)

so the poet closes the notebook, switches off the PC,
and with the clear conscience of one
who knows that his poetry may not be all that good -
but that he couldn't have done better -
retires to bed, satisfied, content.

If bliss is then the emptied mind
the Muse of Poetry is kind.

Michael Shepherd

0210 In A Japanese Garden

How fresh the air is today.
A poet has walked this way,

as silently alive as the breeze
playing with the almond blossom.

Michael Shepherd

0211 Infinite Riches In A Little Room Unquote

In but a few years' time
when every poet and their critic
has the internet on their videophone
we can relieve ourselves
of our mutual antipathy
as demonstrated on poemhunter
shit-quick
and face to face
by taking to the smallest room

and standing on our dignity
though seated
call up without fear
of logorrhoea
and take the piss
out of each other
and having relieved ourselves
quick as a slash
arise
undeterred and
flushed with victory

thus
leaving more time
for rhyme
or for better or worse
free verse

Michael Shepherd

0211 It Takes All Sorts

It takes all sorts to make a world, they say
(how do 'they' know anyway?) :
but it certainly looks like that here this sunny day:

some just want to be as ordinary as they can be.
don't want to stand out in a crowd.
some don't want to be noticed at all.
some are the opposite - pompous, arrogant, reckon they've made it..
some have fallen flat on their face - as happens.
some get fresh flowers every week from secret admirers.
some are only smartened up once a year when their distant relations come to
look them up.
some would like us to know that they know Latin or Greek or both.
some have a ready biblical text on their lips. Or a favourite hymn.
some are war heroes but are truly modest about it.
some are genuinely famous and want you to know it - or their relatives do.
some are unashamedly sentimental.
some are at the mercy of relatives who know what one should do.

The tombstones in Brompton Cemetery are a shoulder-to-shoulder lot;
too many to take in or care individually about
unless you check the one you've been sunbathing beside.

But as you rollerblade down the broad main avenue
in your sunglasses
with your sweater around your waist,
an ice-cream in one hand
and a small paper bag from the chemist in the other,
you may have missed that

every tombstone has a cheerful soul sitting on it
all looking about 35 years old, curiously,
swinging their feet in the sun and chatting with each other
and commenting lightly as you pass
with your doctor's prescription from the chemist,

wondering what you'll make of your life. Or have done so far....
You should listen to them one day.
They're pretty good judges of character by now.

But not everybody notices them.

Michael Shepherd

0212 It's Just An Age Thing

it's just an age thing - should you be concerned?
I'll spell it out; it may just clear my mind:
that, in impatient youth, ambition burned
to have the answers to all things defined -

but not, I haste to add, from teacher's notes,
but from experiences uniquely mine:
a random, fun-filled quest to find the goal
which, when defined, would ease the ceaseless strife;

yet now, the mind's so sceptical, and all
that passed for thought, just mental indigestion;
the quest, forgotten, changed, or redefined;
what passed for answers, are now up for question:

it's braver fun, with answers thrown away
to seek the greater questions in this play.

2003

Michael Shepherd

0213 Late Night Reverie

One in three of us, the stats say, lives alone. Sad;
but fine if you prefer it that way.

It's late at night. You're alone. The PC off at last. The TV off.
Finally you put aside the book you're reading. The attention's drifting.
Too late too, for reading in bed. You should just
get up from the chair, switch off the light,
etc. But you don't. You just sit there. This
is one of life's great private joys. Far better than
all the bathroom stuff, the almost idiot moments
of waiting for sleep, knowing you'll never catch the moment
when sleep takes you; and the more you try, like a child,
to catch it, haha got you, the longer it will be before - zap - zzz.

So you sit there, drifting into a glorious haze of irresponsibility
as the thoughts fade, the cares fade, you're just two thoughts away
or perhaps two non-thoughts away, from something like bliss,
and this peace doesn't dwindle you - there's an expansion
as if 'someone' doesn't become no-one, but everyone...
and there comes to mind, curiously, those greatest moments in the
greatest films, when there they are, looking out over Paris or Algiers
or wherever, with the soundtrack playing, hardly there but there,
and nothing is said, but the whole cinema audience of hundreds
is silent, focussed, feeling in those seconds of emotion and stillness
that everything real, everything wished for, everything that matters
is there. In full.

Or in the theatre - sitting there, hundreds of you, weeping silent tears
that even those stoic Romans found a phrase for, lacrymae rerum,
the tears of things: you all know, she won't take that first step
out of herself, he won't try for that job he knows he's wanted
all his life; they'll never go to the Moscow of their dreams...yet...

It's like that for you in your armchair.

The key to all of life is there, out of reach perhaps, yet
known, not out of reach... beyond sadness, beyond happiness
in a strange way. It just... is as it is. And that's OK.

Better than just going to bed. Yes, it's a good time.
Sleep well.

Michael Shepherd

0214 Me And Lazarus

'Since your breakdown, Michael,
you've changed out of all recognition...'
Was I supposed to feel flattered,
since this was evidently meant as a compliment -
leaving a vapour trail of implications
about past behaviour across the clear sky of my mind?

No, I did not feel flattered;
though agreeably unconcerned
about the degree of un-observation in an old friend;
how could he not see
that I was as I ever was, though
minus some things I could happily do without,
acquired along the way?

Now I can begin to imagine Lazarus
called back from the dead,
unwinding his lifetime's shroud -
you wake up with a touch of cramp
to see a goggle-eyed bunch of familiar faces
telling you some frankly unbelievable story
in which you appear as the unwitting
central character; apart of course from Him;
and you should feel grateful for this?
when you're a beggar, the milk bill's not been paid,
and you're right out of wild honey?

Ah, here's the pay-off
that the Bible omits to mention -
(unless I'm some special case) -
that like Lazarus, I entered the breakdown van
the world's beggar,
and emerged, a hell-and-back,
with new-found freedom and happiness,
and not a little gratitude,

rich beyond riches.

0215 Name The Devil And...

How long?

how long before the measures
put in place by the state
'for our protection'
become the apparatus
of a repressive and
totalitarian state?

'Oh it can't happen here, we're a free country'...

but children never know the experience of
their parents' lost inner freedoms of the mind.

How long?

Start counting

Michael Shepherd

0216 Nobility, Humility

Early on a fine morning in June,
everything so still, the air
as if air had just been invented,
carrying scents, and
taste, and touch, and sparkling clarity -
it could even be singing to my contented listening;
cool air, waiting to be warmed by the sun;
at this magic hour, it matters not whether
countryside or town;

and I'm suddenly, unexpectedly
filled with the nobility of life -
and simultaneously, or perhaps just after it,
humility...

and this strange, agreeable pair, I bask in,
live and move and have my being,
this fine morning in June

Michael Shepherd

0218 Paradise Known

O God - or may I call you Lord? -
I remember when I was a child,
You were my best friend, one who knew me
better than I knew myself;
and so I talked to You all the time,
especially when I'd been naughty;
then later on, it was taught me
that I'm made in Your image - that feels good...

I know, just as all children do,
what Paradise is, and where:
when the sun is out,
it's in that wood beyond the field,
where I feel most myself;
but not quite out of sight of home;
and lots of other places just like that;
then when the sun goes in, I go in too,
and Paradise is - when I'm tired and fed,
and then all nice and read to, tucked up in bed;
and Paradise is in my head.

And then, I read in Genesis
how, out of Your immortal bliss,
the way You did it all;
and so, since we're good friends
and I'm made in Your image,
I have some questions: You did a brilliant job
with fields and woods and animals
and human beings - well, some of them, the ones I like...
and it makes good sense
to have Adam there to look after it all, and to enjoy it;
and a nice idea too to have Eve as his companion -
who else could do the cooking while he's out at work,
or remind him of the jobs to do around the house?
and if Adam had to have the babies too,
he wouldn't then be able to go out and work as well...

But why couldn't You have left it just like that?
you must have guessed that when grown-ups say

'You're not to eat the apples on that tree! '
then you want to do just that,
not for the apples but
because you want to know
just why you shouldn't do that anyway?
I mean, it's human, isn't it?

And if You don't mind my saying this,
throwing them out of Paradise,
that seems a bit severe for such a crime?
couldn't You have let them off, first time?

My teacher says 'it's all symbolic' – that the message is
just to be ourselves, and not divide the world
into the 'good' and 'bad',
or always split our mind in two
or to think we know too much–
(did you tell my teacher that?) :
and that there are some of Your laws
which we must keep, which have just cause;
well, I'll go along with that;
I never wanted – afterwards – to be naughty, anyway;
I've talked to You about this often, and explained...

I'd like to think that when Adam and Eve
realised what they'd lost, and then said sorry,
they didn't have to go around in guilt and sin
(Like miserable old Auntie Min..)
and, if Paradise is lost by us, but yet that's known,
we can then return to what we own?
'And they all lived happily ever after'
is what the old storybooks all tell me...
or is there perhaps some hidden clue,
like, we often 'grow up' and forget about You? ...

*

My teacher says I've 'simplified' –
but didn't You say, 'Be as a child'?

Well, Lord, that's how it seems to me;
and I'm Your child; would You agree?

Michael Shepherd

0219 People People

It must be fun - or so I'd like to think -
doing a 'people' job,
if that's what you really like to do;
like being a born bright barman in a not-too-busy bar
where everyone you meet's a challenge of some sort -
to spark the eyes of strangers, or
to plumb the depths of lonely mind and heart;

and postman, on a regular morning round -
not the early one who drops through blank, closed doors
of houses where only the dog's awake, and finger-hungry;
but the one who has the parcels, has to knock,
and meets you face to face; and meets your gratitude,
maybe your full-on smile...

but now, the latest guy (where do the happy ones all go?) -
he's really weird. He must know by now
that I'm eager for his ring, because that means
another poetry book; and yet when I unleash unshaven joy
and greet him like a friend I've really missed,
he hands me the parcel with his face
turned full ninety degrees to the right, as if
my smile, my breath, bears loathsome foul disease,
or as if in some shared past, I'd done him some unpardonable hurt.
I sometimes wonder if he has some history of abuse, and now
he's scared to meet anyone who might be kind to him...

What a pity that he'll never meet
Mr Weekly Organic Veg
who's born to live in joy, it seems,
whose smile is larger than his face,
whose eyes are shining with a friendship that's unqualified,
and who reminds me in five seconds flat
what life's all about.

Michael Shepherd

0220 Poetic Justice

I forgot to look
where the sidewalk ends
so now I'm
one inch tall
and spread all over the road
I should've taken
the road not taken

Michael Shepherd

0221 Rain In May

It's May and it's raining
and I'm standing at the front door
as if I were the first rain itself
on Eden, blessing and blessed
before there could be
any division between the two,
rejoicing in the scent of rain
and green and singing gratitude

a boy again, rejoicing in the scent of rain on earth,
being, without thought,
all these things

Michael Shepherd

0222 Return To The Golden Age

We are like salmon, swimming back upstream:
leaping against waterfalls that thwart,
cut and bruised; but strong; our only dream
return to source; no thought save source of thought;

and in that fight, our iron age turns to bronze,
and we to heroes, in a war of soul,
as nature seeks the nature it had once;
though wholly lost, remembering the whole.

We silver salmon, sparkling as the sun
shines on our fierce and loving enterprise:
to rear our children where the world is one;
the source remembered, nature's greatest prize.

The golden age is ageless in its gleam
and we, like salmon, swimming back upstream.

Michael Shepherd

0223s O M M E + 9 0

Picasso
defined his art as

'une somme des destructions' -
'a sum of destructions' -

a fair definition, too, of
the art of war

Michael Shepherd

0226 Self-Hate, Self-Love

When did you cease to love, then hate, yourself?
What terrible event? How long ago?
What slight misunderstanding, view of self,
that led to fading love, then bitter hate?

What silent judgment of yourself, believed,
without a witness, umpire, counsel, friend?
Where was that childhood friend you loved, called 'God',
who knew you better than you knew yourself,
and understood your every thought and act?

What black and vicious weed grew secretly
while all your thoughts - you thought - were of the Good?
What demon whispered sweet and viciously?

Alas, no clue as yet. The only way,
to love that self that never went away.

Michael Shepherd

0227 Soap Opera

The Hebrew language
has such sacred power
that you shouldn't sing it
in the bath or shower.

This compassionate concession:
you're still allowed to hum
any music that you fancy
while you're soaping your, er, tum.

Though some would say with Mendelssohn -
that a 'song without words'
is the bathroom equivalent
of a **** without ****s

Michael Shepherd

0228 Streetwise

I was looking at this guy in the street
wishing I could walk with his swagger
as if he owned the street
when he caught me looking -
'you got a problem? ... '
so I thanked him for asking
and said yes
and explained
how I really wanted to express my manhood
without any suggestion of violence
or not respecting others' rights
but rather as a figure to be respected for myself...

and you know what
he just quietly walked away

seems he'd left his blade
stuck in the last guy
and was going back for it

Michael Shepherd

0230 Thanksoffering

As children, lost in worlds grown-ups forget,
pass by some anniversary day unmarked,
then, gently minded, run in childish shame
into the garden, there to seek and bring
some wilting flower in warm and loving hand;

or proffer favourite toy, without a thought
that such a gesture might be their own loss;
so I, who seek to bring you, Lord, some gift
in words for all in life I have not earned;

a childish present, offered to observe
the everlasting birthday of Your world,
with flower You made, and toy wrought by Your skills;

accept, I pray, as father does a child:
my thoughts were elsewhere; Your world me beguiled...

Michael Shepherd

0231 That Day

It's the day that everybody in the world remembers
because they can 't forget it:

The eighth day of the week;
the thirty-second day of the month;
the thirteenth month of the year;

The day that's not on the calendar,
Yet never off it in your mind;

The loneliest day of your life
which everyone shares;

The most unreal day
Yet most real;

The longest day
which hasn't ended yet;

The day whose hurt you want to forget
Yet want to remember in every detail
So that it can hurt more;

Yes, how can I forget -
it's the day you went away.

Michael Shepherd

0232 That Spider

I'm still waiting for an answer:
does that spider on the hedge
just do what spiders do;
or does (he, she, it) think?

Is it just a robot, programmed
by a pretty skilful God?
In which case you could say
God does its thinking for it
which is surely even more impressive
considering the number of spiders
and other species. Like us.

So where does that leave us?

On our knees
with a lot more questions.

And don't tell me it's evolution -
who made the laws of evolution, then?

Michael Shepherd

0233 The Blest

The authority on poetry pauses;
the world holds its breath. This head – greybeard,
skinhead – forehead already lined
with self-imposed responsibility for
the continuance of the known world,
applies itself. The word is,
discrimination. The fingers curl
like scalpel? like talons? around
the ballpoint of the turning world,
the keys that tap the dew of mercy
or beat the bitter rain of judgment on the poet's brain

somewhere in the world
a childish head bent
over a desk clutching
awkwardly a chewed ballpoint
with total absorption
summons the unwieldy letters
that one day will greet each other in
the boundless heart
and write the first great poem
of a new age beyond all
imagining save his or hers

nestled in her favourite secret place -
look, there she is, where
the sunlight catches the leaves at
the end of the garden, by the woods –
a girl, her head caught in a golden halo
of magic, reads a book in a land where
time and place have paused
to read with her

blest are they that give.
blest are they that receive.

Michael Shepherd

0234 The Book To The Reader

The book said:

I serve you. And
as you take from me, I
give myself to you; even
before you begin
to read me.

I note how gently
you pick me up from
where you laid me down,
pausing just before you touch me; and
I feel your mind surrendering
with relief all other matters which
weigh down the mind; as one
who sheds his clothes and dives
into cool, clear water on a sunny day

and when you begin to read me, I
feel your hands, not gripping me but
sensing the film of air between
your hands and my cover; the lovely
detachment of a shared love; you
respect me for my outer self as
you respect what I have to give

and when you put me down,
you put me down so tenderly,
first looking for the perfect place
to leave me; with, I sense,
an inward sigh of satisfaction, gratitude, but which
meets the sigh of parting; like
the parting pause of lovers

and, like lovers who have grown old together,
we put out of mind the passing sigh of
yet a different kind; that one of us one day
will be – not the first, that's easy – but
the second one to go... that's

the eternal test of love: loss to be measured
against gratitude, the final laying down
on the altar, of the book of life

all this I appreciate;
did you too know this? are we not
fortunate in each other, you and I?

said the book.

Michael Shepherd

0235 The Close

Sit with it like a nurse
at the hour of dusk
every few minutes
glancing over
and seeing its petals
closing, slowly
slowly,
vegetable muscles
we have no word
such awe
and when finally
closed
there's no knowing
whether tomorrow
they will
open

I wish
your death
had been like that

Michael Shepherd

0237 The Mind

Sometimes we curse the restlessness of mind;
forgetting it's God's gift, this restlessness:
for this will never cease until it find
that which it seeks: its still and perfect rest.

Without that restlessness, the angry man,
once angered, then would never leave that state;
an artist, end no better than began;
and our delusions never would abate.

The instability of human mind
more constant than its owner, ever roams
like bee, for nectar of a finer kind:
the rest, the peace, the love of God alone.

So love the constant mind's inconstancy;
so faithful in its search for unity.

Michael Shepherd

0238 The Moment

It's mealtime. You knock
on her door with just the right degree of respect
that behoves a parent to their child;
this she will always notice and require.

She looks up. Her eyes focus on you
but behind her eyes
her mind is still in
that other place.

There is magic in this room.
This room is the greatest place on earth
at this moment full of magic
which she will leave, but
never leave.

This is the moment when
your whole parental role
is in question. As your eyes meet,
acknowledge that magic. For
eternity watches you and her
in person. in person.

Michael Shepherd

0239 The Poem Said

The poem said

read me

then put aside the poem

and meet me between the words

Michael Shepherd

0240 The Poet And The Tree

Tenderly
under the tree's shade
the poet wrote;

wishing
that his poems
might have the grace
of the tree.

the tree heard
the poet's wish
and gave itself,
to share his book
leaf for leaf
for as long
as his poems lived

and so it was

Michael Shepherd

0241 The Poet Tree

Tenderly
with its soft leaves
the tree shaded the poet
as he wrote

and as its leaves fell
and the year turned
the tree wished
that it might be reborn
as a book of poems

and so it was

Michael Shepherd

0242 The Poet's Secret Love

even before

you write

the poem

you should love

the readers

Michael Shepherd

0243 The Second Coming

This first August week, the geraniums
are flowering their second flush:
they braved last winter, huddled like cabbage stalks
so as to be inconspicuous
to the meddlesome and sterile fingers of frost,

then burst into abundant life, as did the pelargoniums,
with a blatant generosity or hymn of praise as if
to prove some point we'd overlooked
about Creation.

Last week, dead-headed like a battlefield,
they fell back into themselves, exhausted,
as if they wanted a long summer holiday,
to last right through to autumn's fall;

only, this week, to bear a second coming:
yet changed: their petals paler, exquisite,
water-coloured like shells fresh from the waves,
or the most delicate painted porcelain or
Japanese flowers brushed on silk;

as if God had fallen in love with His own Creation,
seeing it good; and then
repainted it with second, subtler coat;
and given to the geraniums
a second chance to remind us of the love
we missed the first time round.

Michael Shepherd

0243 The Sonnet

Why is this sonnet form so dear to me?
this silent cloister of the singing heart
where I may be myself in sanctity
yet meet beloved strangers there in art;

a shape like some great arch across the world
where every word has music in its sound;
a place like prayer, inner maze uncurled
to find a pattern in that measured ground;

a conversation with tomorrow's friends
of all we know but seldom talk about;
a haven in a time that never ends;
a love that's now a whisper, now a shout;

- to final couplet, falling heaven-blest
to stillness, in that space where all things rest.

Michael Shepherd

0244 Trying To Write A Sonnet

It's a bit like a trip in a hot air balloon -
the hot air of thousands of years of
poets poetizing; all trying to float a little higher than the everyday,
just a little lower than the angels -
whoops, there's four lines gone already...

so, the first four lines or so say
where you're taking this trip from, hoping
to arrive somewhere quite new and unexpected
after fourteen lines, otherwise
why take the trip at all?

so, fire up the burner of ambition, whatever,
and we're into the second four lines now;
floating in an easy, silent, gently breeze-blown world,
a poet's paradise,
where the mind is stilled, the beauty of the landscape
almost beyond words (ha!) : all perspectives on the world
altered; but do we know now where we're heading?
It's a cool way of experiencing altered state
without illegal substances. Take out the notebook,
try to describe it, just in case
someone reads it; at least it might
encourage them to take the trip themselves.

And now we're into the last six lines
which, the pundits say, should introduce
some new insight, some viewpoint on the world;
you've had your chance; has the trip been worthwhile?
the balloon's gone higher, the landscape stretches out,
greener than a politician's promise...
Floating above the green fields, the concrete and the smog,
the unexpected words from the ground heard crystal clear -
have new thoughts, new visions, come, in this poet's paradise?

And now so soon, the final couplet - which the pundits of today
condemn as the valueless whistling in the dark,
the false claim to cultural certainties -
so beware: take all your humility in hand like

a doffed Elizabethan cap: will that final couplet be
the clunk-click of the safety belt's banality? The
front-door clack of Alexander Pope's front door,
before the scrape of sharpened pen, the mellow smell
of candlelight on paper that will ring the world
like thought-fired, savage Georgian hot-air balloon?
Or the clang of oven door in Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald?

For the poet, just fourteen lines: heaven and earth,
truth and lies, life and death, Icarus 's fate,
all these, for his few hours, depend upon it;
but I digress; I should have writ a sonnet..

Michael Shepherd

0244the Soul's Mirror

Do you wish to know what is your 'soul',
in all its glory, and its whole estate?
To know if it knows but a part, or All?
Its birth; its growth, its life - or lives; its fate?

Is it the watcher, even of itself?
Is it its own revealer, beyond words?
Can wise men tell us its true health and wealth?
If not, can we be sure that it exists?

For lack of witness to the soul's true bounds,
then, witness all the wonders of the world
of nature, beauty, law: then, what responds
in our self's mirror, is soul's map unfurled:

unbounded witness to its Maker; masked,
until for glorious proof of this it's asked!

Michael Shepherd

0245 The Sound Of The Flute

Listen to the sound of this reed-flute –
hear what it says. First, it laments
its banishment; its tearing away
from its home, its reed-bed. And
this alone, tears at the yearning heart
of all those whose heart feels far from home.
Listen to it.

Then behind its breathy air
is fire – the fire of love; that sound
which tells every love-story in the world,
of lovers, parted, yearning to be
together once more. This flute first
tells of separation; then of unity.
Listen to it.

Do not listen to this dangerous
flute, unless you wish to hear
the innermost secrets of your heart –
the parting and the separation,
the yearning, yearning, for return –
Dare you listen to this story of pain, of love?
Listen to it.

(freely taken from the Prologue to Book I of the Masnavi I Ma'navi
of Maulana Jalalu'din Muhammad Rumi, the founder Dervish)

Michael Shepherd

0245 The Vision

He read aloud, his dry and academic voice
so quivering with conviction which we did not share,
his offering for a footnote which did not require
this amiable discursion such as only he could love;

and as I sighed in inward kind despair,
and wondered when to break his scholar's drift -
his body turned to crystal; sculptured silver-gold
in detail; his familiar profile then became
by heavenly realignment, ideal, heroic, sublime;
his steady gaze, like some divine geometry,
focussed on the paper which before
had been a spiderweb of tedious, fond thought,
was now an arrow shot at truth itself
in love, and lifetime's care, and all humanity;
a god who had replaced a colleague's frame.

It is enough just to recall that moment's view;
no explanation; but the whole world made anew.

Michael Shepherd

0247 Tiptoeing Into Saywell Country

oh shitty kitty
what a pity

kitty's bitter
you're out of kitty litter

Michael Shepherd

0248 To A Poet I've Just Read

An ordinary life
can bring you
all the love
in the world
sooner or later

Michael Shepherd

0249 To Enjoy.

to enjoy the enjoyable. It seems a modest enough aim
and what we're meant to do by human nature, surely? and yet
that urge to set up the next scene, to move on - do you remember
those old films where the heroes were always saying to their side-kicks
'let's get outa here! ...' pioneers of the about-to-be - this moves us on;
so 'here' doesn't stand much chance of being enjoyed;
and nor does 'now'; and can we ever say
whether we enjoy things more or less than others
- or more or less than our parents or grandparents?

and here I remember my mother, who could recall
in vivid detail with a humbling gratitude, every minute
of some rare act of kindness done many years before -
an unexpected car trip to the park, a fresh baked cake,
those things which are small change to real neighbours
but which she so often gave, so rarely received;
(the old should never move, uproot, unless of gipsy nature;
friends are not so easy made among their settled peers) .

So how precious the nap of an afternoon, if properly enjoyed:
a few minutes, and the brain's wiped clean
of all the morning's bruising, weighed concerns.

The eyes open on the sight, today, of an angel
depicted by Piero della Francesca to console a duke
whose only son died as a youngster in his bloom;
and thus he has the likeness of that son, enjoying
eternity
in my back room. So instead of getting outa here,
a book of poetry idly picked up, with the phrase
'the world forgetting, by the world forgot'; and then,
gently overwhelmed by the lovely yearning
to visit that place where poetry enjoys itself
in unrevealed mysteries - mine, his, hers, yours, read, written -
and in being, simply to enjoy
simply being.

Michael Shepherd

0250 To Indian Poets

'O Lord, I am Your goldsmith on this earth'
sang Sonar, Maharashtra's poet of old,
who hammered out the ingots of pure truth
to poetry, that turns speech into gold;

who sought Yourself within himself to reach,
from heart of gold, that golden mind might shine;
to sing Your praise; and find Your All in each;
reflect your Word; make human thought divine -

yet knew himself but shapeless gold You shaped;
shaped in this life, by grace, as goldsmith born;
graced with the richest substance You create,
to live and speak some gleam of You reborn.

May we be worthy of this golden race
of poets: praise in all things, Your one grace.

(Narahari Sonar - Sonar means goldsmith, which was the family profession -
13th century goldsmith, poet and saint)

Michael Shepherd

0251 To Jerry Hughes At 75

Love is life. Life is love.
Everything I understand,
I understand only because
I love.

Everything is,
everything exists
only because
I love.

Everything is united by
love alone.

Love is God
and to die means
that I, a particle of love,
shall return to Love itself, whole and complete,
the eternal source of Love itself.

*

Did that fiery pacifist, that Pacific warrior,
that defender of the loving heart,
Jerry Hughes, write this? No,
it was Tolstoy, the writer of 'War and Peace', but
you two have much in common
and I salute you for everything
that you are and stand for.

Michael Shepherd

0252 To My Elder Brothers

I think of you more often nowadays, I don't know why;
how is it now with you?
And are you still somewhere – if you ever were -
that I might talk to you?

Will I one day meet you, talk with you,
and know just how it was?
Or do you, I wonder, ever think of me?
And if you do, do you regret
the fun we never had, the games we never played?

How different, I really wonder, would I be now,
if you were here - well, you'd be getting on now,
but there would be so much to look back on...
(and would our funerals maintain the order of our birth?)

What was it like? Did you have some choice,
that made you turn back when so nearly born?
You know that you were loved, with all the love
that Mum and Dad had poured into their wedding vows,
not so very long before; all the love
poured into each other and their lives...
was there some choice?

Did you hear something
within that cosy cave of flesh – Dad's angry voice, perhaps,
knowing that this was one event
he wasn't able to control? So that you turned back
halfway along the scary dark tunnel of love? That's not a thought
I care to have. But I fought Dad, and just about survived..
and loved him, too, when I was very young...

And Mum – do you, I wonder, think – or know - what it must have been
for her? The biggest tiny present
that she could have given to Dad
taken from them, twice?
Did you know, you second one,
that the first had turned back too?

And so, as some wry joke, I say, when people ask
as people do - meaning always something that's unsaid -
'Are you an only child? ' - I say,
all aggressive-defensive-like,
'I'm the youngest of three miscarriages...'
and remember - that I never knew you
but I miss you so.

Michael Shepherd

0256 What Are Those Kids Up To?

It's in a quiet corner to itself
away from the grandiose creations of the
Italian Renaissance gallery, so
you can stand undisturbed to wonder
just what's going on?

A small painting: in a peaceful
green and hilly summer countryside,
not a soul in sight except
these three – children? - their faces under
their hoodies seem known to each other
but shadowed, small, not asking to be
known to us; absorbed, maybe learning, and
they're enacting, in this remote spot,
the Crucifixion

Jesus hanging patiently up there, a bit like
a kid trying it out for himself to see
what it feels like (and there was a case, a kid
a few years back, on Hampstead Heath,
it was hushed up; no accomplices let on) :
Mary's quietly grieving, no big painterly
gestures there; she's huddled up, a girl
who's really learning about emotion as she
acts it out; John, lost in thinking as he
tries to meet in his boy's mind, the
dimension, the immensity.

It would be easier, if this were
a short story by some masterly
South American writer:
three kids who have been totally
unexposed to scriptures, find this
Bible book, read it as, like, science fiction,
decide to act it out. The master
of short stories would have to
work out the denouement:
did the kids, unobserved, pack up
and return to normal life, but

secretly transformed in inner mind?
Or did one die, as on Hampstead Heath,
the others never let on, and yet
never forget? And later, become...?

Or would a well-scripted film,
like 'Whistle down the Wind', make
a memorable, reasonable reality
of this, subtly balancing
fiction and emotion,
that children and their parents
would go to see together, even
buy the video?

It's such a private scene, this rehearsal
of the event so hard to imagine,
even if you try; as if you were
on a fast Italian train; saw it flash past
your window; not quite believe your eyes; then already
two kilometres on, wonder if you should have
pulled the communication cord with
that elegant Italian instruction
next to it? Or try to tell the guard
in your halting Italian, that you'd seen
the Crucifixion back there...he's Catholic,
you're crazy English...yet, it happens..
'miraculo... miraculo...!' the train's
many kilometres down the line by now;
the kids have maybe had enough to
last them a lifetime.. packed up, gone home..so
some kinda joke, Protestant English
taking the mickey out of
Catholic superstitious visions? Best say nothing,
it'll work itself out in God's good time
so to speak

We're sensible, down to earth people –
A prosaic answer, perhaps? Like,
this is a record of the moment in art
when rumours of the delicate
realism of that strange but skilful, detailed Flemish art
hit the idealist Italian scene, by

secondhand account? 'Yes,
they paint very carefully, real
young people in a real landscape,
acting out the greatest dramas –
you should try it...'

Or perhaps some quietly, intensely
devout patron might have said,
I'd like a small Crucifixion scene to take
around with me, or have upon the table
in front of me to inspire my poetry;
no need for dramatics, nor for labouring the point;
just paint the scene; take my own children
as the models; that will touch me more...

In the still silent backwater of this public gallery
the Crucifixion plays itself out in paint,
privately; you're reluctant
to leave it, to seek the tearoom; since,
no answers; only
questions

Michael Shepherd

0257 When The Heart Melts

sometimes,
some wonder times,
I read a poem here and
instantly want, because
of the love of poetry
or goodness, or truth, or beauty, or
whatever, to
live the life
of the poet who
wrote it

though

on reflection
that might not work out
or, I might not know
I'd exchanged lives!
but

at the moment I thought it
the thought was pure because
thanks to poetry
and the very human poet
our hearts were indeed
as one

(for Oscar Mireles)

Michael Shepherd

0258 While The Enamel Holds

I've just made a passable loaf:
the mixing bowl could almost
be called a Thanksgiving Bowl -
maybe, could start a fashion:

it's made, not of catering-trade steel
which spins nicely on the worktop
nor of plastic, but
of enamel, made about 1929 I guess,
by Kockums of Sweden, size 28 cms
it's clearly stamped -
Kockum's whose proud claim is that
'it lasts a lifetime' - if
you're fortunate enough to be able
to test it thus...

my mother used it to make cakes
- I can hear the scratch of sugar, butter, flour, right now;
sometimes the smell of lemon or vanilla too. And
for her, too, gratitude, I guess,
while she used it, hands and thoughts,
although she could not put it to
the Kockum's test...But the silvery marks
of the fork, or whisk, or careful knife that
left little for me to lick,
disappeared from its strong enamel

and now I use it to make bread
wondering how many of
the current users could verify
to Kockum's management
their proud claim

for it was only late in life that
my mother told me that this bowl
this small 28 cm bowl
was my first baby bath

so as I use it with these mixed emotions

mixed together in this mixing bowl
receptacle of love on love
and thanksgiving
I note with some reflection
that recently, one slight chip
in its circular bowl has appeared
due perhaps to carelessness, not in
the preparing but the washing-up...

and think I'd rather think
(you see - the baby turned out intellectual)
my life were rounded by my failures in my care
than the life of an enamel bowl
however guaranteed

perhaps we'll go together...
dust to dust, flour to flour,
flowers falling to nourish
the seeds of flowers to come

I must remember to ask
my executors to write Kockum's
and confirm their not so often
substantiated claim

Michael Shepherd

0259 Who Am I Not?

I started to write about how
I love you
but then the mind couldn't distinguish
which was I, or you, or love...

I started to write that our love was like
diamonds falling like raindrops in the sunlight
or raindrops falling like diamonds in the sunlight
but then the mind couldn't distinguish
which was rain, or diamonds, or sunlight, or love...

I started to write about
a star as bright as love itself,
watched as it appeared
in a boundless universe
but then the mind couldn't distinguish
which was the brilliant star, or boundless universe,
or I the watcher.

Michael Shepherd

0260 You Couldn'T Make It Up If You Tried..

Your box of brand-new football boots
this European season, where the diktat from Brussels sprouts hurhur,
will bear the helpful message
'Average contents: two'...

but when you've picked yourself off the floor
consider this: three boots in a box (great film title)
would be a box with not much inside left geddit hurhur;

but if you tried to sue the makers who only packed one
on that cautionary statement, you wouldn't
have a leg to stand on.

Michael Shepherd

0262 With A Hey And A Ho And An Oh What The Hell

in the spring
an old man's fancy
lightly turns to
thoughts of
re-evaluating the concept of
love

Michael Shepherd

0263 Voyeur

Had you known
that an old man was watching
would you have been
more grateful
for your youth?

Michael Shepherd

0264 Toothpaste Tubes And Toilet Seats

Why do I hate you? Let me count the ways...

Oh I could list them.... but no - not the trivialities
that drive us into impotent blind rage
committed daily by our partners, children, (parents?) , room-mates -
I, you, we, all have that list...

but I sing the joyous list of so-called 'minor' poets
who simply spell out, so uproariously
our petty human weaknesses,
domestic inadequacies, all the idiot joy
of living together while apart...

poets who'll never be on someone else's list
of 'ground-breaking' avant-garde great names
who with new neighbourings of words and sounds
expand humanity's poetic vision of the tears of things;
map out the undiscovered mind of years that are yet to be -

no - poets who, living all our lives for us,
confirm, with smiling banal truisms, this comedy,
our shared humanity; humans being humans;
wishing that we might change, but not too soon, not yet...

and as we smile and groan as poets with their skills
list that familiar daily stress and strain -
the still, mad music of humanity -
love arises.

Michael Shepherd

0265 Tongue

strange name for a pet yeah?
but that's what I call it
and it knows its name
so we get along OK
I keep it in its cage now
since it's a bit large and scary
for those who haven't met it
or know its owner
but I've given it all I can think of
to keep it amused in its cage
papers old books photos to keep its teeth sharp
we love each other to bits

but every now and again
I can't resist opening up the cage
and letting it out to be itself
wild untamed sometimes vicious irresponsible
I used to say naughty Tongue
who's a naughty boy then
but I felt such a hypocrite
I love to see it free
it's like when you have a pet greyhound
that's never seen a track, or raced
faster faster
with all the crowd shouting
to please itself and its master
oh we're both so proud of Tongue

I was given it when it and me we were very small
and people would smile and say
what a pretty Tongue then
it'll grow up to be a fine Tongue
you must be very fond of it and proud too
to my parents who smiled weakly
they encouraged me and Tongue little did they know then
little did they think
that small Tongues grow to be big Tongues
well isn't that the same with all pets
until you flush them down the john

to roam the sewers or sneak out at night
to leave them scratching the tiles
in some gas station restroom
and giving someone's bladder
one hell of a shock opening the door
they hoped we'd grow apart Tongue and I
and I'd go on to something quieter
tattoos piercings stuff
I wouldn't do that not ever to Tongue
though we had to leave home Tongue and I

so I go to open up the cage
and Tongue opens its big mouth
in a sorta snarly smile
gives me a quick glance like yes now
and then it's off
pleased as Punch, top speed,
sniffing where all the other tongues
have left their mark
sniffing friendly at children
scaring grown-ups all shouting at me
picking a fight with every other tongue it meets
so I can't help be proud of it
lifting its leg on the neighbours who tell the other neighbours
who don't speak to me now
oh we have a fine time Tongue and I

then after we've had a great workout
come back panting, flushed, victorious not a bit ashamed
maybe later
people who've stopped talking to me
say to each other so I'm told never me
he'll be sorry one day
Michael has such a malicious Tongue

Michael Shepherd

0266 This One's Only For Those Who Like It

Did Jesus, as a baby, cry?
For was there aught to cry for?
Or were His tears from God's own holy font,
knowing, what He was here for?

The story speaks of one
who's seldom seen in Christmas cribs –
one of the first of animals to make praise:
the inn's pet tabby cat, who, woken strangely
by the faintest sound – yet, not a mouse who stirred –
yawned, stretched, strolled slowly down to check
that in the stable, all was peace...

and it was peace, as peace was ever known.

What could a tabby do but purr?
The Christ Child woke; his lips seemed almost
to form some first and holy word;
gazed at the tabby cat, strange creature
of this strange new world; saw it was good;
and smiled.. and Mary, seeing this, and
hearing in that purr, Creation's praise,
leant down and with her hands, till then
pressed in her world-bearing humility -
and on the tabby's forehead
as some mark of christenings yet to come,
fingered the initial 'M' – not as some believe,
her name – though happy coincidence, but
the nearest human beings may come
to praising godly human, human God,
with perfect purr of peace. And so and ever since
the tabby bears upon its forehead that sacred
M. You didn't know? Well, take a look...

And you may wonder why
this god or goddess of the hearth
is not so honoured in the Christmas crib?
Not as some unimaginative people think,
in case it smothered inadvertently

the Christ Child – well, is that likely?
No – it was as peaceful messenger
outside the stable, marshalling in its holy role
the birds and animals who'd first picked up
even perhaps before the shepherds, that
cosmic sound: 'The stable's full right now – please form
an orderly queue' – and I'm sure
I needn't tell you that this orderly queue, of two by two,
followed the same order as they embarked
and later, disembarked, from – yes, you guessed it -
The Ark.

So this Christmas, if you still have your loved
but battered Noah's Ark
with all (well, mostly, now) its precious cargo –
line them up around the crib, in an orderly
queue of praise.

How quiet and peaceful,
now, they are!

Michael Shepherd

0268 The Happy Man

without a care

in the world

save for

care itself

Michael Shepherd

0269 The Age Of Iron - Kali Yuga

The Rajah's court, it's said, sat dumb with grief,
their sorrow that of those who truly love,
on February the eighteenth, and full moon,
three thousand, one-O-two years ere Christ's birth;

for wise men had foretold that ruthless span:
the golden age, the silver, and the bronze
had passed. The age of iron now began:
the last and worst of ages, where the gods
were to be lost to mind: Virtue herself
from four sound legs, reduced to merely one;
and all the ordered grace of human wealth
to be abused and squandered until gone...

The court sought mercy. Then this answer came:
'Give, and give, in full. Repeat God's name.'

Michael Shepherd

0270 Strange Day (For Dw)

You're walking down the street
in the usual way
when you catch someone's passing gaze
and just like that you suddenly hear
all their inner thoughts – non-stop,
all over the place: good ones, bad ones,
a cacophony of stuff, you wonder why
they don't go mad with it – you look at them,
they look quite normal, unconcerned...

then you look at someone else – the same thing happens;
what can you do for them? You can't start
to talk to everyone about their thoughts
all the time, you'd go mad yourself...
what makes them like this? What
are they all looking for that they have
to do all this thinking?

Suddenly you feel tremendously sorry
that they should be like this; you're
overwhelmed with -- compassion - for
the human race, that all this stuff
should get in the way of – what?

and as you walk, slower now,
trying to hide the flood of tears
and feeling some sort of holy idiot,
glorious and embarrassed at the same time,
the terrible chaos of those thoughts goes quiet, peaceful, silent, still,
and now you feel light and full of light,
and loving what you see in them
yes all of them,
as if you'd never felt any other way
and you're so sure of this, that you'll
always know how to tell them, some way, too
that this is how they really are

it's all so obvious

0271 Texting Poetry (Hamlet's Soliloquy)

2B /, not

? ? ?

take shit / effoff

YEAH! ! !

zzzzz

zzz nn?

? ! ? ! ? !

- - - - -

Michael Shepherd

0271 The Covering

It was not bright enough, not bright enough
to show itself to them, to all; to tempt
the world to bring it gifts; the coloured wool
would say to them look here, look here

it was not strong enough, not strong enough
to meet the heat, the cold; to venture
in the world's bright gifts; the coloured wool
would warm it in the cold, the cold

it was not safe enough, not safe enough
to shield itself from hurt; to live its life
amid the strong, the weak; the coloured wool
would hide it from the hurt, the hurt

there was not care enough, not care enough;
the wool was knotted; slipped and slid
around its centre there; the coloured wool
is knotted here and here and here

there is not time enough, not time enough
to free the wool; the wool it would cast off
from off its centre there; the coloured wool
that never was the need, the need

there were not words enough, not words enough
to free itself; itself which never had the need
to bind itself in coloured wools; it did not trust
the bright, the strong, the safe, the care, the time.

Michael Shepherd

0272 Somme Day

Looks like being a fine day; how red
the poppies in the sunlight.
The whistles blow.
From the now almost home of the slit trench
Over the Top, boys! This is it!

Soon back. The slit trench
is blessedly quieter now
in its six feet.

Michael Shepherd

0273 Something A Song Sing Cummings

if loveliness
says sweetly Yes
says who poets'
poetness?

worthwords,
spearshake,
art forsaken art
a now world,
with here you,
in our all,
whose heart?

if loveliness
says sweetly Yes
says who poets'
poetness?

Michael Shepherd

0274 Spam

Three to four more inches,
greater powers
to keep hard at it
for hours and hours,

wake the neighbours
with her moans,
buy now or she could
leave you for Mr Jones

think I'll wait,
see if she goes,
I much prefer
a night's repose

Michael Shepherd

0275 Reflection Of An Aged Poet

As if
e v e r y year
hadn't been
a bonus..

Michael Shepherd

0276 Savagery

When did you first meet savagery?
Not merely, the wounded heart,
the Christmas present that they never bought
although they knew you wanted that
and nothing, nothing else..
not merely when you knew
that for the first time, they'd lied to you..
not merely when the world first let you down,

but that savagery that tears at the heart,
when you realise for the first time
that to others – or at best, some others –
you're just nothing, nothing...

I guess the question is too painful for some; those
born into it; who wake to it within the house;
go to bed with it; are woken by it in the middle of the night;

some meet it at first school,
are schooled in it;
the first thing stolen from you
by those you thought your friends;
suddenly the world's not flat, and just
keep away from the edge and you'll be safe, but
spherical, with a horizon all around
beyond which the dragon's smoky breath
lurks, waiting to devour.

Only three generations or so since
our forefathers met savagery, were savage, fought for land,
musket in one hand, spade in the other;
only four generations since
their fathers were forced off some other land they thought their own;
only two generations since the working class
lived their whole life with savage poverty not far away;

when savagery's in short supply, there's always war;
but that's forewarned; there are no counsellors of battle
for then it's just too late. We're all to meet it; learn from it; but who

will dare to put it on the home, the school, agenda?
'There are those to whom you're not even
a victim or an enemy; you're just – nothing..'
Pope called it
the inhumanity of man to man.

Michael Shepherd

0277 Rumi The Sufi Puts You Straight

'It seems from time to time - if not always -
that all that stands between my present self,
and what I hope to be, is...just myself...'
'But you are not the trouble - you're the cure! '

'Well, that's all very fine; but I feel locked -
I just can't free myself from all my past;
the mind can't see escape from habit's grasp...'
'But you are not that lock; you are the key! '

'If only I were - but I won't name names -
I'm sure it would be easier for me
to be my self; at least, feel much more free...'
'Well, that's too bad - that's just not how it works!

Just see and love your self; and know this true:
there is no self more beautiful than you! '

Michael Shepherd

0278 Scenario

This disgusting August day
so hot and sticky that the sweat can't sweat,
your collar and cuffs a wet grey grime,
the sunlight graceless through the concrete cliffs,
the shade no shade but fetid oven,
the street signs almost too tired to communicate
and faces too tired to be human,

in a squalid room up there
best left undescribed
and a lifestyle defined by its trash can,
some young guy
is putting words together

which on a day like this but
a few years the other side of despair
and an uncaring world
will make you loosen your tie
with a jaunty Sinatra hand,
tip your hat back on your head, execute
a Gene Kelly sidestep on a dancing sidewalk,
swivel your hips like Fred Astaire,
turn and smile and grab her close,
step out step in step,
Broadway wrote it just for you.
life couldn't be better, here and now,
you're part of it, it's part of you,

it's all in the music.

Michael Shepherd

0279 Sc - Satanic Correctness

Satan's licence to condemn:

'There are more of US than THEM! '

Michael Shepherd

0281 A Mid-Atlantic Voice

It's said in Indian circles that the years of retirement are the time when men choose the occupation of their next life. So I'm sitting here on a fine Sunday in a quiet London suburb, the very day when the geraniums have decided that they and the sun are into a long-term relationship, sitting wondering whether I'd like to be an American poet next time around.

It seems on the surface very tempting: for economic survival, teaching creative writing in a medium-profile college where I guess they get on well with their students and discuss in a class of about twenty-one Pamela Anderson's implants and their removal in an urbane, witty, jokes-and-depth way; they live with a happy family in a happy house and rejoice - as poets, unacknowledged legislators of mankind - in the safety, the relaxed glory, of being typical Americans yet with full liberal license nay duty to criticise or reject or even fulminate against the American Way of Life.

They write as they live, a relaxed, underplayed (you should be reading this at that unhurried pace) free verse, (short lines if as Levine claims, his cat sits there and claws him if the line goes on too far, otherwise about four-five slight stresses to a line) as appropriate and becoming for a writer of sincerity and integrity; while under their urbane but sharp observation of natural detail and human fallibility and institutional absurdity and the life of the less fortunate, strong emotions are at play, expressed with a wry, broad-minded and life-affirming balance. They are at ease with themselves, and us.

They may run to rhyme for comic and children's verse but otherwise have surrendered the grand statement that clunk-clicks like a doorlock, with perfect rhyme and 'meter'; however that doesn't mean you can't easily tease from the occasional reference that they've read the greats. In depth. In fact they're radio-sharp on every event, every cultural reference, and their relaxed eye

and mind and decent heart mixes family, brand names, politics
and the afore-inspected Pamela Anderson
to make poems which aim at the very heart of America
in a very independent American way; in fact you could say
although of course I'm not the one to say this,
that they are the real conscience of America,
the heartland of the united state of mind, and with what -
if they used the phrase, 'feelgood factor' -
they would play with, using all the subtleties
of a fly-fisherman in the river of thought.
Even their reviews are enviable: 'a wildly refreshing,
necessary poet'; 'writes with an honest man's happy discontent';
'everything is touched by his hand'. They are appreciated.
They are that blessed species of human being - useful. And loved.

Yes, it's tempting to put in an order to the drive-by
at the cemetery gates
for a new life as American poet. Were it not
that we who have lived into a wariness of metaphysical speculation
must balance in the world of the unproven
the consideration that time-lapse between embodiments
may make all this a fruitless dream in a hideous world
of swords, not ploughshares; guns, not pens.

And that - Walt, Jack, Pablo, Hank -
would be another ball-game.

Michael Shepherd

0282 A Necessary Art

There's art history, and there's the history of art.
Art history, you can learn anywhere these days;
the history of art's some other, thrilling thing, a life-blood
pumping its heart intensely as if it were a matter
which it is of course, of life and death..

and who will tell you, except those who lived it through,
who will tell you - except perhaps old men;
while the students yawn, stop taking notes,
and wonder if the chick back there
is up for it?

Who will tell you that the truth is savage,
and the world hard earned,
and art, painting, poetry,
a matter of life and death?

Who will tell you, for instance, how after 1945,
when war ended, and 'peace'
was the threat of nuclear annihilation,
the great French artists, who had made
their various accommodations with the occupying power
brought out near ten years' work the world had never seen?
As if archaeologists, searching for the past,
had found instead, the future?
Picasso, Matisse, Leger, Braque - you know the names...

and how Picasso, who never allowed any other artist
to see him at his work, opened his Paris studio
to hordes of American servicemen? Interviewed
in the great French magazine, Cahiers d'Art, in I think
the late 1940s, he said his art was
'une somme des destructions' - a sum of destructions;

and Wallace Stevens, in a lecture at the Met, in 1951,
remembered the phrase, made it his text, and
told the post-war world that painting, as with poetry,
was man's great chance to seek his self - for each of us
to find out who we really are - in ways, we listening

were to assume, which might not always be heard in churches
or from philosophers' petty squabbings..

now today, this may seem a truism put out by slick PR
from auction houses; who can tell you
what it was like to hear that said?
and by so great a poet man?

There's art history, and the history of art.
Who will tell you that the truth is savage
and the world hard earned,
and art, painting, poetry,
a matter of life and death?

Michael Shepherd

0283 A Poet Condescends

It has been brought to my notice
that a review by you of
my latest book of writings
(the term 'poem' suggests
false expectations and is not therefore
used by me) claims that, I quote,
'this poetry is so obscure that
I reckon it's a hoax'...

Your comment is truer than
you yourself would appreciate.
My writing is indeed a hoax
in terms of your level of
understanding. I do not seek
easy paths to meaning, nor
the standard readymade language of the
avant-garde. So what I have
worked though, you have not,
and therefore, your understanding
however partial would be, in your
terms, a hoax.

Indeed, were you to write
an identical 'poem' to my writing,
it would indeed be a hoax –
it would not be the revisioning
of the cosmos, the semantic discourse
with language and communication itself,
the thoughtful and reasoned displacement
of prepositions and their too-long
accepted usage, the deep rejection of
all parameters of lazy thinking about
the imagined 'purpose' of poetry,
the study of Chinese orthography as preferred signifier,
in short, the 'depth' and 'breadth' –
although I of course reject the
accepted implications of those
out-dated metaphors for the
neurological Cartesian – which, in short,

'I' as presented in my writing
have voyaged.

However, in
the spirit of charity, I wish you well
in the deeper study of my writings,
and your 'poetry' magazine
should it continue its somewhat
faltering publication.

Besides, I'm a widely published
writer so yah boo sucks.

(Palinode to the above: everyone has the right to write obscure poetry...I'm
unfairly attributing to the poet the attitude of those who put themselves on a
pedestal and 'explain' why they're a genius...) (Though of course...)

Michael Shepherd

0284 A Poet To His Critic, Ok?

Look, everyone from birth to death, yeah? is
tryin' to express somethin', right? , that
goes beyond
what they've expressed before, OK? so
what we need isn't a ton of crit-shit, yeah? but
a little help and advice would be appreciated... right?

an' we don't ask for praise, OK? although
it's always nice, yeah? but
a little encouragement would be appreciated... right?

Michael Shepherd

0285 A Pretty Kettle Of Wish

Meltdown. A new kettle urgently required for the gas stove. Men love an excuse to wander around the Aladdin's cave of an ironmongers the older the better.

Shock-horror. Rattly, thin as they can get away with, and outrageously, the same price as technology's masterpieces of electric jug... long gone, the solid kettle which sits so friendly on the hob of open fire...

So it's off to the Oxfam thriftshop. a short prayer to the goddess of the hearth (Hestia, in case you wonder, poetically) – and lo and behold, abracadabra, hey presto –

a Designer Kettle in all its glory – solid, shining, copper-flashed-bottom, two-note whistle in two-tone brass, chromium-bright finish, ingenious spout-opener, handle in clever cool plastic, the whole a vision, part Futurist image fit for a painting, part evoking a Mussolini-era steel helmet, and a theft at the price.

The two-tone whistle packed up the first week despite prodding and poking its gleaming brass; the spout-lifter burned the fingers – I had to grow a long thumbnail to survive; the gleaming surface scratched when cleaned; the copper bottom crumbled off; the short spout made filling a teapot dangerous on two counts: the steam, and the aim, endangering the hands.

Was it designed by a woman

or a man? You've guessed it. Who's
the more practical?

The debatable poetic conclusion
of this poet: men go for
form; women go for content.

Michael Shepherd

0286 Aircrew Stopover

As you walk out of the palatial marble foyer
of the refurbished four-star hotel
where the 'front desk' is a healthy walk away
from the discreetly supervised, invisibly recorded entrance,
there they are lined up waiting for their transport –
the airline crew

immaculate, fresh, custom-fit navy uniforms,
neat to ad-sleek hair, those crisp, jaunty neck-scarves
which are forever 1950s and band-box-fresh New World,
they are lined up like some Sultan's Weekly Choice
for your inspection. Air Caribbean, can they be?
They line up in some informally formal
(isn't that the ideal for a reassuring cabin crew?)
hierarchy – at the front the quietly heroic captain,
(do firm shaved aftered jaws and distant eyes come with the job?)
then the other cockpit crew; and down the line
the cuties. The last 'dusky beauty' is jail-bait young..

so as you pass this line-up, dressed for duty but just waiting,
but so alert, fifteen pairs of bright eyes check you out professionally,
and you them...
you and these smart pleasers have shared the hotel overnight
and you never knew... And the fantasies of lust are here paraded –
do their eyes linger on you just that extra microsecond,
as if – can it be – they're thinking just the same thought as you?

So for a second, secure in the luxury of the untouchable,
you, they, look full-on, hungry, at each other... and as you walk away,
the barest, barest of backward glances transform the line
into the cast of a lustfilled airport inflight mile-high
discardable paperback
awaiting your wildest best-selling fantasies
on the crowded grubby train-ride home

Michael Shepherd

0287 Ars Poetica

A poem should be -

stop right there, chum. You've hit
the target in four words.

see it there? Like the
Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis,
like a simile,
flashing through the mind,
reshaping the heavens,

soaring merrily above
should-be-s and shouldn't-be-s

and - not even like I've said.
like nothing else
except itself

poetica my ars

a poet should be
a poem should be.

Michael Shepherd

0289 Bacchus, God Of Poetry And Wine

The famous Poet Laureate
of North Dakota State
has been suspended on full pay
just because one merry day
attending a writers' conference
at a restaurant, under the influence
of the Bacchic nectar he'd imbibed
there were incidents, yet undescribed.
But his students have Larry Woiwode's promise
to deal with their theses on Dylan Thomas
and other poets. Ironic, it must seem
to all those drunk with poetry, in Academe?

Michael Shepherd

0291 Before The Fall

All was quiet in the Garden of Eden;
the apple hung there, ripe, uneaten;
the serpent's voice remained unheard;
and not a fig leaf stirred.

Michael Shepherd

0293 Black, White, Gray, Color

Black and white are the magic of the drama
in the world of film;
gray, the poetry –
silver-gray of Paris; sunshine gray;
dark tragic gray of lovers' partings
on the symbolic bridge, while the Seine
flows inexorably, darkly past like life and love;

who needs Casablanca in full color?

But there's another gray –
the gray of exhaustion.
In 1945, a trip to London was a trip
to another race, of gray to unhealthy white
exhausted survivors, of the bombs
and doodlebugs and rockets,
of dead husbands, wives, sons or daughters,
broken marriages; bomb-shelter life drained of all emotion,
and almost too tired to welcome peace;
gray as the soot-encrusted buildings,
of smoke and London fog;
and Eliot's 'Waste Land' which we had read
before 1939 as a vision of the new poetry
was now in 1945 a vision in the mirror
of what we were, of how it was; the truth of life.

Paper – so dangerously brought across the sea in war
from Canada, in ships sharked by U-boats,
bombs, torpedoes, was reserved for
the War Effort – propaganda, booklets
portraying the British countryside, the villages, we were fighting for;
and the occasional Penguin book on brownish paper,
of the dazzling white and crisp black contours
of the Modern Architecture
in which we all, we happy all would live – this earth,
this realm, this England, this jewel set
in a silver sea, this demi-paradise...
Corbusier would house us in the sky,
reclining in our Breuer chairs,

Gropius would cosset us,
our outhouse would be Bauhaus.. in
a paradise of black and white and gray
as they and we should be

and then, as we continued to snip
our ration books, 'restrictions were lifted' on some things,
and from America, that magic land, where
possibility had not died, one could order through the post
the lavish world of the colour magazine; and such things as
'American Home' came like a rainbow zapping
through the letter-box –
like some art film, black and white and poetic gray which
suddenly printed in full Technicolor:
California sunned itself by long, low walls,
fierce cacti tamed in terracotta pots;
New England sparkled, spick and span,
white picket fences in the sunshine,
The Flag on every trim front lawn,
and at the door, She wall-to-walled her smile
which matched her frilled red-white gingham apron
and the 2.2 children looking up at her adoringly,
young Dad with his pipe in the background;
inside, the blue-white gingham table-cloth
and blue-white crockery zinged against
the buttercup yellow wall; the bright blue red green yellow
painted (do it yourself) or stencilled
Pennsylvania Dutch chairs and cupboards said,
life is good, listen to the
Hoagy Carmichael, Benny Goodman, Johnny Mercer
in the background, life is buoyant, look at all the colours,
optimism runs from every tap, it's in the air,
we'll think of a new word for it all – upbeat...

and the blood began to flow in our gray, exhausted cheeks:
there must be hope, for Over There, Over There,
yes, the Yanks were showing us, there was a magic land,
and it was here and now; Somewhere over The Rainbow
had arrived; Deanna Durbin sang, Nat crooned; there was, after all,
Something Worth Fighting For..

It's a moment in history some forget,

some will never know, some few remember,
the moments of the heart which escape
the compressions of the history books,
the moral fables of a hopedry world; but
live undaunted in the memory
in full, glorious color,
the moments of the heart.

Michael Shepherd

0294 Bless This Thy Child

Rose-pink, glowing, tiny hands and toes,
the magic of perfection brought to life -
if we can think beyond that self-same glow,
how may we help your passage through this life?

For 'education' seems too long a word
to speak too near your tiny ear just yet;
yet mother's, father's, total hopes and love
upon you - who are world itself - are set:

perhaps, like Hindu mothers, we should sing
a cradle song: 'You are that very Self';
and hope that we and you may lifelong bring
that magic of your birth to all life's wealth.

For who can start to show you who you are,
but those whose own self shines like guiding star?

Michael Shepherd

0296 Casting For A New Production

The second act went really well tonight,
pity it's so near the end of the run,
it's good enough for a West End transfer;
they're a good bunch when we work together

no thanks, not tonight old man –
got some TV ad lines to learn,
well it's good money for old rope...
seeyer chizmate

make-up off, stage door chat –
after a good perf., who wants to pub it,
hear yet again about how they triumphed together
in Romeo and Juliet god how many years ago
looking at them now – obscene..

*

When people used to tell me
how old people sat lost to the world
in a golden haze of memory,
I used to think
borING..! not me, not on your life...

but it's not quite like that:
a touch of unexpected thought
may clothe loved actors in a new-stitched garb –
before you took the stage and they
were cast by you as your supporting roles –

they too were Romeo and Juliet,
throwing the curtains open on their red-eyed dawn...
and you, not even yet the twinkle
in the future's eye...
they'd played the serving-maid, the page,
the jaunty clown, the flirt, the on-off, bright-eyed savagery -
the toilers in the burning, dusty sun,
the heroes in a life of war and peace,
had hopes you never knew or asked,

and then, invited you to join their cast...

these were such unknown people, just
as unimportant as you are seen as, now...
but loved, by those you never knew or thought of...

now, in your lean and slippered age
you can re-read their lines,
these fellow actors whom you thought
because they loved you, that you were their life...
now, as you re-write the stories of their lives,
cast them as beloved strangers

Michael Shepherd

0298 Cosmetic Surgery

She bought a new face
with all her riches;
then heard a good joke;
it left her in stitches.

Michael Shepherd

0299 Customs And Excise

The postman who never looks me in the face
(was it something the garlic said?)
has just delivered a parcel
heavy with history

and I'm left holding it and wondering
what I'm holding

In 1972 Marina Vlady, the film actress
who had found favour with the
appropriate authorities
was handed a suitcase at Moscow's
Sheremetevo Airport by the poet
Yeveny Yevtushenko; it contained
in its 15 kilograms of manuscript,
the lifeblood of 245 Russian poets

It took until 1993 for this to be published;
my –(how can I dare to call it my) –
Russian-red-covered,1078-page copy
of this great event, this blood transfusion of poetry,
entered Brooklyn Public Library
on November 12,1993
only to be removed from the shelf
on February 12,1996
scrawled 'mutilated' and stamped
'withdrawn from free use in
city cultural welfare institutions...'

all because some reader (some émigré
rediscovering his own 'mutilated' culture
'withdrawn from free use',
in the winter warmth of
Brooklyn Public Library?)
has pencilled an implied question or two by underlining
the translation of 'My Leafless Maple Tree'
by the universally beloved Sergey Yesenin
and offered an alternative word
in shaky English which looks more like Cyrillic,

in the comment 'he diverted himself with heavy drinking',
for the word 'diverted'...

now I notice also on this page 290
headed 'Children of the Golden Age'
a small dampness which could be a tear.

Michael Shepherd

0300 Dante On Mowing The Front Lawn

Let's not go into the matter of that
dark wood in our back garden which
shames us in the eyes of our
prissy neighbours (we call it
our 'poetic arbour', where
camelopards roam) -

mowing the lawn - that's all I can manage
between poetic stints:
it's hell when you put it off -
the wife, the pointed looks from
those prissy neighbours, the
pricks of social conscience, and
the guilt...oh the guilt...
sins of omission, all that stuff, I'm
in and out of the confession box...

then when I get round to it at last
it's purgatory - the grass is long,
gets in the rollers at the hub, it's
wet at the roots, tears when it should cut,
bald brown patches revealed -
the neighbours' children do their
'watch and pretend to hide their suppressed
laughter with a hand and a smirk' act... but

it's sheer (sheared?) paradise when
it's done and I can look the neighbours
in the eye and dare them to
make some pointed remark in
the guise of compliment - how I hate
this pre-modern irony, Juvenal started it...

all this to get a whiff of paradise...
and now it's just rained this morning and
the bloody grass looks unshaven
already... lawnmowing, it's just
one eternal round - look,
the neighbour's out already with his

swanky new machine; it's
a real human comedy

(thanks to Adam and The Poetry Society for the initial inspiration)

Michael Shepherd

0302 Design For Living

I believe with William Morris
that there should be nothing in the house
which is not known to be useful
or seen to be beautiful.

So I'm filing for divorce.

But which of us should go
first?

Michael Shepherd

0303 Diary Of A Poem

The Indians have a word for it, of course -
'sphota' - not too unlike our 'photo-flash' -
meaning, an explosion in consciousness:
as you recognise it in a flash, it's not yet words,
barely an idea; just that curious urge, for it to be;

You try to get it down - the first verse is a mess,
just like your bedroom as you try to pack
a weekend case that covers everything -
but you really need it, all the same, to get to second base.

You don't know where it's going, but
your intentions are - the best;
and if Dame Fortune smiles
(a clichayed phrase, but who else can you blame?)
there comes that moment when

some mechanism in the mind
slips into auto-pilot: and you don't know
whether the words which now are lining up
are true or untrue; inspired poetry, or the mind's
rubbish-bin; just like a radio that's not been tuned;
but better something, as you think,
than nothing... then, that joy-ride stops,
as if you'd floated in some breeze-blown, fine hot-air balloon
and the moment that your feet touched solid ground,
the memory of the ride itself is gone...

Better sleep on it; you'll be
a slightly different person in the morning:
you may be grateful; groan; or get quite fond of it.

It's all in the lap-top of the gods.

Michael Shepherd

0304 Drawing Space

See this whitish sheet - now mellowing to a shade
of precious ivory - gently revealing in the finest lines of silver-point
two lovers whose whole air of innocence
makes them angelic, as if their ardent gaze
joined souls not bodies;
though those bodies, beautiful, transparent,
she all gauze, her dress
moved by the lightest breath of air as if it would
return her to the air; her breasts, to innocence itself;
he, every muscle of proud chest under pleated jerkin
joining his dancing legs to ardent eyes
consumed in adoration for what he barely dares,
her beauty and its innocence

this silver-point might be from Botticelli, or
a well-trained student in the master's mind
glancing over and across the studio
at what the master, the magician,
conjures out of space and out of mind;

the then white vacant sheet
undifferentiated space as if
it were Creation waiting the command
to be itself;
there's magic still to come, and space itself
yet to be brought alive. See these lines;
they are not bounding bodies, but the space itself;
on one side of this line, the air alive with happening that's invisible,
the other side, her space we call her body;
all her life enclosed in what the artist sees -
awakening of love; see in the space
between her outstretched hand and his,
about to join with lightest touch in dance,
- electricity - before mankind knew such a thing or named;
and in this space, there's love divine.

and see the space between their eyes: why,
in that space, their lives, the present, past, the future;
their minds, their hearts, their souls

hover all expressed and yet invisible;

from emptiness the artist has found space;
from space, from line, drawn as the first time, love.

Michael Shepherd

0305 Dylan (1)

the motorcycle leans
the motorcycle swerves
...the motorcycle just don't
give a damn
about anything

(Robert Zimmerman,1960)

Michael Shepherd

0305 Dylan (2)

I search the depths of my soul for an answer
but there is no answer
because there is no question
and there is no time

(Robert Zimmerman,1960)

Michael Shepherd

0307 Dylan (3)

I have to quit smoking
but I can't quit smoking
I love to smoke
almost as much
as I love to love

(Robert Zimmerman,1960)

Michael Shepherd

0308 Dylan (4)

sholam alechem all you mothers
and don't think your son is so great
if you could only see him tonite -
like an animal
an ugly, vibrating, menstrating dirty little animal
for that is all he is anyway!
he isn't as hip and cool as you think he is
or as he is supposed to be
'hee hee hee'
'look at me, ma, I'm stoned'
get the hell out of my life
before I tell your mother on you

Dylanism

(Robert Zimmerman, 1960)

Michael Shepherd

0309 Eeyore's View Of The State Of The Nation

If you build a great nation
on the statement
'In God we trust'
and then proceed
to deny that in your actions,
in your thinking,
you start to believe in
the primacy of materialism, physical substance
like, say, drugs

and subtly
minds adapt to the idea
that drugs solve all –
to aid backward children,
to quieten teenagers,
to make prisoners docile,
to make mad people docile,
to keep soldiers brave,
to bomb your enemies,
to stimulate sex life,
to keep people 'happy'
or if not happy, then outasite,
and if they're down,
get them up, and
if they're up, get them down
and if they're dying,
make it peaceful

well it works,
doesn't it?
the only side-effects
which we don't look into
very carefully
are to
humanity and stuff

but no-one asks me
said Eeyore

0311 Eternal Justice

I was just staggering in the gate
with two heavy bags
from an exhausting week's conference
when the conman and his accomplice
got me right at my own front door –
I'm mortified by the memory –

they could replace my missing roof tiles
in a moment, look, the ladder's
already up there, the accomplice
is halfway up, now he's already
on the roof in his plimsolls, now he's
shaking the chimney-stack, look, it's loose
.... no cash? oh,
they'd drive me to the nearest cash-point...
well, you can guess the rest –
anything for a quiet life...

as I dozed off that evening,
flushed with anger, blushed with stupidity,
too tired to crawl to bed,
realizing that conmen have
all the skills of hypnotists,
enlightenment struck:

the next morning, I would wake up
150 dollars the poorer but morning-fresh;
'they' would wake up with the urgent need
to seek another mug each day.

And I realised that sublime, ruthless,
beautiful, tragic, comic, eternal justice
is - to be – to live it through as -
just as we are; right now...

heroes or victims of ourself

Michael Shepherd

0312 Even The Best May Stumble

Let's suppose
you've bought or blagged
an invite to a buzzy West End party
after the football game, where
you'll 'mingle with the stars'

and when you get there, all glammed up
and wearing your Saturday best,
you glimpse, beyond a velvet, guarded rope,
the 'stars' you just won't mingle with –

those 'celebs' with not too much to do
except to party and be photographed,
'stars' who're hoping thus to burn the brighter
in the starry glitter of their combined glow...

while the hungry media, mingling in symbiosis,
poised to photograph,
smooze and click to elevate
these passing comets into myth

* * *

But every now and then
onto the stage of public wild acclaim
strolls the myth itself, the archetypal
Aristotelian hero –

not quite the Job or Oedipus whom
the gods single out for test, with all their force;
but the classic hero of the public stage
with that one fatal flaw, and
without the Stoic wisdom that
all life's a lesson to be learned, who
finally puts a magic foot wrong; and then
fate gives the golden best the final boot...

Shakespeare missed out, so it seems, on sport,
apart from the Royal tennis court,

otherwise he might have seen
Othello, as a footballer,
Desdemona his other half, his god-given, wonder-working skill;
Iago the tempter whispering with sex and booze around
the light and lustre of our hero's life he drove himself to kill
so killed his very self

'To wilful men
the injuries that they themselves procure
must be their schoolmasters'...
Shakespeare would have recognised him
for what he was: earth-striding idol, feet of golden clay.

Yet those who knew him, as Cordelia did King Lear,
loved him
beyond all tragedy. Yes, he was more than that -
we have the footage of that golden foot.

Michael Shepherd

0313 Every Poem's An Adventure

Reader, if it's the first time that you hit
this site, stretching out like a landscape
as far as the mind may reach – just, we ask,
remember –
every poem's an adventure;

- not, perhaps, for you, scrolling fast in case there's
something better round the corner -
but for these writers – Frost-sparkling, or first-born ...

tune in if you must, to those
discerning poet-critics, poet-teachers, with
their 'one of his least successful'...
'in this early work, she has not as yet...'
'marks the slow falling-away of the early promise...'
those distant, serious, inconsequential voices like
twirling a radio dial across the stations –
but remember –
every poem's an adventure;

all we here, know so well, that
one day we set down what there was to say
and then, we realise - without a shape to it...;
another day, some passing angel touches it
and like some shake of the kaleidoscope,
there it is in perfect form,
touched with immortality...

we – we're not fooled; they're failures in some degree, never
quite what we hoped of them;
but we don't delete them, for
they're our children, and we love them;
we've learned from bearing, rearing, shaping them;
and when they leave home and roam around the world,
someone may love a part or all of them...
they're here because, even if they're
'hackneyed, trite, unambitious, banal'
to those that shit in judgement on your work...yet

every poem's an adventure.

Michael Shepherd

0314 Executive Decision

'Look! now briefly, mortal living head -
As severed from thy now so lifeless limbs
In brief and, who knows, truthful, godly view,
So solemn, oncely, rare - that fleshly instrument
That thou hath used, misused...
And learn this last of life's live lessons, quick and dread
In these few seconds of a living death...'

So Dean John Donne might have wrung out
that detail, had he known it – tolled
his solemn, tortured, feargod, ringing knell
- had he but known this 'metaphysical' quaint fact:

that, when the executioner's sharp axeblood
slices through your neck with such finality,
the head maintains its human faculties
for eight brief seconds after body falls;

the executioner, it's said, with great formality, then
takes hold that still-life head by its warm hair,
and turns it round with all solemnity,
to gaze its last repentance or regret
upon its frail accomplice on life's way;
the gathered audience awed to silent, ice-cold heart..
last freeze-frame photo of an undeveloped film.

This solemn final courtesy of soul to soul
I'll leave to metaphysicals, to speak life whole.

Michael Shepherd

0316 Faith - For You Who Asked

Yes, there is a stage
and yes, there are actors;
a script to engage;
an experienced director..

Yes, indeed, I'll pray for you
to the One they say best deems
those matters which may bless our soul
however strange they seem;

Oh yes, I will pray for you,
as much as human can;
but, add this wish from me for you,
which is more personal:

In course of time – who knows how long? –
may you look back and say,
'Although it seemed ungodly cruel,
it turned out well for me..'

Yes, there is a stage
and yes, there are actors;
a script to engage;
an experienced director.

Michael Shepherd

0317 Fingertip To Fingertip, A Human Net

i think it's really wonderful
that with all the million poems on this net
people find their way to read what each of us has read
or written.

it's like a shining human net around the world -
fingertip to fingertip in space
all connected by the love of poetry
and the poetry of love.

so instead of moping and chewing our pencils,
feeling pathetic and unread
we can dedicate all our poems to all those real people who - yes! -
actually read them
and say
It's you I wrote them for - and you - and you-
and now I know you're there
I'll write some better ones for you in time,
that what it's all about...

and if I'm silent for a time
working on something that's good enough for you,
remember -

love, love, love

Michael Shepherd

0318 Five

Five fingers touching
in the warmth of night;
five toes walking you
when your back feels tight;
five senses yearning
in the half-filled bed;
five times memory
both alive and dead.

Michael Shepherd

0319 For Jake - A Sloppigram

Some days I love crap sentiment
'cause I know there's real sentiment under there

Some days I love silly pomes
'cause I know it takes a happy man to be silly

Some days I love rude messages
'cause they're a way of not saying loving, embarrassing things
about special people

Hi Jake

Michael Shepherd

0320 Forget Me? Not!

To see the greatness of Creation
- greater than science, greater than religion –
and perhaps to see in mind, perhaps to praise,
look to the smallest things.

Even before the mustard-seed of faith
today I choose - the forget-me-not, and its thoughtful seeds. It
has this habit of, each year, colonising
a different area of the garden; and I wonder,

what is its essential character? Is it
like that prim, fussy, difficult elder relative, for whom
you've carefully arranged a day out somewhere
then when you tell her as a nice surprise she says
oh I've been there, as if you're just thoughtless and
that puts the kybosh on it?

or like some energetic missionary – plant the seed
of faith, then move on fast, don't wait
to see whether it's taken root, move on, there's
so much more to do, so many souls...

or like some far-eyed, romantic Wild West pioneer,
who looks into the glory of the setting sun
and pushes onward, ever onward,
to unknown splendours under a Western sun
until one day, there's blue beyond the furthest ridge?

or, like a child with sparkling eyes, mischievous, laughing,
saying, let's play hide-and-peek, now close your eyes
and count to ten, no I'm not there, or there, or there,
I'm here, and here, and here...

or is it Creation's memory of itself, itself,
reduced by some wise cosmic greatness
of the miracle of miniaturisation
to a still small voice, so small
that only the eye can hear it,
blue as an angel's clear blue mind,

saying, forget Me not

(for Scarlett, who added to the fun)

Michael Shepherd

0321 From A Drop, Of Gasolene

Did you notice
as you put the nozzle back in place
after filling your tank today,
a drop, of oil, of gasoline, of petrol
fell on the stained and stony ground?

did you hear – no, surely it couldn't be –
the faintest sound then, almost
as if it came from somewhere on that ground?

It was my voice.

Millions, billions of years ago
I was a tree
reaching upward from the blessing of the soil
to the blessing of the sun
in silent worship of our nature
and the God who planned it thus

I grew, spread my branches wide in gratitude,
sang my silent song of praise,
grew old and died, with a sigh heard through the forest,
not of regret but of a life well lived
falling into God's peace;
knowing that in His divine mercy
I had laid down my life
for future generations, in the perfection
of the cycle of all Creation.

The years passed; and mankind
in its desire to move further, faster, more often, cheaply, then
with the help of God's mind in mankind's own mind, dreamed up
the automobile; and needed then its combustible life-blood,
this miracle liquid made before man named miracles

so as I lie, a dropp of gasoline catching the sun
or the harsh lights of gas-station forecourt
know this: my love for you

0322 Globetrotting Snails

a great title for a rock group but
from this week, fact or at least
truthish. species have been found
to travel many thousands of miles
across land and sea
and don't you wonder how and
aren't you that little bit envious?
nature's aerial hitchhiker-backpacker-caravanner
wow

seems they (they? how did the word
get around? snail-mail?)
learned (learned?) this trick
of sneaking into the wing-feathers
of migrating birds. and anyway the birds in this
symbiotic relationship are thought
to tuck them in there (which came first,
the chicken or the snail?) as an
inflight snack, though evidently
missing one or two who

when they get to the dropping-zone
(more questions – how do they know? a
well-developed sense of smell?)
paraglide, dismount, unload without a word
of thanks – you know the type – and make
themselves at home, though in an
eliot-esque way, they arrive with what
they have not left, and in a garden
outside time, and in a place
they've never left behind... and we'll just never know
whether it was wanderlust or simply
Intelligent Design

it's as simple, wise, and beautiful
as any poet might imagine and
beats surrealism at its own game
or as the critics put it, extends
the parameters of vision. though

perhaps globetrotting is
a terminological inexactitude...

snailboarding?

Michael Shepherd

0323 God Removes In Mysteriousways

Knock at door.

Is this 34c Warren Hastings Court?

(Shout from upstairs)

Tell him we don't want no doorsteppers today, Ali.

I don't think you understand, Sir. My services are part of the removal package.

Well bless me. I didn't see that in the small print.

Good, just kneel here on this bubble-wrap, my son. Would you like me to pray for peace in your home, Sir?

Perhaps later when the baby stops screaming?

How about blessing your bed for a fruitful sex life?

We've got six kids, thanks, as you can hear.

The toilet then, for a healthy life?

It's pretty busy, the kids are rather upset at moving.

The kitchen then?

Aliya doesn't really like men in the kitchen.. God, is that the time already? We're not ready for the van..

Remember, God's peace is beyond time, my son. That's why I'm here. Perhaps it would be better if I visited you in your new home? May I take the address, or perhaps ride with you in the van?

It's 10 Allahabad Villas, Southall.. but I think it's better not – But thanks for coming. It's the first time we've met anyone from your religion, Inshallah...it could be a good omen for peace..

**! ! ? ? ?

We're Moslems despite the English surname which got us in...didn't they tell you?

Oh I'm so sorry sir, it must be a computer error...

Oh no harm done, I guess. Allah be with you..

And with you, my son... first time for me, too..

Michael Shepherd

0325 Hip Hippie Hooray

All those 'Sixties hippies
are in their sixties now (..man) -
hope they ain't forgotten
life is just a wow (..man) ...

Michael Shepherd

0328 Holy Shit

jeez I thought here's
this lady I have the greatest
respect for and she
comes out with this holy crap
and holy shit stuff

so yesterday I was
walking through the
winter-wet tufted grass
of the field they keep
the cows in this year
avoiding the cowpatties
the outside tap for
gumboots is frozen

and stopped and looked at one
fresh and steaming
the way you do
and the cow down the field
looked at me with that
not very enquiring look
they have but today
it came across as So?

and I remembered
the milk that morning which
had that layer of extra
spring cream
and the roast beef
smell when the kitchen
door's open on a
spring day and it all
linked up later

as I got home and sat
contemplating
the bathroom fittings
as one does and
thought

holy shit yeah
the lady's right

(for Mary and PoHo)

Michael Shepherd

0329 Holy Shit (2)

everything in Creation
is as holy as its Creator
how could it be otherwise?

the cow
has been the centre
of the Vedic culture
these last few thousand years
fed with love
and yielding milk and calves

and cowpatties
which when dried
provide the fuel which
the saints say is the best
for use as the domestic fire

of food it is said
the first part supports the body
and the second part the soul
while the third part falls
to support the earth

Wordsworth found immortality
amid the daffodils
but see here in the next field –
the cows are grazing as peacefully
as poets

poets who see the world
in awe and wonder
as the supreme machine
whose every part
is wholly of the whole

mind how you tread
this ground is holy

0330 How Christianity Came To Britain

bright banquet-hall in darkest night -
swallow flies in, through, out -
from where, to where?

Michael Shepherd

0331 How To Wait Doggedly

I've never seen him just like this before.

Crouched at the entrance to the largest run,
the burrowed-out soil in front of it
ground to dust by many eager legs
hopping, skipping out of the dark warren -
he's totally silent, totally still. It's awesome.
This isn't the puppy who goes wild at rabbits
in a frenzy of excitement, wet nose intoxicated by
a thousand trails of scent, scattering
white tails into burrows, barking wildly
(are they friends or enemies, in this joy?)
at the sheer excitement of the chase,
puppy paradise; but now..
this is serious stuff.

at first sight, you could think he's resting, he's so still;
his back legs haunched down under him, looking
like the sphinx itself, immobile, waiting for the question
it's waited for through thousands of wise years;
may only answer in this sacred silence;
his nose and head and throat almost flat upon the ground
(this is no time for his 'Tailwaggers' League' identity disc to rattle)
as if at the epicentre of
some invisible geometry of scent and earth-echoed sound,
his ears poised, half-lifted on instant muscles;

he's the image of relaxation, at first sight:
but a stillness packed with potential energy
wound as ready on electric nerves as in a spring;
a silence so intense it's thrilling,
full of alertness; a silence right inside his head
that teaches silence, stillness: he's carrying
no sense of future: he's living a continuous present,
waiting for the senses to tell him something.
There's nothing else in the world to do, right now.

A fox terrier flat on the ground at the entrance
to a mere rabbit-hole; we've never found a foxhole,

we two; should I apologise to him? If we had,
he'd be in there like a flash; sheer life-or-death ferocity;
but here, nevertheless, it's serious stuff;
this is what thousands of years of dog
have made him for; that, and what he and man
have learned together from each other; bred in him;
while this present man gazes awestruck at the species
in its perfection of action, action contained in stillness,
stillness and silence containing all the senses,
all contained in knowledge, awaiting, perfect, pure,
what the cosmos will reveal in its good time.

Has my dog just shown me, taught me,
how a poet should await a poem?

Michael Shepherd

0332 How Were They To Know?

Yes, how were they to know,
searching in the heat of forenoon dunes,
those high hills of sand
where once the forests grew,
now a rhythm of burnt sunned, cool shadowed, mock horizons,
- they, searching for the camel which had strayed -

and finding there, a man sitting still, cross-legged
in the sand upon a small strip
of faded coloured carpet,
palm of hand crossed in palm of hand,
and in the palm of his upraised right hand,
one grain of sand

and who, as they approached,
did not shift his gaze from that one grain;
and yet they sensed that he sensed them;
better let him be, he knows what he's about,
or if he's mad, at least he's quietly purposeful...

how were they to know
that as he gazed, the universe he saw
in that one grain of sand then
grew inside of him? till it filled itself,
like a sand-clock, as the last grain
falls from the upper to
the lower, and all is still again
as measured time stops still
amid the sands of time?

how were they to know
as that small figure against the desert sand
his cloak still burning to the touch,
returned to the oasis, as the red-hot sun
sank below the dramatic shadow of the furthest dune,

and later, sitting by the green palms and papyrus reeds,
the camels head down, humped around the welcome pool,
one child, then many children,

then grown men, asked him their questions;
and the answers, as the night folded in
below more stars than anyone could count,
drew the circle of cross-legged silent listeners
- occasionally, urgent voiced with a lifetime's pressing question -
as if some grain of sand became in their mind too
totality; the universe.

Michael Shepherd

0333 Hungry For Romance

Mills and Boon, Mills and Boon,
ravish me - but not too soon...
Boon and Mills, Boon and Mills,
steam my specs with bedtime thrills...

(M&B - publishers of bodice-ripper romance, with strict rules for their writers)

Michael Shepherd

0334 In Vino Veritas, In Birra Bonitas: In Praise Of Grape And Hop

When heavy hangs the soul - if soul there be
in such a state of abject loneliness -
and all Creation's steeped in misery
and all bad influences join life's mess,

and melancholy blackens; hope recedes;
faith's gone; and love and charity lie hid;
and nothing seems good for the mind to heed,
no action springs to mind to lift the lid
that sits, black monster, on the love of truth,
of goodness, beauty - all this gone from hence;

then - wine, that warms the heart of man, must serve;
and hops, that give of God's benevolence:
and at the measured glass's end - God bless -
the possibility of happiness...

Michael Shepherd

0335 Indian File

Like a set of graded kitchen pans
the newsagent's children,
back from school, file into the tiny corner shop,
and all so small, this neat, obedient, clean set,
that no-one needed lift the counter flap.

And in a moment's flash of truth, or sentiment,
I saw the beauty of the human race.

Michael Shepherd

0336 Japanese Silk Print

The shy young girl
can't hide her shining eyes
this Spring.

Michael Shepherd

0337just A Moment

The usual disgusting scene:
the sneezes coming one after the other
so no fun enjoying the one;
the coughs like an iron file along the lung,
coughs that just weren't going anywhere;
and as for the nose-blowing stuff -
beats any horror film in Sensurround...

and in the midst of all this carefully selected
personal misery.

a moment of perfection.

there it was, full on,
looking one straight in the eye:
perfection.
and because it was perfect
all you could do was look at it and register
and because it was perfect,
it was peaceful
and because it was peaceful it was still
and because it was still it wasn't going to go away

and all you could do was, to just be 'yes! '

and because perfection is - well, perfect -
there has to be Mr Other
saying in best TV style
'So that's it, huh? Just that? And I'm supposed to get the message?
Do me a favour...'

but it hadn't gone away.

Well that's how it was this afternoon.
You get the evidence without the commentary.
The back-up.
The instruction book in five not-quite languages.
The friend who's been there.
Or some less extreme scenario.

But no. That's it.
And you know you won't forget it.

Call you later.

Michael Shepherd

0338 Just Couldn'T Hack It

A hard writing I had of it;
the words clumsy, the sense banal...

escaping from rhyme isn't easy;
half a lifetime to work up to it
then like skirt length, that's it,
the line's short this season,
and rhyme is, so, like, so last year...

(and must be insincere
if you have to work at it
or even want to)

so there I was in the
midst of getting the
hang of cutting the line at the
best place for the
sense, to avoid the
artificial on the
one hand and the
banal on the
other -the
art that conceals the
art -

and scenting euphony, when suddenly -
a crash - and in there lumbered - 'woodenly'...

I twigged instantly that it wouldn't
go without a struggle;
and called in Suddenly for questioning -
had they some sort of pact in the recesses of my mind -
kissin' cousins, blood brothers, partners in rhyme?

Suddenly denied this vigorously -
never been asked such a question before,
wouldn't want to associate etc.;
a word only used by theatre critics...

So I sighed and threw out my neatly chopped prose,
spontaneity, jokes, and anything goes;
and returned to meaningful old-fashioned verse
so woodenly crafted - well, poets have done worse.

Michael Shepherd

0339: 21 Keywords To A Life

War under a summer sun
and the soldier's life now a sleep, beautiful
in, we may hope, the angel kiss
of death, friend of heroic human nature.

We who live on may count the loss: girl,
home and love, hope and music,
sex; rain; all the school
of life. He, not.

(This 'poem' contains the 21 most hit key words on this site - see poet page.)

Michael Shepherd

0340 Leaping From The Psychiatrist's Couch

They warned me that deafness
would turn me in on myself,
make me suspicious and sour...

but since my psycho called me
'a bunch of new roses' today
I feel just great. There's nothing like
a compliment from an expert
to cure depression. What a poetic mind!

Michael Shepherd

0342 Like Me, Like You

Landing airplanes form a high queue;
Busy ants all form a low queue;
Salespersons should pretend they like you;
But only poets can form a haiku.

Michael Shepherd

0343 Love Poem

Because I love you so,

sometimes it's loving someone;
sometimes it's loving anyone;
sometimes it's loving everyone;
sometimes it's loving no-one.

How can I know,
when I love you so?

Michael Shepherd

0345 Lyric.1.

What in the lovely gaining, loves you?
What does the bird that's flying, bring?
What in the lovely gaining, fills you?
What does the flying-bird sing?

What in the lovely losing, joys you?
What flies as bird on wing?
What lost in losing, frees you?
What does the losing-bird bring?

Michael Shepherd

0348 Me, Royalty And Fame

I didn't wave anything at the Queen
when I saw her leaving an official reception
sitting bolt upright in the car,
still, pale, exhausted,
on her way to the next engagement
of the five or so that day.

I didn't say much to the Queen Mum
when presented to her -
some people chat with royalty when introduced
like old friends; others, even the most anti-monarchical
turn to idiot jelly. But
she sure was good in dealing with it.
A pro to her fingertips.

I didn't say anything to Prince Charles
when he opened an exhibition
that he and I had an interest in;
but I'm proud to say we pushed
the greatest man in the room
into the receiving line
which otherwise he would not have sought.

I didn't say anything to Princess Diana
when at a reception I saw she'd spotted
the big red badge I'd been given and wore proudly -
'One of the nice things about New York';
I felt a fraud and slunk away.

I didn't say anything to the Prime Minister
when he invited me for tea -
the invitation got mislaid.

I didn't say anything to John and Yoko
when I met them at her first art exhibition -
since just looking is what art is for.

I didn't say anything to the Rolling Stones
when there they were sitting in a line

in the sunlight on the wall outside the National Gallery
before they were screaming-famous.

I didn't say much to Andy Warhol
since my question seemed to knock him backwards -
he leaned back, shrugged and said weakly
'It seemed a good idea at the time...'
then his minders hustled him on through the Andy Andy.

I didn't say much to Gloria Swanson
when some upmarket con unexpectedly
put me on the telephone to her
about her sculpture.

I didn't say anything to Marianne Faithfull
when she came in to the shop -
I was downstairs typing invoices at the time.

I didn't say anything to William Burroughs
when he was living in the flat above -
he didn't seem to want to talk.

I didn't say much to the Canadian Prime Minister
sitting next to him at that lavish banquet -
they'd changed Prime Ministers from the swinging one
between the invitation and the banquet.

And that's about it, really. The rest
of the time you can't stop me talking.

Michael Shepherd

0354 Not Quite War

Too young to know the horrors of a war I've fought,
too young to know war's fear, or yearn for heroism,
but old enough to have lived through;
boys but one year older than myself
lived and fought and died; and younger, some,
who fought in Malaya, Kenya, Korea, to the death...

Slit trenches in Hyde Park were the first photos in 1938,
apart from the official ones to stir our patriotism;
then cycling home from town as radios in every house
spread Chamberlain's sad patrician voice
telling us with regret that from Herr Hitler
'no such reassurance has been received' -
and consequently Britain was at war...

Leaving the house which Mother had designed and Father built
a bare few yards from the barbed-wired beach and sea
where unbeknownst to us, the Germans planned to land
their first invasion of support troops and supplies...

Herded one day unwarned into the basement changing room at school;
the first invasion scare; accompanied by - was it serious
or not? - the story that our wicked enemy
was to parachute its advance troops disguised as nuns,
but you could spot them as they descended
by their boots...

The Junior Training Corps turned out as firewatchers and Home Guard
with the Lee Enfield rifles, the wind-round puttees,
the smell of cordite and of rifle oil
of equipment - oh supreme irony - kept from World War One,
the 'war to end all wars', to be continued;
our Sergeant Major's face
a scary pattern like a camouflage, part white, part livid skin
from mustard gas in that first bloody war...

Days of vapour trails in the sky, as we cheered
the sky-high calligraphy of aerial dogfights;
the nights spent in the thump of bombs;

the prickly uniforms for us raw cadets; the battle drill;
the kick of grown-up rifle butt in shoulder,
the assembly of the machine-gun; the naming of its parts;
all this in far-off teenage memory;
not quite war.

But war enough.

Michael Shepherd

0354 Ode To Powdered Coffee

Desperate to get it;
usually regret it.

Michael Shepherd

0357 On Not Thinking About People You Thought You Loved

I'd been reading some poems with
– for the first time in my life that I remember –
'a lump in my throat'; and a pricking in my eyes,
and a sense of the awesome power of that poet
and of poetry itself; and self-criticism
mixed up with envy, wishing I had
that sort of poetic power myself;

and it seemed to call for some sort of
formal acknowledgement of this,
some ritual of gratitude – not necessarily
the darkened room, the candle swaying gently,
the kneeling – but something inner that
was beyond selfishness, some worthy
sacrifice, surrender.
Perhaps, I thought, the thought
of that would have to suffice.

Then quite out of the blue – or so it seemed, but maybe not –
came this painful thought:
that never for a single moment – a single moment! –
in my life, had I ever given thought
to what my mother was like, living her life
before I was born

and I was overcome, stunned, appalled,
at the hugeness of my selfishness,
the smallness of my self-centred world
that I, who pride myself on my imagination,
lacked the imagination even to think of those I love and loved
as existing without me in the picture...

of course, there are photographs –
studio portraits, snaps,
solemn-faced groups with hockey sticks;
the pride of motherhood;
and yet I'd looked at all those without

really thinking of her being her;

but, where to start? The young girl
as her life slowly formed around her?
the teenage dreams; the hopes of marriage;
of giving a loving husband
the greatest living present she could give, and then
the two miscarriages before I arrived
to strut about my centre-stage?

It didn't work.

and so I'm left with the stark, bare fact
to ponder at my leisure:
I never for a moment thought
of my mother existing as herself
without my being there.

And I thought I loved her, totally. So much
for love's imagination.

Michael Shepherd

0358 One For Bill

Redheads, with their fiery hair
oft have a temper that can scare.
Can God and Nature so conspire
to scarify with hair and fire?

Michael Shepherd

0359 One For The Inner Child

As the tapeworm
said to the spaghetti -
'Would you run that
past me again? '

Michael Shepherd

0360 Ouch

There are times when
opening the Hallmark card
sent no doubt in good faith,
the banal cliché of a worn truism
expressed in groansome verse

opens one eye,
yawns,
stretches,
gathers itself
wearily
like its alarm just went off
and it's time for work

and lands you one
hard, right on the nose
ouch

I think it's called
humility

Michael Shepherd

0361 Over My Dead Body..

The central aisle – more, an asphalted roadway –
of Brompton Cemetery would be hard to beat.
It's no Forest Lawns, Pere Lachaise, but great
for passing trade, of all peculiar sorts – a
constant stream of cyclists,
rollerskaters, boardies, headphoned joggers, even
snowboards briefly – tourists,
lovers, quaintly; and all, as in
John Donne's verse or Stanley Spencer's paintings,
shoulderbone to shoulderbone
desperately calling for our attention
to that which we least wish to
attend to right now, while there is
a now.

And since the undergrowth
between the aisles grows
like the fireweed of desire,
it's Dangerous Liaison Central
fit to make some of these turn in their graves.

On that central Park Lane, Wienerstrasse,
Broadway, of departed spirits,
the black marble, gold-lettered plot
of Richard Tauber, heart-throb tenor
of years gone by (I do a great imitation,
forgive me, Vienna mine...) is never
without fresh flowers. He must have
touched some hearts; or got around.

A last message to the world.
Gold letters on black marble?
appropriate perhaps for
the theatrical; yet on
the other hand, if deep engraved,
if not so gravely,
'Where was I when I needed me? '
(the title of a Broadway memoir
which cheers me mindless, frequently)
might make some passers-by to pause; a

last laugh and a longest testament.

(Inspired by Spike Milligan's tombstone)

Michael Shepherd

0362 Party To Truth

'The British elections are not firing the voters,
since they don't trust politicians any more...'

cor stone the crows!
as we used to say in the days
when we could distinguish a crow from a lyre-bird...
blimey, knock me dahn wiv a fev-ver!

now if they called it
The National Bribery Competition
it might liven things up
and reconnect politicians with
truth

Michael Shepherd

0363 Poem For The Po-Faced

Marcel Duchamp's urinal
is overflowing
with the minds of critics
and needs emptying
upwards

(for AJS)

Michael Shepherd

0364 Poetry Reads; Poetry Speaks

It's like an adult version of a parlour game, isn't it?
a sorta cross between a single-handed game of patience
and a crossword puzzle where the guy who set the puzzle
is always a step at least ahead of you dammit
and knows there's a perfect solution
only known to him, or Him

so here I am, shuffling these black-and-white
(well, kinda brown-maroon on this site)
soundless things which are supposed to be
sounds in my ear and mind which
by mad optimism forever proved somewhat
or totally wrong in experience
are supposed to come out the other end
into your ear and mind in a vaguely
similar manner – allowing for the fact
that if you're of a critical cast then
you'll have a superior ear and mind
to mine anyway so that's a mess for a start
and I suppose the same applies if
you have an inferior - oh forget it

so forget for the moment
this creeping disorder of rather dumb
black and white caterpillars making their humpy
busy-legged but corporately slow
progress across the page in a
disorderly snaky line, arguing among themselves
trying to remember (ah yes, Plato,
trying to remember) like
a Spanish bus-queue, whom they're
behind and whom they're in front of
if and when the bus comes, while they
chatter in little groups among themselves –

where was I, ah yes, forget
the black-and-white on paper, and rhyme
or not, and all that technical stuff
which you're not suppose to notice anyway

and know that what
I really want to do is

take your two hands gently in mine and
smiling, look you straight in the eye
and say
when all's said and done
and that may take a little time,
and to coin a cliché which
I'm not apologising for, but
forget it's supposed to be poetry and
listen to my sincere voice saying

isn't it a wonderful world?

Michael Shepherd

0365 Poets And One World

The poet's world and the philosopher's
may seem to be in aim, and truth of act,
so different; the poet offers us
fine dreams of heart; philosophy, fine fact;

and yet, both spring from knowing nothing's known,
and wishing knowledge for its own true sake:
the poet seeks a truth in worlds his own;
philosophers seek paths which causes take;

yet both, in knowing their own ignorance,
are moved by wonder at the world they share -
the beautiful laws of this world's governance;
the universal heart and mind seen there:

poetic truth and love of wisdom spring
from wonder at the one in everything.

Michael Shepherd

0366 Poem As Snake, Poem As Not-Snake

Walking the narrow, stepped path that bends
through our local sub-tropical,
magical landfall, full of strangeness,
there it was
across the path,
brownish, yellow and green markings,
waiting

adrenalin poured through the body,
waking instinct, emotion, thoughts;
possible next moves racing manifold through the mind,
uncertainties, no previous experience
of quite this situation to rely on
in our relatively snake-free neighbourhood
and it was big;
the body froze,
the eyes just looked

at the branch, covered in
green moss, yellow lichen,
brown and almost weightless with rot
so that the storm had tossed it
onto the path, into my path,
indifferent, innocuous,
so much so that as the body
restored to equilibrium
I was beyond kicking it aside -
in some sort of embarrassed respect;

it, unaffected by all I brought to it;
like a poem

Michael Shepherd

0367 Portrait Of The Poet As Sea-Monster

The poet -
by whom I mean
an ordinary human being like you or me
who keeps a diary
of the mind and heart
and then publishes it
with luck
and maybe sells a few -

is a bit like one of those 'exotic' creatures
filmed on the ocean floor,
gracefully waving a hostess welcome
as if used to welcoming photographers
into its lovely home in this week's special issue
and such a delicate shade of pink its designer decor! -
but how to read it visually?

Are those waving fronds all the nerve ends
of this sensitive creature of the depths
of the human heart?
Or are they stinging antennae,
jealously defending its survival,
guarding its creative core
against all comers?
Or simply, like the elephant's trunk,
a means to acquire the food
to digest
with its prodigious memory longer than one man's alone,
into the poetry of the deep?

Beached on the floor of a commuter train
this delicate creature would be trodden under foot
as two-dimensional yuck;
but in its own environment
it secretly upholds humanity,
seeks the true in the unknown,
says new things about old minds,
teaches us to pause and think and see,
sings silly rhymes to enchant children,

shouts boldly or murmurs quietly
about goodness, truth and beauty,
and their opposites,
and deeply, deeply
loves.

Michael Shepherd

0368 Post-Modern Irony

With all the excitement of a Florentine writer around 1480
who's just heard about the new invention of printing
and has plans to use it bigtime
I'm sitting here at the PC, one of
the first generation of mature writers
who can bring to a lifetime's experience
the web's recall of every great and relevant word
recorded since the beginning of recorded time and thus
pigmy on the shoulders of giants
and what happens
the excitement's gone to my

Michael Shepherd

0369 Prayer. To Mike, Who Asked.

Simplest prayer, soonest answered,
so it's said; so let us be as little children
(themselves an answered prayer..?)
and ask the simplest questions -

how? whom to? for what? and will we get
what we are asking for? promise?
suppose He or She or It thinks, (if They think anyway..)
that's it's a silly thing to ask for,
or just a bit too 'me' and greedy,
will they say no? will they let us know
somehow, that's it's no?

or will our justice be
to get what we think we want
until the day we wish we hadn't asked for it?
or is it like the tale of the three wishes,
everything turned to gold – including us! ...
another wish, please cancel; then
the last and sensible small wish, which may even
include the welfare of all others too?

Some say the commonest of prayers
amounts to, please God, let two and two
please equal five...that prayers may only ask
what may be within the domain of the law
of our Creation; some even say that, given this,
we'll always get what we wish for – eventually;
but that by some mighty, unalterable law,
as with the fairies gathered around
Sleeping Beauty's cradle, as the Fates,
along with what we asked for, comes
a something else for which we didn't ask...

others say that there's no difference
between the meaning of a prayer, and praise;
that in our praise, our prayer is surely shaped
and those who do not think to praise
may never know, to whom to pray,

or ever truly know, for what...

and others of a theologic mind
pray to be taught, for what to pray...
or instead of prayer, to learn to willingly accept
all that befalls them, as the gift of all
that they might pray for, for their good of soul...

*

all this is for considering; but I suggest
that in the depths of grief, or heights of joy, we know
the place where prayer may arise:
so deep within ourselves, that it's beyond
the asking or the answering; a place so deep
that there, our soul rests in peace,
all questions meet all answers,
and all desires are satisfied;
there is no loss,
and nothing lacks;
we are – ourselves; ourself; at peace;
and for that, we may surely pray.

Michael Shepherd

0371 Reading Behind The Lines

So if it makes you feel great,
OK, go ahead -
as long as you're making yourself more attractive
for me, not your next husband...
OK, look like Anne Robinson if you must;
yes, she is great seen full-face, I grant
but now she's got no profile
to match those wit-sharp comments
to a sideways glance...

and yes, it's blushing well-known
than a man can't even recognise his own wife in a crowd
if she's had her hair done in the interim...
so who am I - except the one who loves you
like the supper we've had every week
since we were courting? ...

but let me just say this:
I who have loved you
in my quiet way
like a favourite book (now, where did I put it? ...)
love those fine lines, that time and - we - have etched;
we men, surprise, are something of a connoisseur of lines:

the lines that cross your forehead: there, because
you're just so silly about not being seen by other men
with spectacles on your nose -
as if that told strange men
a lie and not the truth...

if they were lines of worry, anxiety, failure -
they'd be my responsibility, not yours...

and then the lines around the mouth:
that's a national thing in part -
it's well known that American women
welcome you with open mouth;
(and teeth! ...pearls? more like spotlights...) but
Europeans greet you with a smile of eyes;

(and there are cruder analogies I'll leave unsaid) :
so look carefully, man,
those smile-lines - a little forced;
or natural?
accommodating show-biz whopping tooth-caps?
upward and sweet-natured? or that downward turn
that bespeaks a critical mind you might come home to every night?

then the lines under your eyes - none of my business, those:
that's a matter of heredity or, OK, cosmetic surgery...
please yourself, my darling;
you've bags of skin, I've bags of money. That was a joke.

but the lines around the sides of your sweet eyes -
ah, how I love those...
the European smile that makes a man's heart melt;
'crow's feet' indeed! there's written, years of happy life,
and children, friends; the world itself
in those sweet lines...

' In those dear lines, my love, your soul is caught;
Your soul; my life; without them I am aught.'...

OK go ahead, spend my money if it makes you happy -
you know I'll always go along with you...
(I don't know yet, how I'll respond
at parties now when carefree younger men
give you that searching glance that chancers give...)

But please, I beg of you, don't ask your surgeon
with his character-erasing tools
to take away those lines around the corners of your eyes,
that smile at me
from a lifetime that's been shared.

Michael Shepherd

0372 Reflection On A Garden Pond

It's unexpectedly mild this early Spring evening
and I take my glass of beer, cold in the hand,
and slide the patio door open and step out for the first time this year,
feeling like an intruder in my own garden, so strange in the twilight.

Then, melted by awe and gratitude
to see an unplanned wild violet
which has taken up residence between the cement slabs.

Between other slabs the miniature bamboo stubbornly returns,
(that was my Japanese year) and in the tiny pond,
soon to be turned into a living soup by amorous frogs
to the total puzzlement of the white cat, watching for an hour or so
and extending from time to time an ineffective paw,
or nosing the water unable, either, to gulp a tadpole -
in the tiny pond, something bright;

a dancing reflection in the water stirred by an evening breeze -
the moon;
the same moon that danced on the water for Li Po
as he drank from his wine cup
alone and at peace, so far, so long ago;

in a poet's solitude and contentment
and the thought of distant friends,
celebrated with wine
under the moon, on a spring evening,
in perfect happiness.

Michael Shepherd

0373 Regret

We have a 'past'...however, now, not true;
since only in the present is true life;
and yet, the heart may sometimes deeply rue
some past event, or memory of strife;

and in those moments, we may humbly yearn
for one to whom to offer up our tears;
to beg forgiveness; to some greater turn
that we may live beyond what failure fears;

and then we may seek transcendental One
to beg of him, return of soul to health;
or if we're so inclined, kneel to atone
to that one Self which is our very self.

Sometimes detachment pleads duality
to find our godly self in unity.

Michael Shepherd

0374 Seasonal Greetings To...

In the spirit of the season
I'm working on a big-hearted,
multi-faith, inter-faith, lack-of-faith
religiously correct yet thinking outside the box (6 x 2)
all-inclusive but not syrupy or anodyne
seasonal greetings card
(or will the mention of season
offend non-seasonalists?)

here's the draft but no doubt
it'll draw comment.. feel free..

Seasonal greetings to All whom
I usually ignore:

Greetings to all our enemies -
please don't abandon your principles, I'm not asking that, but
can we draw a little nearer this year?

Greetings to all pagans -
we all would like to pop round for a merry drink or two and a hug
but can we do it indoors? Merry
mistletoe, etc. - wrap up well!

Greetings to all atheists -
enjoy your year all the more since
there's no One to thank except possibly
Intelligent Design?

Greetings to all agnostics -
should I hope that this year is
the year you make that big decision and
leap that big leap off
the fence of fierce, barbed intelligence - or
will life be the duller for it, for you?

Greetings to all humanists -
hope you feel really human all year and
don't lose faith in humanity, and please

spread it around especially
among those who have an over-developed
sense of sin...you could put the fun back in
fun-damentalist..

Greetings to all bah-humbugs -
who have better reason each year
to condemn the commercialisation
of the season - take the phone off,
disconnect the intercom at the door,
and have a really good time to yourself which
many of us pretend to envy you...

and

Greetings to all those who, while
not really believing in anything too much
or too little either,
go through the motions, wreck their bank balance
for the sake of others - may you
emerge from the season - nay -
live the whole year -
with an unexpected greater warmth of heart - for
you are the salt of the frozen earth

and I suppose finally

Greetings to those without a heart -
may you enjoy all
that you wish yourself
and who knows

(for PJ whose idea I stole - seasonal greetings and please forgive..)

Michael Shepherd

0375 Season Of Mists And Merry Mythfulness

You...leave...the...
Pennsylvania classroom at a
quarter to four..
leaving all your Bio. notes
for checking, at the door...

With exquisite timing, a Pennsylvania judge
has ruled that the wonders of biology, as
revealed by the dissection of neatly-pinned frogs
and suchlike squeamy miracles of internal packaging
so cleverly evolved by, uh, 'Darwinian evolution',
must not mention - no, not just God, as
Creator - heaven forfend - but even
'divine intervention' - like some 'hey, stop the show
right there! ', as the alternative to
'Darwinian evolution' - so called, by the way, because
it's only a theory anyway, not yet
a proven law - it's just a kinda myth..and
with nasty Emperor's-clothes, whizz kid, questions
sticking their hand up in the classroom -

'Please, if it all started from two whatsits getting together,
who made the whatsits, and, who made the law that helped this
evolution to evolve? '...

So, since we're in the world of myth, which
is said to be the wishes of mankind
formulated into glorious dreams
of might-have-been - then can we give
some thought to alternatives?

No 1 on the list is surely
Santa Claus - that jolly, kindly man who one year
maybe thought it would be fun
to create, simultaneously,
some really super presents, and of course,
someone to give them to - it's called
a symbiotic relationship - and Santa's grotto
became - hey presto - the Garden of Eden!

and just to make the whole caboosh more fun, he
added a special family-sized Christmas present –
a Christ to go with Christmas – or
as Shakespeare might have said,
giving to these airy nothings of a dream
a substance and a local habitation...and
thus without much of a hitch, we could re-direct
our prayers and praise to Holy Father Christmas –
I mean, we're halfway there already...what
are you praying for this Giftmas?

Or, since the other myth that everyone accepts
is the world of science fiction,
and historically, although
Darwin didn't really follow this one up,
random evolution by its very nature, throws up 'mutants'
which many children believe in, even more and longer
than Santa Claus..

So just suppose we do a little
re-naming here, and following up the story
that Mary was abducted as a child by culty Templars
and brought up by them, say she gave birth to
a rather highly evolved
Holy Mutant? A sorta non-divine intervention, or
Unintelligent Design? It's an
elegant solution, as mathematicians say –
balancing all the very apparent throwbacks among human kind
with the odd throwforward?

And thus, there's a fair chance
that in x years' time, the human race will all have caught up
with the Holy Mutant...a kinda happy ending, in its way.

So how's that go down with you, Judge,
on this your Judgment Day?
And a very happy Mutantmas to you too.

Michael Shepherd

0376 Self-Search

Hey, Self - how do I know that you exist?
Or are you just a word - a useful term
for what we hope our real nature is,
those things about us which we're proud to affirm?

So, can we know you? How to start the search?
A dictionary hardly gives the clue;
Or are you always far beyond our reach?
A mirage always 'too good to be true'?

Or, are you so close known, that we can prove -
by dropping off all that we know we're not -
that what is left is what we are: true love:
that, which we always are; cannot be got.

O Self, you must be all that's true and real:
for without you, we'd never know unreal.

Michael Shepherd

0377 Should Be, But

I should be writing a poem
about those small wisps of white cloud
moving unusually fast across a blue blue sky
on their way to somewhere else
as if they're late for an appointment.

I should be writing a poem
about the way the breeze is so gentle
that it seems to have a secret plan with the sun
and the new green leaves
to do something quite extraordinary.

I should be writing a poem
about the way that the trailing geranium leaves
are giving out a scent more white than green
more heavenly than any thought.

I should be writing a poem
about the way that the purple and blue and yellow and white flowers
seem to say nothing but beauty.

I should be writing a poem
but all I can do is gaze in amazement
at what I've seen before
and never seen before.

Michael Shepherd

0378 Song Of Impatience And Experience

When two or three
wire coathangers
are gathered together
anger arises.

By day, they hang out
demurely, side by side.
By night they couple closeted
in passionate love
and if disturbed,
fall locked together
in embrace
to their clackhiss fate
and wake the whole house.

Michael Shepherd

0379 Species: Sonnet 190

It's said that every species in the world
displays one gift beyond the scope of Man;
how dangerous the skies - to men and birds -
how soiled the air, if wings were in Man's span!

Suppose that every species made extinct
by Man - God's guardian of all things that live -
deprived us - as indeed it may - by dint
of mindlessness, of something God's mind gives?

I watch the spider, humble in my praise:
self-spinning tightrope walker; engineer;
the knower of all Nature's weathered ways
and bold explorer on the winds that veer:

Nature spares the spider Man 's wild mind;
should mind in Nature rest, God's there to find.

Michael Shepherd

0380 Sonnet: Katrina To Marc

Marc – remember splashing through the waves,
and walking barefoot in the sand, so fine
between the toes? And how the breeze, that day,
caressed your face, in 1989?

How could we guess, so carefree way back then,
that wind and water, in 2005,
would turn so merciless and blow force ten,
then kill so many; poison those alive?

How could those waves, that beach of love and fun,
now signify tsunami, hurricane?
or sparkling water turn so putrid, vile;
man's carelessness, bring down all nature's bile?

Once proud to be Katrina – now but shame
To think I share for you, a killer's name...

Michael Shepherd

0381 Spider On The Web

so here I am, sitting here, as I write to you,
half of me thinking about poetry and everything,
half of me thinking, time to shut down the PC,
you're not married to the thing or are you

when a brown spider, all of a centimeter across
is suddenly there in front of me on the PC's shelf,
stopped sideways as if reflecting (?) as a poet should;
and having gained my attention, and
banished all this mindstuff with the tiniest of miracles,
requires of me, I think, that I respond to it:
it's brown on top, delineated by the neatest line of darker brown
with white below, as if carries its own ghost underslung
in some metaphysical memento mori like
a poem by John Donne; memento mori too
to the mind that automates those slightly crepey hands
that busily misspell this communique from the ground
of life.

and now, that required of me,
it sets off along the edge of the shelf, and
going left, the second back of its four left legs
like some ballerina-explorer,
extended over and down the edge with delicate, sensitive,
confident grace; and having reached and turned the corner,
goes down, then has a change of mind (?) :
that tiny computer, provided by that enterprise called Nature
has had what we might call a thought...

and now its pace has accelerated, as if
some anxiety afflicts it; as if
there's somewhere else now that it should be,
and I am pathetically, uselessly
disturbed, concerned...

for what am I to the world
and world to me,
if I know so so little
about these little things;

so vague
about the great?

Michael Shepherd

0382 Sportsman Lacks Ship

He's just won the tennis match;
walks up to the net,
shakes hands with his opponent
but his eyes don't follow

now they're off to the umpire's chair;
he reaches up, shakes hands
as if he's tipping the doorman,
eyes elsewhere

he may have won the match
but he's lost my vote.
At least politicians have the nerve
to look you in the eye.

Michael Shepherd

0393 Veterans' Day

The veterans of the last time
die off one by one
with a smile
and bitter memories
and pride

but which those others had no chance
to find within themselves

which would think the other
more fortunate?

Michael Shepherd

0395 Sunset Boulevard

I loved your stories of the old times -
the endless journeys of the band bus,
Judy with her black-eyed girl,
the first action at each hotel
the drawer taken from the chest,
you laid in it; the band singer filling in
between the famous stars; knowing
the bridges between the famous verses
which singers seem to love so much
as if they're nearer private lives
of songwriters who have lives;
the visits to Stan Laurel, modest,
bright-eyed, pining for his Oliver..
the glittering night-time life
of wartime, almost-still-1930s
of the Hollywood refugees;
told by the not-quite-famous who
performed in front of the famous;
the time when thanks to you
I spoke to Gloria Swanson on the phone..
I hear the footsteps of the high-heeled life;
I smell the perfumes now no longer made.

I thank you for all these and more.
And if some of them
were not quite true,
then thank you for the care
with which you told them;

true dreams - dreamed truth.

Michael Shepherd

0396 Thanks To A Poet

You
wrote a poem

I read it

while I read it
I was you

I feel good

thanks

Michael Shepherd

0396 The Almost Unknown Language

I like to think that
there's a language
which is unspoken, unwritten
except
on rare occasions when a poet
puts two words together or
sometimes even
a whole line
which haunts the reader
beyond sense, even
beyond understanding and
beyond beauty as perceived and
beyond truth as previously revealed
but good beyond hope and yet
not beyond a shiver of delight and
the poet has heard it
in the space between the thoughts
in the space between the words
in the silence between the thoughts
in the silence between the words

and somewhere very wonderful
two beings we've never seen
look at each other
and smile

Michael Shepherd

0397 That, It Is

unknown; formless;
eternal; always present

who may think of it?
who may speak of it?
who may not think of it?
who may not speak of it?

where is it?
where is it not?
when is it?
when is it not?
what is it?
what is it not?
who is it?
who is it not?

when other is one
and there is here
and that is this
and then is now

and poets are silent
and silence holds their poetry
and mind and heart
are in love with rest

there in the stillness,
unknown, formless,
eternal,
always present,
here and now

Michael Shepherd

0398 The Blackbird's Song

Waking to the blackbird's song -
insisting, so it seems, on something close to joy and praise...
the sun's just breaking through the morning mist;
the smell of coffee and hot bread rolls,
the gentle stir of household come to life:
it's a good day, the best of days, right now.

Showered, with the inner glow of a man who's
just those few and precious minutes ahead of schedule
and thus with goodwill there to share -
and what?

Is goodwill quite enough, as you bounce into the office,
or (o hero) into the morning classroom, or
the matey pride of factory floor?

This is the tricky crux of this poem, and who am I...

now in this summer morning's glow of goodwill to all men
- and to all womankind, rejoicing themselves and you
in summer's clothes - is there a place
within this glow, for, go on say it, joy?
And if joy, is there, then, gratitude?
And if there's gratitude, is there, then, praise?

Meanwhile
the blackbird
just sings.

Michael Shepherd

0399 The Day You Went

The day you went,
the first primrose appeared
as if it didn't know.

The day you went,
the blackbird sang
as if no-one had asked it to be silent.

The day you went
the bees foraged
as if it were a day like any other.

Michael Shepherd

0399 The Eye Of I

our deepest being is that which observes:
which watches, far beyond all forms of thought,
as hand and tool and all the senses serve
to find and make new things; or shine at sport;

which watches its own stillness in deep peace
and knows it knows, yet knows not what that is -
except that in this being is release
from all that's not; a peace akin to bliss.

There may be further being yet to be;
but in this present observation shines
a world that's fresh, and bright, and new, and free,
which fills the heart with joy, and clears the mind.

If we should doubt that we know 'self' or 'soul' -
that one, who's still, and knows 'I am', tells all.

Michael Shepherd

0399 The Father

Saturday afternoon,
the air, now so hot, and streets
busy with that slightly faster pace of personal intention,
weekend plans:

I remember the face from years ago -
dropout, errand boy, chancer, hanging around;
carrying that resentful face that settles on some school-age kids:
I'm just not bright...I'm told;

but here, now, today, at the pub' s front table
with his two sons, shining with non-stop conversation -
one an intelligent seven-and-a half, I'd guess,
one a very bright five-year-old,
-both of course a dab with mobile phones;
yet far more lively interested in the moment's talk
on this special boys' day out-
and though Dad reads the menu with slow finger,
you can almost see that magic circle in the air
that spells the enchantment of the family;

and I'm transported by wonder far past words
at that other magic circle
of love, sperm, fatherhood
and love...

Michael Shepherd

0400 The Family

Seen from the back as
they walk along the dusty summer road, with
the sheep straying onto the verges where
a tuft of more succulent grass may linger
in the earlier shadow of
the noontime sun, under the low stone wall,
it's difficult to see whether
the couple walking with the
gentle pace of conversation, are
son and father, or his grandfather; the man
seems older than the young fathers
around here. But from the front, when
you see their eyes, there's no mistake –
they're father (or stepfather?) and son all right, talking
with such attention, such respect
for one another.

They walk into the village, silently greeted, greeting,
with the gentle nodded glance of villagers
about their various tasks; and open up
the wooden door of the cool and tidy carpenters'
workshop open to the sunny air, where
a young mother gazes at the boy with
all the love in the world. It's
in His eyes too.

Michael Shepherd

0402 The Footballers' Bible

It's a book of two halves

First half, a lot of whistle-blowing, rule-breaking, penalties, and the ref keeping strictly to the rules

Second half, all about creating chances and a satisfactory result.

Michael Shepherd

0403 The Medium Is The Message

'I wish you could see it - it's an incredible sight -
there's this unbelievable river of people -
like a Ganges or a Mississippi -
all moving at their various speeds
according to age and infirmity and determination,
all races and colours too,
yes, a bit of strain and pain on some faces,
but such a feeling of goodwill
as I've never experienced before-
cheerier than a Hallmark card -
all facing forward, carried by the others
and superbly marshalled - the angels -
so there's every support you could imagine,
I don't know why I ever had cold feet about it,
I feel that the future is rosy...
but the present's even better....
see you soon. Oh by the way,
forget sentiment and keepsakes, all that -
slung the marathon medal in the casket. It reminds me
of that last day. Funnily enough, it's rather
similar in a way, as we approach the finishing line -
' the pearly gates' ha ha;
yes, see you soon. Time flies, doesn't it? '

'And that' said the medium, turning up the lights,
'is all we've time for this session. I hope
it makes you feel better, dear. Most of my clients
say so, they go out happier...Yes,
I'll take an Amex card...'

Michael Shepherd

0404 The Middle East In Two Lines

We are the innocent party

so we shall take revenge

Michael Shepherd

0405 The Mountain Of Truth

This bloody poetry writing - it's like rock-climbing -
who asked you to, anyway?
who needs it?
why can't you be just like everyone else -
admire the mountain from afar,
Olympus, Parnassus, whatever, what's in a name?
its cap of snow, the way you often can't see the top
for mist; like romance around truth.
Homer at the top saw gods - shall you?

But no -
it's a fine summer morning
and you get the urge to see the view from the top;
well fine, but that's not enough for you,
no going up the standard route for you, oh no,
you want to be the first to get to the top by
a new route never attempted before...

so there you are an hour or two later, at the grassy foot
safe in your skin and about to risk your life
(and your reputation, you conceited little man)
and off we go...

the rockface, truth itself (and did you give a single thought
to how that was built, or who might have built it?)
and you with this tiny, hot ambition;
but take it calmly now, word by word, or you're in trouble
and it's a banal climbdown for anyone to see and read.

and it's not as if anyone is going to appreciate
the difficulty of your climb
without doing it themselves; and taste the exhilaration,
the selfish, lonely, glorious exhilaration
as you gain the top, and gaze at the heart-stirring, breeze-blessed view
as if you are for those few minutes before other thoughts creep in,
the master of your universe...

but beware, even the climb down you now face
back to the plains of everyday

may be a sterner test - humility may even
cross your mind, as you recall each step
that that same rockface of the truth
that challenged all your skills to master,
saved your life every step, by its every ancient crack and crevice
so conveniently provided by nature and those millions upon millions
of seashells that built this truthful mountain...

and now, you're back on the level plain of everyday -
are you going to keep it quiet, or tell the world?
'Look, there's the mountain I climbed! ' 'Yes, I saw it
in the paper - how's the wife? ' And though
it'll be recorded in the books, the later editions will point out
that yes it was the first, but that was before the first
girl did it by that route, the first child,
the first man did it barefoot,
the first blind man did it from memory...

yes you'll feel good, yes you'll feel a bigger man,
yes you'll be a better climber for it,
yes your fellow climbers
will treat your name with respect,
yes they'll read it in the books,
but they'll never know, unless they try it,
how it felt at every risky step,
the holds you didn't take for caution's sake
on that rockface of truth,
what went through your mind or got blotted out.

But you'll know. And that's enough for you.
Personal satisfaction. And the hope
that your book about it will touch others,
even sell well. Your heart's in it -
what more can you ask?

This bloody poetry-writing.

Michael Shepherd

0406 The Summer Evening Music That Never Ended

It was such a warm summer evening
that the music that was promised us
after the evening meal, called to meet
the open air. I wondered, would it work,
would the delicacy of the music's fine woven tapestry,
the shaped fine wood of instruments,
fine sounds from strings, flute, clarinet,
find themselves, or lose themselves,
on the mown front lawn before the house,
under the heavens' curve?

Chairs, music stands, cello's spike
were settled in the grassy earth; skirts arranged;
stillness as the group began to hear
each other's silence and the music
not yet played; not far away; but almost here.
Something complete, it seemed,
was in the air.

Music began; acquired attitudes of listening
settled on the audience; and then, unannounced,
magic descended. Someone
who knew life so intimately, so completely,
who had passed through it even while
they lived it, was telling me in my inner ear
what life was, is, all about; in detail –
it's like this; and this; this sweetness,
that sweetness; this sadness, that sadness;
sweetness that's sad, sadness that is sweet;
all held like a gentle fountain - bubbling continuous,
yet gloriously and joyously, ever fresh;
to be welcomed, not to be judged or resisted,
(the hearing of it was way beyond such things)
for it held - listening to it now afresh, it holds -
all that may be known, that may be lived; this is life itself;
this, this is simply, how it is...

The sound is with me now; music told me;
this is how it is.

Michael Shepherd

0407 The Past Was A Present Once

A string of perfect pearls
threaded on grey silk
in a silver jewel-case
I'm keeping for somebody else
so don't open it

A room of carefully-folded
happineses
but I scrawled 'nostalgia' on the door
so don't go in there

I know what's in the box, the room,
so I haven't looked for a long time

maybe I should

Michael Shepherd

0408 The Phoenix Museum

A sightseeing phoenix a sign espied:
'This way to the Phoenix Museum';
A little homesick, went inside;
Looked for friends; but couldn't see 'em.

In hindsight, the title's
Just a little rash;
The Phoenix Museum
Is now a pile of ash...

Michael Shepherd

0409 The Postman And The Dog, Or Plato's Fido

There has to be a reason:
dogs bite postmen.

It's not just that they jump up the sofa to the window
and bark excitedly even when the postman's invisible down the street;
that's smart; but they don't stop at that. For those of us
who still have letterboxes in our front doors,
every one's a tasty finger-trap...and open the front door
to take the parcel - and all hell breaks loose.

You'd think that they'd catch on, that their owners
mostly like to have a dropp each day - even though
its largely bumf (and you can't even use it for that) :
it's not bills every day; no, postie's not our enemy
that dogs defend us from; or do they pick up thrilling smells
even before he's at noselength, of rival canines
all along his round? Can't the perfume industry dream up
a body-spray for postmen to please the canine race?
A kinda Mini Factor Inc., 'Make-Up To the Curs'...

I wonder if the answer's in the Hindu mould:
that this life is the sweet-sour fruit
of last lives' actions; even our living form:

Was the postman with the hang-dog expression
who won't look me in the eye - as if
we both remember some shared former life -
is he on the up: his last life, noble, faithful, obedient dog
with just one fatal flaw: he couldn't resist a juicy mouthful
of postman's ankle?
So now he's born - eternal justice so decreed -
a postman... tooth for a tooth...but carrying in consciousness
a hang-dog memory of that guilt?

Or (since it's said the number of created animal souls
stays constant) is he on transmigration's down escalator -
a human failure as a postman, who, out of public gaze,
aims a shrewd and secret kick at Fido... and
with that hang-dog expression....

yes, you guessed it.

I wonder if I should mention this to him?

Michael Shepherd

0410 The Runner

you're still running
in the dark between the
dangerous lights.
you don't hear their footsteps
any more. they may have
given up. but chasing you
with noiseless footsteps, is still
fear. when to stop running?

one day, perhaps, no longer
the faint chill sound of fear
chasing silently.

just, quieter still,
the fear of fear.

Michael Shepherd

0412 The Wind And The Tree

The soft spring wind
is whispering words of love
to the slender branches
whose leaves flutter
like young girls
talking of love

(for Brian Tinsley with best wishes)

Michael Shepherd

0412 Their World

It's a sepia photograph, taken, I'm guessing,
1900,1910? The whole of it is taken up by
a crowd on the move, passing the photographer,
who could be, say, clinging to a lamp-post, or on a balcony.
Going to? Leaving? Impossible to tell.
Who's rich? Who's poor? No clue.
What's it got to tell you about - life?
Why go on looking at it? No reason

except that you're human; they were human; and
today, you wish, with increasing intensity,
to connect. In some way. Somewhere at the back of
uncomfortable mind, maybe, lurks the thought that one fine day,
you'll be that anonymous one in that anonymous crowd,
forever recorded - dead on the page;
by the irony of history, photographed
when you were sure that you were alive forever...

There's one chap in the crowd looking at the camera;
as the artist, in some Renaissance adoration, and
slightly aloof from the crowd's concern,
looks out of history at you the spectator - as if to say
I'm there; I'm here; and what of you?

But he's no artist; he's looking boldly at the camera,
a cigarette between his lips at 45 degrees from the vertical -
a cheeky angle you never see today; the equivalent, I guess,
of the V-sign at the camera, as some meaningless, cocky, lively,
spontaneous act of defiance -at what?

Now you can 't put the photo down.
It's like picking at a scab or
a joyless masturbation. It threatens - you threaten -
your sense of security; whatever that might be.
Every one of that crowd lived a valid life.
You'd like to be one of them - or would you?
Why aren't you filled with a joyous sense
of identity and compassion?
A selfish greed, perhaps, to know more than you ever can?

Maybe, one day, you'll pick up that photo once again
and greet them like old friends.

Michael Shepherd

0413 There Not Back Kerouac

Jack Kerouac
thought to track
the real America
on the road
but forgot to pack
his full stop
so lost the point
and thus didn't stop
'til plop!
into the Pacific
with a smack
but found it terrific
so never went back
for that full stop
and lost the point
but found himself
did Jack
Kerouac.

Michael Shepherd

0414 This Other Eden, Demi-Paradise..Yeah?

Eden lives.. in the misty
mountains, jungle-thick,
of Papua New Guinea..

with its community of living things
living in what, hunger apart, seems
to be harmonious balance

awaiting, unperturbed,
Man:

adorable, begging to be cloned,
kangaroos that climb trees
(it almost ranks as
showing off at Nature's
Olympic Games) : mammals
that lay eggs as easily as
a chicken crosses the road
to take a drink of milk;

and just the merest touch
of more obvious Darwinian competition by
the lyre-bird which builds
an ostentatious house fit for a honeymoon
to tempt a girl who knows what's what;

or is this
the last place on earth
where the survivors of
Nature's ruthlessness might be safe
amid the thick, tall tress,
from crunching jaws
of dinosaurs,
the stabbing dives and crack-bills
of pterodactyls?

would it surprise you if they found
upon the highest peak, Noah's Ark
with a list writ by some heavenly hand

full of crossings-off?

but why am I so moved
by smiles and tears - then
joy and fears -
to read that all these creatures
have not learnt
to fear Man?

Michael Shepherd

0415 Thunk

sometimes i type thunk for think
it's not that i've been at the drink
but then i look at it, and -hell -
it does describe my thoughts so well

Michael Shepherd

0416 To A Prolix Poet

why do you hate Poetry so much
that you slap her face in public

yet assume she'll stay with you?

Michael Shepherd

0417 To A Small-Part Actress In The Drama Of My Life

Shall I compare thee to...a winter's night? ...I wish
I knew what so provokes...
is it me, is it you, is it us?
I try from time to time, to start afresh,
make overtures; but it's just like
a brick wall in the mind; as if forever you're defending
some unspoken matter from attack,
and so we all unwillingly take on the role
of chosen enemies.

What, behind this unexplained brick wall,
are you defending? So that every conversation
feels as if there's someone out there marking, like a boxing ring,
points scored? Even when you walk in through
the office door, it's like a challenge to a world
who handicapped you long before the start - so now
even your beautiful and natural blonde hair,
always so perfectly groomed and shaped and held,
seems to growl a challenge...but to whom?

I wish I knew - just for the sake, at first, of knowing;
and then, who knows, I might even sorrow for
that which so corsets all that yearns to yield...maybe;
and even love you for yourself...

but I think what really riles my man-mean mind
is that you behave as if, despite all this,
you've not a single enemy in the world...
that I find difficult to forgive...

Michael Shepherd

0419 Tribute To A Listening Man (George Steiner)

The TV studio set for a prestige production
of the sort that wins renewed network contracts
if not viewers, late on Sunday night:
the subject, a weekly series on
The History of Christianity -
worthy discussion leader, impressive panel
mingling ecclesiastical robes of
a glowing spectrum of faiths with the
open-necked, for open-minded,
dress-down of young freethinkers, but
respectful of their elders, with it;
subtle lighting on the semi-circular panel
and the background, tastefully designed
with hints of the history of otherworldliness

and among the assembled voices
of faith and reason in their polite battle,
the great intellectual guru of the Western world
himself – would his searing intellect, his daunting
global dimensions of mind, dominate
this gathering?

Life can have its glorious surprises even
on a dozy, precious-last-weekend-hours
of a Sunday night – George said his piece,
then, challenged by the other speakers,
sat there listening: as if, without a resistant, reacting,
or self-regarding thought in his head –
listened rapt in full attention, as if expecting
to listen to a further, deeper truth from
those who argued against him – his face
benign, almost smiling

I have never seen such intellectual humility –
as if, way, way beyond the personal, a mind
was listening constantly, for truth, to truth itself..
listening to that listening,
I felt proud to be
a human being.

Michael Shepherd

0420 Trust Nature

It's said that every species in the world
displays one gift beyond the scope of Man.
How dangerous the skies - for men, and birds -
how soiled the air, if wings were in Man's span!

Suppose that every species made extinct
by Man, the guardian of all things that live,
deprived us (as indeed it may..) by dint
of mindlessness, of something God's mind gives?

I watch the spider, humble in my praise:
self-spinning tightrope walker; engineer;
the knower of all Nature's weathered ways
and bold explorer on the winds that veer:

Nature spares the spider Man's wild mind;
should mind in Nature rest, there's more to find.

Michael Shepherd

0421 Truth In Politics

I read a rare truth
in the news today

no evidence has been found
of any misdeed on the part
of the politician

well that's all right then

some may ask
how hard did they look

Michael Shepherd

0424 Walking Together

When you arrive, ring then knock,
we talk a little and I can feel
you think perhaps you ought to say
how's the poetry going then

but the silent note's just a little
out of tune so I say
let's go for a walk
the park's quite near

so we walk out, the street is quiet
except for the house
where only last Saturday
the two sons were stabbed many times
hauled out of a white Mercedes van
in a gang related crime unquote

the house guarded by expressionless men on cellphones
born into a cycle of poverty, easy money and revenge, then
on to the park, the walkers, the cyclists,
the football players, the tennis players,
the lake, the dogs, the ducks, the rowers,
the flowers, those who sit and watch

this is in place of my poem
this is my poem this walk
a way of saying I hope
you share all the world with me

and all the emotions, all the thoughts
that arise from it, all we see
every moment whoops careful now as the boy
on the unsteady bicycle nearly hits us both

and back past the house of death
where the men stare at us as if
we are some yet unidentified enemy
in a war they won't admit to

this is in place of my poem
this is my poem this walk
a way of saying I hope

Michael Shepherd

0426 Was It A Smile Or A Cry? For Salma

You reminded me, and I dug it out -
the snap I've always hated but didn't know why;
now you've reminded me and thank you -

they know they have to stand with their back to the sun
so, without thinking of you, but
thinking of their future thinking about the past
they make you stand facing the sun
so you squint and screw your eyes up which is bad enough
while they take random advice from the other adults
and then as if that wasn't bad enough
they say 'smile! ' as if they're saying
you can win this race (for us) .

Is it a smile or a cry?
it's the record of the first time you lied on camera
for your parents who should be ashamed.

It would be more honest
if instead of smile or watch the birdie or say cheese
they said 'Now lie for the camera! ! '...
and somewhere
truth would smile.

Michael Shepherd

0427 We'D Never Have Gessed..

There's so much
we never know,
would never have guessed,
never asked,
and now regret that
we never asked,
about what it was like for 'them'
before we were born...

I can't remember exactly
how old I was – eight? - when I knew
that Mum couldn't possibly
have been my mother.

She was so innocent, so simple, yet
so quietly organised,
so sensible, so unlike me
- who was unlike Dad anyway, didn't he remind me -
that she could never
have had.. sex? .. with Dad..

It must have been my 'naughty' aunt, who had me,
'father unknown' but conveniently
adopted by my 'parents' -
the one who had an eye for the boys
and boy did the boys have eyes for her,
who asked every evening if she could
go out and play with them, while
Dorothy did her homework,
learned double-entry book-keeping by post,
did part-time secretarial work,
became the first female bank-clerk in the town, and still
made the cakes and scones to sell
in the terrace front-window shop
before she went to morning school or work,
while Grandad wheezed in the armchair, sick from the cotton mill..

It was only when my mother, in her sixties, took me
on her annual holiday once to see my

aunt (?) Mary, and the two played one-up
all the time, that I realised the truth of this
familiar family play of life:

Two daughters, fighting for their father's love,
picking each their role: the one,
doing all the right things to win his love;
the other, forever testing his love
with naughtiness; (she never married, just
played the Magdalene) :
he died, and yet
they carried on their fight; Grandma was
some bystander, I guess. And of course,
Grandad loved his 'scamp' so much –
she, the same twinkle in his eye
that he had when he courted Grandma..
Who won, in the end? Neither? Both?

After I saw that, it didn't seem to matter so much
which of them was really my mother. It would
have been fair if they could, somehow,
have shared me; and maybe, I them.

Michael Shepherd

0428 What Is A Poem?

A wise grandfather, skilled designer,
approached with serious concern -
to ask 'What is a poem? '...
no ready answer - but the question
spoken so touchingly
as if indeed it mattered...

A poem?

Some sounds
from heart to heart
to melt the heart?

To join our inmost thoughts?

To keep in mind, recall
what human kind most values,
needs to value?

To share a laugh
at this extraordinary human comedy
and blow away its illusions?

To reassert our human greatness
and the humanity of humanity?

To preserve the finest sounds
of our beloved language
which hold
all that we love?

To tell a new, entrancing story
which we'll never forget?

Blowing a soap-bubble world
with all the colours of the rainbow
sliding around on its roundness
while we clap our hands
and pop it goes..

Just - serious fun?

In Pooh-Bear language,
simply
People Reading It And Nodding?

Really,
a poem is like
an angel, a dragon, a favourite food, or a Special Friend -
you'll know it when it comes along...

My wise friend
said thank you,
he'd always wondered.

Michael Shepherd

0429 Who Doesn'T Love Greatness?

It's one of the world's
greatest secrets
that shoudn't be:

if you recognise
an artist's greatness -
in any art -
it's because you have
greatness in yourself

otherwise
you'd never recognise it

OK?

Michael Shepherd

0430 Why War?

when peace is forever,
why war?
It doesn't last
like peace.

(for Jerry Hughes, poet)

Michael Shepherd

0431 You Couldn'T Make It Up... I Hope...

Off the coast of California
where else
hornyhead turbot
and there's a name for a start
were found to be bisexual with
ovary tissues in their testes

the males were found congregated
around a sewage outlet

before graffiti writers
and fundamentalist preachers
develop the implications of
this newsflash
I think I'll stop
right there

Michael Shepherd

0432 Zen In The Art Of...

I thought my tire was flat.

But it was my heart.

I thought my headlights were off.

But it was my mind.

Michael Shepherd

0433 Zen And Travel

In the road, a car.

In the car, a poet.

In the poet, many poems.

What moves?

(for Joseph)

Michael Shepherd

A (P) Lea To (P) Oemhunter

O ppoemhunter - hear my pplea:
please dropp that ppleonastic p!

Suppose your spelling, dropp by dropp
ran PCs short, all crashing, *lo*,
and *oets had to write their *oetry
without the strength to hold their *!

It could reduce dear England's language
and cause considerable *oetic anguish
(and by 'England's language', AJS,
I do not mean... well, you can guess...)

Would Doctor Nerd-like surgery
help remove that extrusive *?
'twould be a cut to *lease any Aryan
but all things considered, humanitarian...

As old men (meta*horically)
suffer so unsociably,
from all too frequent need to wee,
restrain your *C's excess *!

Overuse could be averse
to *oets' *oems, or verse - or worse;
and *arekh's generous realm of dreams
would be reduced by reams and reams...

*oemhunter's world-wide error
could set the *undits cold with terror -
like *ublic toilets when overused,
*lease to mind your *'s and queues!

so *oemhunter, I dropp this *lea:
*lease take care just where you *?

Michael Shepherd

A Born Crook

Fact: a bright British lad, by name
has today been extradited to San Diego
under a 'one-way' treaty with the US (yah boo unfair)
to face fraud charges relating to
a software company

which could make it difficult
for prosecution and defence lawyers
addressing him formally
in their different ways

how close are tragedy and comedy sometimes

Michael Shepherd

A Comment On The Ethics Of Millionaire Footballers

' I wuz innocent' he cries,
his hands upraised in righteousness,

the gun still smoking in his right hand,
a handful of his opponent's shirt in his left,

his arm smeared with mud from the ball's illicit touch,
his boot toecapped in the sunlight,

gleaming wet with his rival's blood

Michael Shepherd

A Defense Of Bad Poetry

'Naff' comes back as 'cutting-edge'...
though dogs may have their day,
doggerel may have nine lives...
I guess it's here to stay...

Michael Shepherd

A Flowery Smile, A Smiley Flower

And we need the wisdom of others
for instance, this week
I'm eating sunflower seed bread

and suppose that no-one had told me
that just like those cutesy baby tapeworms
sunflower seeds made themselves at home
and grew like men having babies

until one day, someone would say good morning
and you'd open your mouth and just like
one of those happy film cartoons
out would pop a big yellow sun flower as
an answer

worse still if you were strolling round
a Van Gogh show and someone asked you
what you thought of them
and thought you were taking the mickey
like some Disney moment

yes we need other people's wisdom
to live safely I mean
why don't they grow like tapeworms,
do you know, smartypants?

Michael Shepherd

A Mireille

Mireille, merveille de poesie,
Laborie, qui sans labeur
mele notre deux langues
d'exploration exquise
en extase mutuelle
avec une ardeur telle que celle-ci
delicieusement
en poesie...

(courtesy Longman's French Dictionary, 1905 + MB, berger des bergers...)

Michael Shepherd

A Philosopher's Love Poem

putting on one side
the inconvenient paradox
that I always seem to be
boring old me and yet
never quite myself
I'd like to offer you
my eternal love and
perhaps we might explore together
the implications of that concept?

Michael Shepherd

A Piece Of White Flannel About Cricket

Sport is popular. Fine.

Sport attracts sponsorship. Fine.

Sport becomes showbusiness. mmm.

'Pietersen embraced Collingwood on his century like a footballer'..

I say, old chap, that's just...not cricket...

Michael Shepherd

A Pig Of A Cliché Day

One of those days.
Do I need to tell you?
Like some invisible burden
to do with humanity or something
personal, imagined, no clue,
pressing down, tensing the back,
can barely walk a straight line,
face full of repressed anger
about what I don't know,
then yawning with the weariness
of doing nothing
so how to deal with it
if you don't know
who laid it on you
or why

opened the paper
almost too bored to do that,
read the story of how
he won the VC, top honour,
very rare
and what it's been like since

reckoned if I can cry like this
something must be alright
somewhere

I'm OK now. You?

Michael Shepherd

A Poem For November 28,2007

At rest, in peace, and happily,
in silence, in stillness, and joyfully,
honour yourself. Be yourself.

When you honour yourself
you honour the whole created world.

Live just this day in your glorious self.

Remember it for the rest of your life
as the day the world rested in itself,
the day we were all at rest in peace,
the day the world was a happy place
and you were glad to be that peace;

the day we were all ourself.

Michael Shepherd

A Poem, A Thankyou, A Surrender, A Gathering Tear

You know how it is, too?
you write a poem, it means
more than anything to you
while you're writing it, and when you've
just finished it; then
you tremble for it, for yourself;
and it's a bit like – I imagine –
the shadow of having to give up your child
for adoption... you look away,
close your eyes, walk fast out of the door,
looking back without your eyes...

then just one person, that's
all it needs, says they like it...
and you read your poem with
a new warmth, as if
someone adopted it,
had it christened;
and it smiled.

Michael Shepherd

A Public Apology

Public apologies are the new confessional.

So here goes.

I apologize for not knowing where to start with my apologies.

I apologize for being tainted with the sins of Adam.

I apologize for blaming Eve for the sins of Adam.

I apologize to the Serpent, who was just following orders.

I apologize for the seductiveness of ripe apples on the Tree of Knowledge. I just didn't know at the time.

I apologize for not taking Genesis 1 literally.

I apologize for not appreciating the allegorical significance of Genesis 1.

I apologize for blaming the Jews for crucifying Christ.

I apologize for not being quicker to blame the relevant parties for the crucifixion of Christ.

I apologize for not giving independence to America sooner.

I apologize to the Native Americans for invading their great God's-own country.

I apologize to the Native Americans for not stopping them sooner from killing each other's tribes.

I apologize for entering into business agreements with the chiefs of certain coastal African tribes to bring their captives from their tribal wars to resolve America's manpower shortage.

I apologize for dwelling on the sufferings of my family in the Holocaust, without considering the mental and emotional agony of those obliged to follow orders to massacre them.

I apologize for messing with Iraq.

I apologize for not doing a better job of messing with Iraq.

I apologize for not being Politically Correct.

I apologize for being Politically Correct.

I apologize for throwing all these things in your face and encouraging you to feel complicit in my guilt.

I apologize for not apologizing sooner.

I apologize for all the things I haven't the imagination and humanity to apologize for.

Oh to hell with it.

Michael Shepherd

A Quiet Rap For Poetry Teachers

Words, they `mean' – just, what they do;
and a poem means – just what it does;
if it doesn't do a single thing for you –
that's it, for now; let's cut the fuzz...

it may be called `the greatest' poem;
it may be utterly true;
but if it doesn't do one little thing for you -
just put it aside for another time;

and let's all rap'n'clap this memorable rhyme:
'poems `mean' – simply – what they DO...
(1,2,3, and...) ...for ME..(5,6..)for YOU! '....

and that's the end of my poetic beef –
I hope you find that some relief..
so rap it with me, all of you:
" POEMS MEAN – JUST WHAT THEY DO! ! "

Michael Shepherd

A Rose Is Only Until

hold the camera
as the rose's petals
fall
one by
one
until.

backwards
film
the
run
Now

a minor miracle
of memory
in two dimensions
once three.

you.
I.

who
holds
the camera
now?

Michael Shepherd

A Senseless Poem For Senseless Entrepreneurs

The Honourable 'Stinky' Fartbutton
all his life felt put on
being burdened with such a name
until one dread night,
surfing a website,
he found he'd achieved a tasteless fame
blinking to the left of hallowed poetic text
on Poemhunter... 'Whatever next..? !'
exclaimed The Honourable Asafoetida Fartbutton, B. Litt., and then
reached for his pen

(sorry, people, but really...)

Michael Shepherd

A Tribute To William Bronk, Poet.

There you have him, and you have him not..
his life, his poetry;
humility, yet
the glimpse of glory;
the glimpse of glory, yet
humility..

There's how it is; and how
it seems. And poetry.
So poets say, of how it seems, that
'it's as if...'
and of how it is, they say that
'it's as if..'

for thus we are to know
the slender, swinging, fearful
in its impertinent height over
awful depths, rope bridge
of words across the chasm,
life, below, fast flowing,
the poet carrying a thin scribbled sheet
with undescribably great love

about how it is, and
how it seems,
about how it seems, and
how it is
and on the sheet,
'As if..'
We'll understand.

Michael Shepherd

A Whispered Rant In Disguise

If the definition of poetry is
that it touches the heart
then the Olympic Games,
all the arts
and other more intimate matters
are poetry

which I believe the Greeks
would nod assent to

and Baron Coubertin's declaration
relaunching the Olympic Games
(though this time with clothes on, ah well) and
somewhat forgotten by the media
that it's not the winning
but the taking part
would apply to all
the above activities

which is OK by me
and her.

Michael Shepherd

Am I A Poet?

Dunno about you (that's why
I'm writing this poem) but
it's the noun thing, 'poet': as if
you're simultaneously committing yourself
for life to something – although
you would love to do it for life,
it's somehow got
public connotations.

A good place to test the word
is a party – if you make some pleasantry
and the lady's eyes brighten and she says
'That's very poetic..' you'd be mad
not to continue the conversation...

So 'poetic' is OK, . It's
non-threatening,
environmentally friendly,
warm-hearted;

however 'I write poetry' –
is risky. Men feel challenged;
they know they wouldn't read your book
even if you gave it to them, signed; so
they respond in career-advice mode
with 'and do you make any money
by it? ' or even a straight
'are you any good? ' or
simply assume you're out of work
and unemployable; whatever,
they'll do that English thing
of looking carefully at your clothes..
and go into their practiced
about-to-move-away mode

Women however are different: especially
if you risk the full-on 'I'm a poet...'
they'll do an instant calculation –
he's discreetly promiscuous, that means

safe, so do I fancy him? Probably out of work, but hey
that's always useful in an afternoon lover...

However for them, at a party
it promises a more interesting conversation
than 'I'm a merchant banker, not
very interesting I'm afraid ha ha'
so at least they ask questions
and you may well bring them around

though ladies in rather look-at-me attire
who instantly respond 'Yes,
so am I! ! ' with enthusiasm are to be very carefully
summed up before you risk this claim
of poet; it can be like
being smothered by
an emotional jellyfish;
better just say 'I write poetry',
it's less committing; you can always
retreat from the claim as if
it was a passing phase when younger

but if the lady, or the gentleman,
replies with a twinkle in their eye,
Yes, so do I, but
I don't tell anyone ...! ' a merry
conversation should ensue...

I'm currently using 'I write poetry
on the internet...' which is
non-threatening, almost interesting,
and doesn't involve
any commitment on their part
to buy your book or anything

My recommendation is,
try these phrases out at home,
with a mirror, preferably full-length
(body-language can be so revealing)
and see which makes you cringe
or even fills you with inspiring confident pride

However all this may be

a generation thing; 'lyric-writers' for popnrock
must have all this sussed,
beating off the offers
of one sort or another.
He said.

Michael Shepherd

Amen, Hot Hep Heptameter

vandals in their silent sandals sift the sands of time;
with fire and sword, hide hideous hoard of past poetic crime; and
better far, with metaphor they banish vanish'd rhyme;
and curse all verse banal or worse: their aim, the same -sublime.

Michael Shepherd

America's Pumpkin Shortage-For Ted

Tough on Cinderella,
tough on Hallowe'en..

Think of them like politics -
hollowed out
with a face imposed;

only the poor
live the value.

Michael Shepherd

An Ecological Thought Eked Out

God
doesn't get much sympathy
from believers
or unbelievers
(though for different reasons)
but just imagine
how He must feel
when, having created
all the glorious,
ludicrous
(He has a sense of humour surely)
multitude of species,

mankind just knocks them off one by one,
I mean, just imagine having all those extinct species
in your Mind,
sketches, working models, problems resolved,
fine tuning, (er, evolution in later versions?)

but no longer there for all to see
and sometimes laugh
despite the fact that
they themselves don't see the joke, and live OK thanks very much...

it would try the patience of a saint
as they say

Michael Shepherd

And Hike You Too Mate

There's nothing that makes
the prissy just so pissy
as 'rules for haiku'.

Michael Shepherd

And This For Dr With Thanks

moleskin britches

need luminous stitches

Michael Shepherd

Another ***** Rant...

Emotion recollected in
Tranquillity? Not.

British Telecom has this time
added to my modest bill
£4.50 (\$ 9, right?) for
'processing' my payment.
That's 10% of my modest bill..
the bloody nerve.

So what about the cost to me
of 'processing' my bill?
The costly stamp I'm lucky
if I've got; the mental effort
of having to spell out the figures
on the cheque, in case someone
alters them; the walking to the postbox..
what makes them think I'm not doing this
in my expensive working hours, for which
I charge a consultation fee?

I see they've even set up
a separate company to 'process'...
bet that was cheap... Though of course
I could follow their 'complaints procedure'
and phone them... 'we are sorry but
our lines are Very Busy...your phone call
is important to us...please hold the line...'

So tell me, why shouldn't I... charge them? ...

Michael Shepherd

Another Rant And Why Not

The plan, we're told,
is, let Israel bombard Lebanon
for a week, then
send in Condoleeza with condolences
to suggest
a buffer zone.

What a great
TV game
for those
still alive

Michael Shepherd

Ants In The Pants

The colony of ants who (which?)
were happy up until recently
eating away at the gatepost
have braved it up the path to
the doorstep where
the four a.m. milkman deposits
the milk and bottled juice; it must have been
an exciting discovery, the bottles all dewy, cool,
in the early mist of dawn and
a promising ring of sweet liquid
just below the aluminium caps of some

so as I pick up the bottles, bleary-eyed,
some bold mountaineers
hitch a hike to foreign lands
which they regret. The first one such
finished up on the steel sink-top –
a pathetic sight out of Kafka or Orwell,
the worker out of work scurrying
more and more hysterically,
up and down in search of company, of work,
disorientated, frantic; I brushed him,
her, or it, onto the floor in the vague belief
that ants and floors had more in common and
could sort it out between them.

The second put a cap on schoolboy jokes,
making its presence known just as
I lowered my pants upon the toilet seat...
black trousers at that – I was as frantic
in my antics, as that first ant on the draining-board.
Perhaps some kind of retribution.

The third turned up on my arm, as I sat like this
at the computer..this time I was in care-for-all-things mood
and hoped to tray it on a piece of paper
back to its team – it wasn't having any,
skedaddled, almost jumped I'll swear,
off to this foreign floor that is not ever antland..

Maybe it was the same one which just now
turned up on my arm again here, three times
resisting brushing off until I, ungraciously, succeeded. And then
I felt guilty, repentant,

An old man on creaky knees,
searching in the poorest light
on a dark gray carpet
for a small, reddish-brown ant.

Michael Shepherd

Apollo Is Alive And Well And Living In Suburbia...

Last night, a great lute-player
as full of enthusiasm for the power of music
and its history of the human heart
as far as history recedes, as I remember him
forty years ago before his fame had spread,

handed his lute around the dinner-table
as if we were at some christening party
for the eternal birth of eternal music
in the eternal present moment...

the lute shining like a promise
of things greater and unknown..
yet... not unknown to the eager heart...
made of several woods, matured

for around eight years; like pearwood,
the driest wood known; all nature
had conspired (as poets put it) ,
the trees had conferred together

in praise of the music which they hear
hints of through their winter branches,
in their rustling young spring leaves,
in the wind's dry whisper in red and brown late curling leaves...

and a man had put all this together
with its invisible fierce tensions held
by cunning of design, to permit
the gentlest sounds of laughter, tears...

a man who after years of skill
built into priceless treasures such as this
now works in La Jolla as a restorer
of heritage houses from the nineteen-hundreds...

and the lute itself! when holding it, it seemed
to have a 'negative weight' – as if
its very balance, laws of immaterial sound

made material in our human world

had made a thing of spirit, which begged
return to its very elements of ether,
sound, air, touch, and music's fire,
the flow of love in laughter and in tears,

so that I swear, it had no weight
but rather, was its opposite...
he played an ancient song
composed before songs were written down,

recorded for us – its sole record, this –
by the first inventor, from the Italian courts,
of moveable musical type; a song
which transcended its Christian story

of sin and sorrow and repenting grief;
its music, roaming in its memory,
over Africa, Asia, all the length
and breadth of the human heart

recorded in the sound of music...
this the magic that rose in the air
around a dinner-table in a suburban house
touched by a boundless, weightless eternity of grace.

Michael Shepherd

Are You Sure You'Re Wrong?

'UK schools may no longer be obliged
to teach right and wrong'...

well, OK, but how do we know
whether that decision's right
or wrong?

...er...

Michael Shepherd

Arjji

Every birth is a miracle;
more of a miracle; not less;

but his two hands and his two feet
are tiny miracles in themselves;

the four first toys he's yet to discover and enjoy;
we can't take our eyes off them -
their perfection.

but his face..still crinkled, his lips
almost disdainful; as if he's not yet ready
to face the world, put on a face for the world;
it's not even a world to have a view about as yet.
Lucky him.

So he doesn't know as yet
that he's to be named Arjuna;

that he's yet to discover
whether it's a burden or a blessing
to be given that name

which he'll hear crooned so many times:
'Arj...Arjji...Arjunaji... Arjuna...'

and gradually it'll sink in, that
there's someone else... and me myself...

they'd prayed, as is the ancient custom,
to bring a great and noble soul into the world;

his father Krish, that's Krishnaji
has taken on a new role too;

there's more to birth, and name, and life...
it takes a lifetime to find out.

Ascending Mount Fuji - A Hike-You

View from the top -

a snowy blista

Michael Shepherd

Autobiography In The Hanquerian Style

We got a new class teacher this fall.
Head says we should be grateful

on account of he's highly 'qualified'. Guess that means
he gets paid more. So he's the one

should be grateful. In my experience
which don't hold for much
but which ain't nothing neitherways:

life out here don't pay much heed
to paper 'qualifications'.

Now, 'qualified' is something
of another colour altogether. That's earned
with a different sort of paper.
We'll see.

Michael Shepherd

Automne

I wrote, attempting French for a beautiful image which seemed halfway to French already:

Quand les oiseaux migrateurs
rouillent sur leurs branches,
peut-etre les arbres croient
ses feuilles s'en retournent...

but...here is real French from Michel Galiana's voice:

“Quand les oiseaux migrateurs
Se perchent sur leurs branchages,
Ils croient peut-être, les arbres,
Que leurs feuilles sont de retour. »

and a further 'more classical' rendering:

'Lorsque les oiseaux migrateurs
Se posent sur eux, est-ce pour
Faire croire aux arbres que leurs
Feuilles enfin sont de retour? '

with apologies and thanks. MS

Michael Shepherd

BLUES

no, it's beyond words.

say a word your word
if you need,

death loss tears grief gone ever
it's beyond all these

take them hold them
press them tear them

squeeze from them
the tears of things
tears at the heart of things

squeeze this pure pure liquid
from these from life itself

so pure it's nameless
so pure it's the being
of your being,
the truth of truth,
the beauty, of all the sadness
that ever,

so pure, so true
that never again;
so pure, it could be
joy or love or grace
wash in its purity
this is life

Michael Shepherd

Be My Space-Time Einstein Valentine

Yesterday...

Valentine's, you missed it, too bad, he left no forwarding address-
I watched from the pub window
as a van from a high-class Consultant on
spatial and temporal problems
it implied
in one of those pretentious titles
of enterprising thirtyish freelance entrepreneurs
gunning for a profitable big corporation buy-out I guess
pulled up and parked in the very place
and for the very time
guaranteed to cause most disruption
to the desperate gotta-buy-her-sump'n traffic on the busy road
while I in my righteous citizen mode
frowned and awaited developments

until many minutes later
he returned
looking very pleased with himself
carrying a bunch
of not many red roses
in a cut-glass vase (clever florist) ,
i'm not sure about the water - the vase was tilted
in his hasty, laddish, anticipatory hand

and drove off.

Michael Shepherd

Beach After Storm

The largest stones are piled against the sea-wall
since that huge storm, a hundred years ago.

For the sea will never leave the beach alone –
might you think it would fling
the smallest stones the furthest?

No – to re-assert its power,
it challenges the heftiest resistance,
with inexhaustible, ruthless determination
rolling, thrusting, flinging in impatient storm
the largest, furthest; then grading with such patient delicacy
over the years, the smooth but fine-scratched stones
of so many colours – how can it have found,
how long for it to find, so many lucent colours of wet stone?

These sometime finds – searching with a child's fine eye –
of purest pebbled marble - how many thousand miles
has the sea rolled these from southern shores?
And these smooth stones of reddest brick,
or rubbed, etched glass? Or ancient serpentine,
bright green?

Then after a night of wildest storm,
the air intoxicating with its ozone,
new treasures thrown up on the beach:
green glass globes from fishing nets,
cork mats, boat wood, torn seaweed
in thick chunks like beached, exhausted octopods;
the beach re-shaped; even some parabolas of sand

while the seethe... keesh... of the dying storm
draws incessantly, then spews the finest shingle
in its maw like a hungry concrete-mixer.

The beach spreads out its shining, wet
new treasure for the child-bright eye.
This afternoon, the rock pools will be full;
all will be new; sea-god a child again.

Michael Shepherd

Buy Yours Now While Civilisation Lasts

Just as we prepare to celebrate
the season of sparkling white and winter fuel,
piss on earth and extended drinking hours
there steals a hooded headline
whose threatening menace
turns your stomach over with
the sickness of mankind to man:

Builders at a research facility
at Oxford University
now wear ski-masks although
in the absence of some seasonal snow but
in order to hide their identities from
animal rights activists.

Michael Shepherd

Carefree

You don't hear the word
much these days.

It floated into the mind
this morning in the middle
of a fit of glooms

call it grace if
you believe in grace

carefree
it comes without strings
like an escaping balloon
a blue balloon or
a thinks balloon

no documents to sign
no commitment
no promises, no-one to
forgive, not even
myself, not
even a solemn declaration
about giving up all other

all a bit easy, no wonder
it's out of fashion

well you know what they
say, yesterday's naff is
tomorrow's edgy retro

so what
today I'm carefree

my blue balloon, you can
hardly see it against the
blue sky, looks as if
it wants to join it up there

wanna hold my balloon
before we let it go?

Michael Shepherd

Christmas - A Despatch From The Battlefield Of The Heart

Christmas is a-comin' – but
this goose is gettin' thin...

why do I feel I'm in the dock
of some unauthorised court of moral judgment
with the prospect of spending New Year
in some condemned cell of
personal opinion remarkably similar to
a Dickensian prison now electrified in just one wing...?

Forget the whole giving-presents thing – that's
relatively simple – it's those bloody
Christmas cards. Sent yours yet?

I'm with the angels on this one –
peace on earth and goodwill to all, uh,
persons... I'm fully paid up on
this one – so – can we stick with that?
or do we have to prove it with
a ready-printed message once a year?

It's Christmas, dammit – maybe my year-round goodwill
is equalled by the whole other lot of you out there?
in which case, can we just take that as read,
a universal love-in on a level playing field?

It's the subtext – 'I've forgotten your personal existence
all the year, but look – Goody Two-Shoes is sending this
to show you up – and I'm posting it
so late that short of posting in the press
one of those announcements that say
'This year Mr and Mrs Smith are sending
a donation to charity in place of the many Christmas cards
they would have sent to their many friends...' – or
a postcard,
'Now we're back from our Antarctic trip,
Happy New Year! ' you're too late to reply...'

which means?

Or there's the subtext
'We're sending you a very
religious card with just the faintest hint that
although you may not have noticed it
when we had that blazing row
across the fence which has
simmered on all year, nevertheless
we're really more - well, everything -
than you bastards - however
this puts us, spiritually,
one up...'

'Darling, Christmas cards - who sent us one
last year? ' - say no more...

Would
'No, we hadn't quite forgotten you
in case you thought we had, and
I bet it's mutual? ' cards, tastefully
designed, be more fun? or

'Why should we even know your
name and address if we
hadn't once thought you worth loving and
if so, why should that change? '

I reckon one acid test for those you love
is, only think of sending cards to
those you'd think of phoning on
Christmas Eve or Christmas Day - and then,
do just that - no need to send a card as well?

Oh well, any excuse to say, I love you.. especially
if we mean it...

so, anyone who reads this (apart from those
who only read to check whether they'd
sent us one too) -

If an individual can claim to share

that universal love which, do we need reminding,
should live our lives for us all the year round,
please feel my universal love
blazing, blazing, towards you...

...'what's that, darling? Oh yes, I suppose
we'd better send them one, in case
they think we'd forgotten them... which evidently
we had, hadn't we...? '

Have a happy holiday and
a loving New Year full of peace

No really I mean it

Michael Shepherd

Clamour In The Forum

The defence of free speech -
glorious battle without end.

We even must defend
the right to offend...

Michael Shepherd

Clerihew

Mick Jagger a-
pparently doesn't need Viagra

and might view as malice
an Xmas gift of Cialis...

Michael Shepherd

Clubwich: An Art Experience

lay the lettuce on the plate first
that damps down the sound
of the iceberg lettuce which can
disturb hearing aids

if you're into fartsy additional veg
chop them up small and sprinkle
it saves the whole edifice deconstructing
when you take the pin out

then a slice say an inch thick
of wholemeal bread which
you've soaked in olive oil and lemon juice
and rubbed garlic across as if
you were ironing the curtains
of a dolls' house

then throw the half-tin of tuna
or the salmon you've just caught
on the top since after all
that's what you want to taste
so put it out front stage
and cover it with mayonnaise
bet you're drooling at this point
maybe looking at your watch

then eat while looking at
a reproduction of a reproduction
of Andy Warhol's priceless screenprint
of a Campbell's soup tin
gratitude may arise

sheer poetry
simple sensual immediate
self-expression clearly communicated
practical copy it in your faves
slip it in your Pulitzer Christmas Cracker
in place of the joke did I say joke since it
touches the heart touches all our lives

and for once you've read
right to the end of a poem haven't you and
I bet you'll remember it longer than
the thirteenth verse of the Ancient Mariner

similes metaphors you want
similes and metaphors supply your own then
they'll be fresher than mine and
more spontaneous more relevant

yes that's what I call a real poem

Michael Shepherd

Cn U Rd Ths? Its Nt Gd Nws...

The National Literacy Trust in Britain
did a survey and
- yes, you guessed -
57% read 'only a bit' or not at all
and 25% of the older ones said
they had no intention to
read any more than this

So what do they read when
they read?
Well, mags,
and websites
and txt msgs of course
and jokes,
and TV books and mags
and e-mails

and eighth on the list comes fiction
that's made-up stories, right?
right
then comix ninth
then newspapers well
they're just for people
who don't have TV and
don't mind waiting 12 hours
to read the news put that tenth

what's that? poetry?
sorry would you spell that
oh poetry nah

girls said, they read
to find out how other people live
and feel and
to help them understand
more about themselves

boys said, they read
because they have to and

because it helps them
get a job so

some old farts might say
put up a sign
civilisation's postponed until further notice
but it may all work out
well it'll have to

Michael Shepherd

Coleridge On Poets

'A great Poet must have
... the ear of a wild Arab
listening in the silent Desert;

the eye of a North American Indian
tracing the footsteps of an Enemy
upon the leaves that strew the forest;

the Touch of a Blind Man
feeling the face
of a darling Child. '

(set out as verse from Coleridge's prose)

Michael Shepherd

Condy, Hold This Back. George.

My Fellow Americans:
as loyal Americans,
we are committed to the spread of the freedoms
of democracy throughout the world
regardless of the cost,
to fight
so that peace may prevail
like oil on troubled waters. However
the forces of evil are insidious and
in order to resist them we must
be vigilant to root out the pernicious
forces of evil that are attacking
the very roots of
our own democracy. In 2005
I gave consent to wire-tap all
internal communications for
our own safety and the preservation of
our Am'r'c'nw'yl'fe and to limit
the right of free speech in order to
preserve the right to free speech
throughout the world.

But M'f'l''w'm'r'c'ns - the
forc'v'l are unrelenting in their
campaign. I must therefore
ask you as true M'r'c'ns
to be vigilant to preserve our
w'life - watch those who claim
to be your neighbours - do not
hesitate to inform the r'l'v't authorities
of any suspicions you may have. Even hearsay
will be recorded for future reference. Do not
fear for any loss of community spirit,
our Investigation Units only operate
in unmarked thought-conditioned vans
during hours of darkness. And to aid
your work for democracy I have
inaugurated, as your Commander In Chief
a Young Vigilantes Brigade of our

War for Peace Volunteers compulsorily enrolled
in each district.

My F'l'w'm'r'c'ns,
the price of peace is eternal vigilance
in order to bring peacenfreedom
to the world we must move forward and
abandon outmoded woolly liberal
concepts such as 'peace'
and 'freedom' I am sure that
with your help, we shall win this
War for Peace G'dni'f'l'w'm'r'c'ns
and God bless America Who
Stands Alone for
Peace'nfr'd'm'nd'm'cr'cy

Michael Shepherd

Dactylo-Epitrite... Got It?

'Dactylo-Epitrite', Andrew,
sounded like lyric to Greeks;
Pindar, who used it, is seldom
read by our Poemhunter geeks...

(for A.K. and of course the Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry...)

Michael Shepherd

Dear Amy

Dear Amy - we all know how you feel -
but honestly, to help you we're just not able -
'cus we're all still - well - much the same;
just hiding behind a designer label.

Michael Shepherd

Dear John - Haiku

one haiku a day

peace of mind

Michael Shepherd

Diamonds Are From Forever

Silent, they speak
of the elemental:
clear as water, clear as air,
bright as fire, sparkling as sunlight,
hot from the Sun, cold as ice,
yet created out of blackest earth
by forces beyond our imagination

and I wouldn't be surprised
if one day they'll be found
to emit a sound so far beyond heard sound
that only dolphins and eagles may
hear it a thousand miles away and smile;
elemental, the most beautiful paradox
of the so practical, created world

and sparkling at the throat, on ears,
the haloed tiara on the up-piled hair,
but most of all, upon the outstretched finger - look -
silent, they speak: he loves me; or,
I am loved; or, this is the love
I draw to me; or, this is the love
I have in me to give

silent, they speak
of the spark of a severed sun,
spinning a solar system of such
solemn, sparkling paradox - a burning Sun,
a fertile planet Earth, revolving
around each other like forever lovers
who need each other to be one -
an incandescent mass of already
cooling planet beyond all
measured heat; of something

even beyond paradox, that could create
by laws of nature which we can only now begin to imitate,
something so ordinary a pebble yet
so beautiful when polished, treasured,

that it's a metaphor for love;
silent, sparkling with
the laughing, bright-eyed question -

who created love?

Michael Shepherd

Do Pterodactyls Write In Dactyls?

Dactyls – according to encyclopaedic wise men – though the staple of classical Grecian and Latinate tread, are now comical – ‘only used humorously’... And yet, read at a funeral pace, in solemnity, toll out the dead...

(with acknowledgements to M.G. and the Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry...)

Michael Shepherd

Do You Feel The Same Way Too?

I've just written to a friend and said

'I've just written a poem
which I would have given my life
to have written.'...

and then sat and looked at
what I'd written –
wondering whether
that was what I really meant..

(and, faintly, contemplating
whether a thunderbolt
straight from Justice central
might strike me there and then...)

or whether I'd retreated into
some private world of self-delusion..

or whether I had reached the height
of mortal bliss.. as perhaps some 'real' poet might...
when on the scales of life-for-life
or perhaps, eternity,
I was offering humbly, in exchange
for all I have received, all
that my soul could offer...

discarding all the burdens of the past,
disregarding any thoughts of future life,
living in the present, like a child does,
as, glorious, the present presently moves on
from freedom into freedom... tell me,

do you feel the same way too?

Michael Shepherd

Doris Lessing

I've just been looking at the photo
for longer than I've looked at, into,
a photo for a long time, as if
hoping that in some way
it would add to my humanity,

of Doris Lessing, Nobel prize-winner
at the age of 88;

looking like a benevolent
lady ape looking at you and me and
considering the nature of the human species
she's hoping to evolve into

which may or may not include you and me as we are
but she still looks benevolently at us,
as apes, disconcertingly, do; briefly;
leaving a question in the air
which perhaps words will evolve towards.

Michael Shepherd

Eco-Logical

'Trees need their alone time too' I read it just now
in a poem by Bob Hicok and just like that
the world expanded thoughtfully and gloriously
and I imagined the whole of nature
giving a great sigh of relief
like a dog does when it lies down for the night
and a great sigh goes from the tips of its paws
to its ears or of course it might be the other way around
and trees with that sigh get on with their nightly cleansing routine
and expel all the stuff that mankind has made them put up with
in the world that we 'share' ha ha
and then think about the poor trees in the park and the streets
who've been passive smokers all day not to mention
gas-guzzlers without the accompanying four wheels
to enable them to getoutahere into the countryside for the weekend
to **** that up too yes I'm sorry trees although I must say
you do a good job of it and with silent patience
and don't write complaining to the newspapers in a mass protest
which is just as well as those papers need more trees
so I was just almost feeling complacent that Nature
seems to be well just about keeping the whole thing
on the rails until I looked up at the tops of the tallest trees
and saw the tops dying off
and wanted right then to know if prayer would help
because what else will

and thank you Bob and I guess poetry too
for half a line that brought me to the world
and a laugh then tears.

Michael Shepherd

Elegy On A Marriage

the gentle plath
of bitter tears
on the cold grey slate
of crowpecked years

Michael Shepherd

Emily Considers Herself

Blissful – myself – by nature –
soul's own nature – not by action –
nor by thought – myself –
alone – yet limitless – I –
one without other –
universal, individual –
beyond love,
His – Our – My -
Love – limitless -
to write – this...

Michael Shepherd

Ennui

sometimes
when I feel like reading
nothing much
but not nothing
just something
I pick up your
gentle fantasies
and start to read
like when the two of you
are sitting in the
dentist's waiting room
making occasional remarks
which you've forgotten
before you said them

Michael Shepherd

Enter Not, Love - For Eh

Plato would have favoured
That internet dating site -
All ideal and Platonic
('til that risky meeting night...)

Socrates I'm not so sure about -
He asked too many questions -
I don't think he would fall for
Those rather sly suggestions

Michael Shepherd

Evolving Thoughts

Maybe it's because we're so obsessed with property,
real estate, that we assume
this 375-million-year-old fossil yearned
to make it from the sea to golden sands
and further earthly joys? That's assuming
that it thought like Darwin anyway?

Maybe a refugee from
the Garden of Eden
who thought seaside holidays
were more fun?

Maybe it just tired of pursuing fast food
which it could never catch on land
with those pathetic flippers, and
reckoned there was more food out there
that might swim into Mr B!gmouth!

Remember, even you got tired
of watching Baywatch on a hot
summer's day, when the
surf's up? And did you notice
that fossil's built
like a surfboard?

No contest.

Michael Shepherd

Excuses, Excuses...

It's a situation
all too familiar:
sitting at this keyboard
getting sillier and sillier,
descending from Olympus
to a hell of trivia,
fingers wildly itching
for some inspiration,
tapping out some pointless words
in conceited desperation

so I hope you'll weakly smile
and charitably say
'oh it's just a poet who won't shut up
having a bad day'...

Michael Shepherd

Fare Well - And Yet Goodbye To All Farewells.

All is in the mind and in the heart:
there are no empires and no entities,
nought can be owned and nought possessed,
in mind nor heart; our parents, partners, kith and kin
are but changing shadow puppets in
the self-constructed drama of our life -

and this the humbling truth, which in our mind we know
yet in our heart, wish that it were not so;
loving the flight of free and graceful birds
yet wishing all within the golden net
of our own love - that love which can so quickly seem to go...

and so, since we can never own those things
which bring us all our joys and all our life
we can no more say hello nor goodbye
when all is all within, yet all without...

this freedom should bring joy - were we so bold
that in ourselves, we knew it to be so;
so, meeting some new face, know it to be - ourself;
and saying goodbye - be it to dust and ashes said -
know, what we never owned, can never lose;

for 'hello' was an ancient wish - 'be whole and well',
and 'goodbye' meant 'God be with ye' in a distant age;
'fare well' a blessing too, a wish beyond
our view of self, and loss - or death - or gain;
and thus beyond all pleasure lost, or pain;

what cannot be acquired can not be lost;
'goodbye, my love' a frail, transparent ghost;
love weeps beside the grave's heart-rending sorrow,
yet lives to love, heart beat again, the morrow.

Michael Shepherd

February 21 - Whose Birthday Today?

If you saw the film 'Four Weddings and a Funeral'
you'd have been moved maybe to tears
by his 'Funeral Blues';

If you were a college poetry student
the day after 9/11
you might have had your poet in residence
read his 'September 1,1939'
and had your breath taken away
by its accidental appropriateness
and the last line, which he wanted to amend,
'We must love each other, or die'

Two poems he himself didn't think quite good enough..
this is posthumous fame beyond the control
of poets;
this is what poetry can leave to the world;
this is what poetry is.

Wystan Hugh Auden would have been 100 today.

Rest In Poetry.

Michael Shepherd

Filmscript For A Lonely Afternoon

walks into deserted playground
indifferently, pushes memory-go-round

squeak creak
pauses. moves on

Michael Shepherd

First American Haiku

dam
beavers!

(attributed to Gray Owl)

Michael Shepherd

Footnote To A Famous Poem

You all know it from the classroom.
It's in all the anthologies.
Many say it's his best; 'a young man's poem'
full of life and love and promise;
and short too. His long poems,
they're great but few have the patience now
and who cares about Poet Laureates
when they're out of fashion?

It never appeared, did you know,
in his lifetime. Sat in his desk drawer,
a single poem in a fine Italian leather folder.
His wife left it there after he died;
remembering when he'd sent it to her
the night before their marriage; she caught him
once, sitting there, an old man reading
a young man's poem; closed the door quietly,
said nothing.

They cleared the house after she died.
It would never have come to light
if years later his mistress hadn't left
a copy – it transpired - to the museum
in her will; he'd written it just for her, she said;
but made her promise not to publish it.
She felt she owed it to his memory though.

Some people prefer not to have
footnotes to poems; they say
they spoil the poem,
and cheapen a great man;
some people like them; they say
it makes poets seem more human.

Michael Shepherd

For Advent: A Business Trip

Their wives were not too keen about it all:
beyond the call of duty, so it seemed;
for, if they read the heavens' portents so well,
what need of proof, of presence at the scene?

and then, to go without due retinue
through unforgiving deserts; foreign towns;
and forests hiding thieves and wild beasts too?
and carrying rich gifts? and worse, their crowns?

and so to risk three kingdoms, not just one?
and for the sake of some religious creed
not even ours? 'Nay, love - it must be done;
we crown our lives and kingdoms with this deed;

these crowns are symbols of our rule on earth,
to yield the King of Heaven at His birth.'

Michael Shepherd

For An Unnamed Teacher

You know that shot, in films and musicals
glamorising La Révolution Française:
a hundred metres away, just fitting into
the camera's breadth of range,
a crowd which signifies rights withheld
advances on you (safe in bourgeois seat...) ,
led by a token handsome, flushed, tall
kerchiefed man or woman, centre-stage?

Today, that's me – in upraised hand,
a Bill of Poets' Rights... You said,
I'm told, that 'if you were a poet,
you would just write praise...'

Do I detect a note
of implied criticism there? ...

Did you not know, that every word that poets write
is praise? First, praise of the language that we use –
its glorious flexibility; praise of the chance to use it
at its height and breadth and depth,
freshly - as if it had never put before
this word with that, and made of it new thought
to lodge within your mind, and warm your heart,
to call from soul to soul, of what souls share...

Advancing on the camera, we shout,
if you don't know this - that all that, is praise...
then you're not ready for reading poetry, just yet...
'For this we stand; for this we live; for this we'll die'...

The photo-opportunity has come and gone;
the cameramen push back, drive to their editors;
the crowd disperses, glowing with its righteousness;
and leaves the world to darkness, and TV...

Michael Shepherd

For Joan Crammond

You told me last year - in between
doing all you could for others
in your state and at your age -
(and that meant working dawn to dusk, at least -
as you had done most of your life)
that you were 'tidying up'
so that your family would have least work
to do themselves when you'd passed on

And so, as just reward, death came to you
tidily,
neatly, smoothly, in your own tidy room

Just a few weeks ago,
when you had done a kindness
spreading word of my poetry,
I sent you a poem on
'A Reminiscence of a Great Lady'
and to my surprise, not just, from you,
a kind and tidy, just response,
but you were deeply stirred

Did you read in it, the great lady
whom we both had known and loved?
Was it what you'd always hoped to be?
Or did you recognise yourself in it - in full?

No need now to question.
No need, anyway; the difference
is not important in eternity.

Not so important as
a tidy, outward life. So,
that poem and now this
to you, for you

Michael Shepherd

For Rilke

What is the subject of your poem?

'I was there.'

Why is it so important to you?

'I was there.'

How can you describe it?

'I was there.'

What did you know of it?

'I was there.'

And what did it teach you?

'Of itself, nothing;
only that I was there.'

And what will that bring to you?

'Now, all may be known.'

Then what can your poem share with others?

'Be there too.'

What can you say now
to those who thirst after knowledge?

'Be here.'

What can you say now
to those who thirst after God?

'Be here.'

And what of poetry and praise?

'Always now.'

And what of your soul?

'Always here, and always now.'

What then, the Creator's message?

'Be here; be now; be always.'

And what the Creator's smile of love?
'The here; the now; the always.'

Michael Shepherd

Found Poem 1: Julie Joins Poemhunter

hey babe, it's your girl julie ;)

Want to tell you that so far
i'm having a great summer,
how about you?

I went to the beach yesterday with my friend Sara,
and many people hugging and kissing there,
which made me feel bad

since I don't have that special person,
you ever feel like that?

My college is over for now, but

I'm working a little as a waitress, and

I must say there are many rude guys out there

who give me bad compliments,

but I'm getting used to that;

the weather is awesome here, can't complain there :)

Anyways, my cam is on

and I'll be home whole week,

I just didn't know how to put it

so what I did is connected it

to some network which all it needs

is age verification..here's my site....

let's meet each other finally...

bye, jules :)

Michael Shepherd

Found Poem 2

The only function of economic forecasting
is to make astrology look respectable.

The key to immortality is first
to live a life worth remembering.

Michael Shepherd

Found Poem 3

I enquired into the nature of Evil,
and found no substance there.

(St Augustine, around 400 CE/AD)

Michael Shepherd

Found Poem 4

'There has been death in the morning,
death in the noon-time,
on the highways and skyways,
death by faceless people
who said they are warriors.
They are not warriors.

Whose cause is being served?
Certainly not the cause of God,
not the cause of Allah,
because it is God Almighty
who gives life
and is full of mercy.

How much blood must be spilled?
How many tears shall we cry?
How many mothers' hearts must be maimed? '

Michael Shepherd

Found Poem 5

He's still the world's most powerful
wine critic; however
his palate
doesn't command quite the authority
it once did.

Michael Shepherd

Found Poem 6

Brace up for a bellyful time today,
February 5—it's Super Sunday!

Did you know that after Thanksgiving
it's on this day that
maximum food is consumed
in America?

Hey, so what are your
plans for the day?

Michael Shepherd

Found Poem 7

What does happen occasionally
is that Kenny gets an idea for a dish
and writes on the specials board
- yes, there is a specials board -
something like Indomalekian Sunrise Stew.

(Kenny and his oldest son, Charlie,
invented the country of Indomalekia
along with its culinary traditions.)

A couple of weeks later, someone
finally orders Indomalekian Sunrise Stew
and Kenny can't remember what he had in mind
when he thought it up.

Fortunately, the customer doesn't know, either,
so Kenny just invents it again on the spot.

Michael Shepherd

Found Poem 8

'The asymmetry
in the conflict's
death tolls
have led to
the accusation
of disproportionate use of arms
by Israel'

'asymmetry'...

Michael Shepherd

Fourteen Lines

Old poets, torturing their thoughts to rhyme,
their lovely English verse to end-words tied,
oft found just cause to moan of 'envious Time',
and seek immortal fame in 'Time defied';

for rhymesters, it is ever June, when moon
shines on their corn; for moralists, base love
may find in Plato reason to attune
and lift their Muse to world on world above -

and then, there's Shakespeare: from whose boundless art
flows liquid gold; whose words bring heaven to earth,
to sing love's beauty; melt the frozen heart,
make men to cry with joy; gods, weep with mirth:

a sonnet's span can bring one to oneself;
in fourteen lines, bequeath us heaven's wealth.

Michael Shepherd

Fr Ee Cummings And Goings

<pre>

if those
 only random

thoughts

would
 come
 together

into a

P O E M

Michael Shepherd

Freedom's In The Air

'Let Justice be done,
though the heavens may fall'...

Now the overnight, merciful dew
has fallen on the hottest July day
on record, (why does it give us
some sorta touch of personal pride?)
and on my rant of yesterday
about a Britain of whose recent past
I'm more than a little ashamed
in my rather downplayed English way... then
the wickedly and useful perverse mind
turns to what's good; and
in Saint Augustine's succinct words,
I exist; I know that I exist; and
I am happy to know that I exist..

It's hot again today; in London here
a good place to be is high above London
on Hampstead Heath with its fresher,
cooler air, its natural bathing ponds
and view of City and St Paul's down there;
presided over by Kenwood House;
filled with the shade of William Murray,
1st Lord Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice,
who in 1772, presided over the case
where James Somerset, slave, shackled
in a slave ship moored off Bristol
on his way to America,
sued his 'master', Mr. Stewart of Virginia
(the English colony, you'll note) :

'Let the slave go free' His Lordship finally declared –
adding the comment with which I began...
and eventually, the heavens fell..
Or perhaps, the earth rose up to meet them...
and generations of proud British and other students of the law
have learned those words about our common law
which His Lordship would perhaps have said,

but didn't actually: 'The air of England
is too pure for a slave to breathe, and so,
everyone who breathes it, becomes free...'

Yes, this sweltering hot day, the air of Hampstead Heath
feels fresher, cooler; in the nostrils, filling the chest,
smells so good.

Michael Shepherd

Freshen Up Your Love Poems

Honey,
i wanted to write you a real blaster
so i looked in 'Writers' Weekly'
and sent off for 'Freshen Up Your Love Poems'
by, it said, 'a well-known successful writer'

it suggested
'take a famous line and give it your own personal new twist'
so

I could not love thee, hon, so much
were we not both fans of 'Friends'.

Michael Shepherd

From Goethe On Boldness (For Poets And Others)

How many noble schemes from goodwill's heart,
how many splendid plans and fine ideas
have foundered, lost their glorious craft and art
through hesitancy born of baseless fears?

We do not see the moment as divine,
thinking that those plans are somehow 'ours';
forgetting, too, that Providence sublime
yields timeless good through time in human hours:

the task begun, this heavenly Providence
begins to move; bestows her love's support
with means, events, beyond coincidence;
assistance past all dreams of human thought -

be bold! and trust in Providence above:
she brings to earth God's magic; power; and love.

Michael Shepherd

From Sengtzan (Died 606 Ad/Ce) , The Third Patriarch Of Zen

How may we walk all free and undisturbed
through life, as if there were no other way?
So that our human nature finds no break
between our nature, and all nature's play?
The answer lies in thought: for if our mind
holds any thought that some restriction makes
on truth itself, then Truth is thus constrained
in every part; can never show itself.
For hence comes false requirement, then to judge
between all these embordered things in mind -
Which wearies angered mind, like some old grudge;
No freedom then, nor peace, nor truth, to find.

So curb that game divisive mind will play
with anything at all; that is the Way.

Michael Shepherd

Fundamental Reggae

'fun-da-mental-ism' miss God's fun, man -
who want a God wittout a smile? ...
'fun-da-mental' send this chile mental...
me thinkin', God too He run a mile...

Michael Shepherd

Geoff Chaucer Reads Tom Eliot

A clerke there was, one Tomas Elyot hight;
'Stearns' wasse hys middel name; I think him so;
His gowne a cutte severe, sterne, clericale.
Hie werkéd in a banke; but lyked it not;
Preferring farre to be a publysshere.
Hie telleth of another clerke hys love
(thow sadnesse more thanne love, methinks it were..)
J. Alfred Prufrock wasse thys clerkés name;
Hie lyved in melancholie fasshyion,
Of chepesyde inns and wasteland wyndowes fogged;
Hie wasse so timide and soe fulle of feare,
Hie lyved a narrowe lyfe of caushyonne,
Hie knewe no joye, methinks; hym thoghte hymselfe
But born to serve some lorde in defferrense..

This Elyot's tale wasse shorte; I hoped itte so;
Methogte hysse lyfe but wasted wayle and woe.

Michael Shepherd

Gertrude Stein Chews The Fat

We asked ourself a question
since no-one else asked it
it was are poems about the poet
or about poetry
or about neither
or about both
and now we had asked this question
we had to answer it and we said
if poetry raises all these questions
the answer must be simply
yes

Michael Shepherd

God Friday

Today

the heavens opened

first thing

later the sun came out

and everything perked up

Good Friday

Michael Shepherd

Golden Links In Golden Chains

Imagine – well, try to imagine -
what it must have been like
to a poet of, say, 1480
in, say, Florence, that sounds civilised,
the day he (probably he) heard for the first time
while scratching away with goose-quill, copying
what used to be a favourite poem
which he's now beginning to dislike
as he copies it for the nth time
in hope of getting it known –
imagine when he first heard
about this new invention called printing
which of course he couldn't afford
but which held a golden possibility
of a brave new world of mind so easy shared;
imagine

surfing the internet which has been around
longer than – some of our children – so that
they might assume that Adam and Eve shared a laptop
with a faint scent of figleaves -
surfing the internet hungrily for intimate, telling details
of some, let's say, poet-hero,
there's now a chance, that like a heavenly shaft
of sunlight through the dark clouds concealing history,
you – I – hit upon some link; some interview; some audio,
that takes us deeper into that hero's life
than ever we could have hoped for –

might we hope that such a heavenly insight,
such a golden link in myriad golden chains
might be, oh, a mere shadow of some truly heavenly
facility, truly heavenly experience,
that we may one (day) share?

Michael Shepherd

Good Friday

A recipe for thought:

Take a pair of scales
as large as the boundless human mind,
and into one scale
pour all the goodness in the world that you can see
carefully
and into the other,
all the evil in the world that you can see;
into the first scale now add
all the joy that you have known
(the joy of others you can never measure)
and into the other, all the misery,
(the misery of others you can never measure) :
into the first, add all the laughter you can remember,
and into the second, all the tears;

and now, from the cupboards of your heart,
add what you will
to either scale:
the hopes and fears
of all the years.

now give one day each year
to the watching of these scales
and see if slowly, gently, as we watch
with all our love
the scales
move

Michael Shepherd

Green Thoughts From A Kyoto Garden In Spring After Closing Time

what would earth be

without rain?

where would rain go

without earth?

Michael Shepherd

Grown-Ups Are Daft - A Limerick For Rh

I went round the keyboard-type shops
But they only stocked qwertyuiop s...
Well, I ask you - if we
Can't read straight, ABC
Our schooling is fooling. Full stop.

Michael Shepherd

Guantanamo

Allah the Just, the Merciful.

That must be so
otherwise human beings
would have no conception
of justice or mercy
which is a solemn thought.

Suppose,
and there is no reason that this should not be true,
Allah
watches the unfolding Guantanamo saga
and considers thus:

'That the ignorant of all nations
cry for revenge,
I weep over.
But that those who know the Law
and blazon it as their nation's badge of pride
and then make exception
without remedy,
for years,
that is a crime a hundred times greater.

So I, Allah, the Just, the Merciful,
will allow this injustice to capture the mind
of a hundred Muslim youths
for every detainee;
of these, some may understand the Law;
and weep with Me;
some may ignorantly, cry for revenge
and act it out.

Is this not just and merciful?
It is the Law of ignorance.

Just suppose
He thinks that way.

Hacker Hero

How would a healthy,
confident nation,

a nation that loves sport..
how would it react,

hearing that some young hacker
had penetrated 34 was it,
of its most secret websites?

It would say, thanks pal
for showing us our weaknesses..

and by the way, there's a job
just waiting for you in the counter services..

of course, it would have helped
if he'd been American – he'd have hired PR,
positioned himself as hero; spun the story,
said, I did it for our great nation..

but if he'd been let's say Russian
or Al Quaida... perhaps we'd never hear
from those red faces at the Pentagon..

So let's praise the hero hacker
(who by the way, didn't sell
the info on, to let's guess who...)

and by the way, you can bet
they have their own guys, highly paid
to test defences by that self-same method..

doesn't every sport hone its talents
by competition? Oh, c'mon on guys...

Michael Shepherd

Haemorrhoid Ode - For Herbert

vets help lame dogs
over stiles, while
others doctor
dogged piles

Michael Shepherd

Haiku For Mf

What a lovely present!

I threw last year's away...

Michael Shepherd

Haiku For Poets

A poem read.

A reader changed.

How?

Michael Shepherd

Haiku-Ish For Cm

You took my breath away.
What did you do with it?
Ah yes, I remember.

Michael Shepherd

Hair Raising

The fun thing about being dead
is the haunting. Revenge. It's Payback Time Whoo Hoo.
I'm updating my Visiting Book,
adding some, crossing off a few
in case my memory's not immortal.

It's quite a long list, though I try to be
as fair as one can inhumanly be:
I've always been the target of con-men
of all ages and oh yes con-dames too.
It took me a while to get wise:
they all think they're smarter than they are...
though by then it's usually too late.

Moving on to those who've bullied me;
who assumed (and alas, oh so did I)
that I was cut out to be a victim;
and all those who I let push me around
for their own promotion, empire, glory, satisfaction...

well now I don't want to bore you but
you get my drift. However, perhaps you didn't know
that the old-fashioned loose white robe
or ectoplasm, cold air, that stuff - out;
like pandemics and computer viruses,
we keep up with the times - it's easy
when there's no time to keep up with.

Photography was a giant step
for ghostkind; when it was still blacknwhite
we were those outafocus blurs that walked
along where the wall wasn 't any more,
through the doors that were not there,
in the life you did not lead,
a bit like Eliot's garden...

but when colour came into your holiday snaps -
there you are, Caribbean-hormoned,
honeymooning with your third young wife,

Viagra-ed, Cialis-ed, sunkissed, gin-blissed,
and hello! we never snapped that family group...with
those two blurry familiar faces in the background...
out in Concorde, back in discord...

Then came computers...you really do make
our task more fun for us; we're the cyber-virus
or ghost in the machine that affects, ha, only yours; and who
picked up your digi-cam that night and photographed your dreams?
or slipped that sexy message under the office address?

the bit I haven't yet worked out
in all this (well-deserved) fun
is that most of the worst offenders in my visiting-book have -
you know - passed on - and
will be there to (greet?) me. That thought rather
haunts me.

Michael Shepherd

Have A Good Gruntle

'You're the most ept, ert, choate and dolent person I know -
how do you manage it? '

'Excuse me...? ? '

Words are fun.

If your child's school report
declared him or her
'inept, inert, inchoate, and indolent'
you'd have a fairly clear picture
of how things are;
the negatives survive,
as more useful
(ah, sad reflection...)

and then there are the words
that have reversed their meanings
by some really interesting
but alas never yet charted
human failing:
'nice' once meant stupid and ignorant;
'silly' once meant blissful...

But today I'm savouring 'disgruntled':

that is, dissatisfied, and angry with it;
a state not unknown
to a consumer society;
so are you gruntled today -
satisfied and happy?

but it's not quite as easy as that:
if you're gruntled, then officially you're
'uttering little grunts'...

would that be while DIYing
somewhere back of the sink,
or pigging out so fast you can hardly
make time to breathe,

or perhaps being, uh,
sexually favoured?

Words are fun
especially for poets -
Shakespeare made up more than anyone
just like that
without some egghead like Bacon (aha!) or Jonson
looking over his shoulder and saying
you can't say that
they won't know what you mean
in the low-price seats...

Words are fun;
give them a good shake of the kaleidoscope
and they just might play nose-to-tail
and make a poem

though not today it seems

Michael Shepherd

Heavenly Fathers' Day Forever

Assuming and that's one hell of an assume
that we retain our individuality
you know.. up there..
you can't but wonder what
they talk about, if of course

for instance, those millions
on millions of fathers..
do they gather round and talk
about.. well, forget that club talk
about their wives and
that kinda dissing that's
a sorta boast...

and their daughters? no
they'd all go quiet and remember
when they were Daddy's girl
hurrumph

no, their sons? ..

'reckon he came from
his mother's side
of the family – couldn't never
understand him...'

'wanted to give him the benefit
of all my experience –
would he listen? '

'everything I approved of..
he wanted the opposite, took
the opposite view.. couldn't
talk to him about anything that
I'd learned to value..'

'he just couldn't understand
how fortunate he was.. I
grew up we had nothing nothing...'

'he had a place waiting for him
in the family firm, great
future – but no, all
he wanted was to...'

'I kept telling him, yes,
great as a hobby but
there's no money in it son
for a decent life, take my word..'

'paid a fortune for his education,
like I never had, and
what does he do with it but
go off and...'

do they go on and on like this? it
must be hell..

or are they allowed the benefit
of hindsight, a sorta
purgatory before oh god
another chance? or

or are they allowed a solemn vow
to never be like that again
and swear to make their son's life
heaven? (poor wimp..)

or simply on the Indian lines of heavenly justice
swop roles next time ho ho?

Dad, all this
is just a joke

now

love you

Michael Shepherd

Here's A Pop-Up Thought In A Pop-Up World

'Make Your Writing Pay'

'Work From Home'

'Find Love Fast'

Career guidance
isn't always easy
to come by and
too many of us
take what comes

here's a thought
that just popped up:
a little discreet prostitution
carried out from home
and faithfully recorded
blow by blow
so to speak
for eventual
publication,
screen rights and
celeb status
might well bring a
triple reward
a metaphorical
fortune cookie

Michael Shepherd

Hermaphrodite

I'd seen her in the pub from time to time -
shortish height, slightly awkward jerky movements
not quite to be called boyish
like her haircut,
indeterminate of age -
a worn sixteen; an undeveloped twenty-six?
but in a year or two, she seemed the latter
though her vulnerable, aggressive stance
made age irrelevant.

had she been more confident, more inyerface
she'd have been lesbait, no doubt of that; I felt
uncomfortable around her, as you do, however kind,
around those who have not yet resolved their life.
but she didn't pose her boyishness; wore
her trousers without pride; didn't
give off that lesbian vibe.
she might almost have been
the girl in the girls' school play who was as tomboy
told to play the boy and
who wore the clothes
and hated it.

then she started coming in with her quiet,
steady boyfriend; sometimes with their dog; she seemed more relaxed.
I gave her no more thought;
was faintly happy for her, I found.

so there I was one day, pissing off twice the amount
of beer I'd drunk - strange, isn't it? - in the Gents;
the door opens, in she walks, stands two urinals away
and does her thing - I guessed... well, no,
I didn't take a closer look - for she was
challenging me to respond.
And I didn't have a response.
I'd never seen her
doing that before; maybe my age suited her for a role
in some sad psychodrama of her unhappy life,
I, cast, perhaps, as proxy father, uncle, teacher, godknowswhat..

I didn't respond; nor did sex
raise its tumescent head; in fact I'd say, rather the reverse.

Of course she couldn't have known
that English boarding school,
ages seven to twenty-one (for the really thick and desperate) ,
equips you with a knowledge of acquired hermaphroditism
of an innocent yet knowing kind - beyond, I'd guess,
the experience of many a born hermaphrodite...
to please your hero man
at any price
in any vice;
we called them 'fags'; it's the official term, and
snigger-free;
then later, play the macho game
of picking the most beautiful new boy
to be your 'fag'; flirt publicly,
...to show that it's not serious or queer...
and if you take it further, well, that's your concern,
just don't get found out;
or if you want to really win repute,
date the housemaid simultaneously...

I let her leave that restless restroom first,
it seemed fitting, in my determined, neutral state;
yet it left a sense of many serious matters of the human heart
unexplored; unresolved.

Michael Shepherd

Hesiod Reads Homer On Poemhunter

Wow!

Gr8 poem!

Loved it!

Keep writing!

Michael Shepherd

Higher Waffle Of The Trochee Tribe

'And the smoke rose slowly, slowly,
through the tranquil air of morning...'
'trochee' in the Greek, means dancing;
'Hiawatha' leaves some yawning...

Michael Shepherd

History Teaches Us...

A stone's throw, just, from Chelsea's football ground,
-skinhead territory long before any silverware -
there's a barber whose window decorations indicate
they're stylists in that tricky, ingrowing black hair;
I dropped in there one day; and as the one white face
in that busy, proud salon (I took the last spare seat with some relief)
spent half an hour or so as a 'minority',
as images of identity played out some tennis game of mind
across the net of what - division or harmony?
was I the face of hated white supremacy, now
the hated white minority? Covert glances on both sides...

Eventually I settled down, to then enjoy the novel ritual to me:
when you're finished, dusted down - rise from the chair,
and pause a second or two upon the barber's dais there
and face the audience; to be admired for sharp new style
which is by implication, tribute to the barber's skill;
there's palpably the sound of silent, proud applause
(I even dared, now shorn and bolder, to acquiesce, with respect,
in just a hint of this attractive ritual...) .
And here's the crowning glory of this escapade:
they charged me less than for that difficult black hair...

'History teaches us...'
...not to trust too much the lessons of history;
but rather, learn from how it's working out:
emigrate to seek a better life somewhere
where faiths and customs are so different
and you're the proud, hardworking, strange minority.

But then, beware - your children will not want
the birthmark of 'minority'; and maybe seek
some other pride than that of family,
a new identity, some wilder faith
than football's common touch, or cricket green;

the hosts and guests of history must learn
to seek to learn the lessons both must earn.

The Romans, empire-builders, had a phrase for this:
'lacrymae rerum' - which so gladly, sadly, means
the tears of things...

Michael Shepherd

Homage To Dorothy Parker

To laugh at life
wittily
among friends

Michael Shepherd

I Read Psalm 30

Say, it's the first day
of your holiday in the country or the wild:

you've slept so well, you go out
just as dawn is about to break,
to take in your surrounding:
fields, woods, forests, mountains;

there's dew on the ground, moist air
gently rolling off the mountains;

everything seems, at this precious moment,
to know all about two great events:
sleeping and resting, and waking and being alive;

you take it all in for a moment;
then maybe, light a cigarette,
think of your first cup of coffee,
congratulate yourself for living the good life..

or maybe something in you would like,
as the first slow sunlight makes rainbows
in each dropp of dew in front of you,
to say thank you to someone or something;

maybe you believe a bit in God
while freely admitting, you don't understand
anything about His – or Her, or Its – nature;

and maybe that sense of wonder
that crept up on you
slips into a sort of thankful praise; and that
expands the wonder wonderfully, until

you're living surrounded by wonder;

and if someone said to you standing there,
don't you feel that all around us,
we are looking, smelling, tasting, hearing,

in the silence and the stillness, something of
the nature of God? you might
say, something like that...

maybe the psalmist is right,
God `needs', too, in a way;
needs human beings to wonder at him,
thank him, praise him, celebrate him...

maybe the mind loves innocence,
the heart, to sing and dance...

Michael Shepherd

I Wonder If I Have Ever Passed Graham Leese On The Street

You're not
going out
wearing
that
are you?

Oh

Michael Shepherd

Ignore The Ad Above This Poem

I deeply resent
the ad above this poem
(well it was there
last time I looked)
for Carcanet Press
as if we were chums
them and I
far from it
not only am I
not published by them
in case you thought I was

but

they don't even answer my emails
offering them my poetry
at 100% off

and their
selecting editor
is quoted as saying that
'amateur' poets should
be wiped out
so much for
love of poetry

I guess courtesy
isn't award-winning
these days

(dammit, it's a different ad this time...)

Michael Shepherd

Illusion And Laughter

Are illusions made to be
laughed with, laughed at,
laughed away?

Is the human comedy also
a divine comedy? Should we
not wail, but share the joke?

The children's party conjuror
and the handkerchief, the rabbit,
the flock of doves – they're here, then
they're not... we laugh
at our own disbelief.

This illusion that the world is real,
and that God does not look us in the face
at every turn, in every detail –

should we laugh, acknowledging
a good joke, and ourselves the butt;
remove our own false nose, and eyes and ears,
take out the incarnation from our buttonhole
which squirts squid-ink at unsuspecting friends..

applaud the conjuror?

Michael Shepherd

I'M Reading Psalm 31...

Sin...

what is it? Is there such a thing?

Is it, would it be, a good thing to have?
do I want it? or do I have it,
so deep, it's more trouble than illumination...?

All that sadness, all that sense of failure,
all that sense of impending doom,
all that guilt in respect of
person or persons unknown...
or that always trying to please persons
known or unknown...
yes, that makes sense...

So, who am I supposed to have sinned against?
Since I'm a bit hazy about God, then
have I sinned against myself?

Memories now of schooldays – Michael,
you've let yourself down...and then
of course they have to add, and you've let down
your parents, and you've let me down
as your teacher....seems I'm some sorta
team player... who picked this team anyway?

OK, let's just suppose that there's
some vast, perfect self-balancing system
running the whole caboosh (with maybe,
wholly good intentions) so that
if you steer badly, then there's
first the hard shoulder, then the grass verge,
then maybe if you're on the race track,
piled-up tires, some sort of resistant and yet yielding wall..

and after the hospital period, your steering
is rather more careful, rather more attentive...

so maybe, a sense of ... let's call it

good roadsmanship –
'Paradise Garden Welcomes Careful Drivers'...
would be a good thing ... say 'sin'
but smile as you say it ...

just a warning sign - 'Black Spot'; 'Dangerous Bend';
where the other guys came to grief...

and life – the highs and oh those deepdown downlows –
is more about being your very agreeable self,
and somebody else's idea of sin
very much a thing of the past;
the neighbours wave at you,
and the postman seems glad to see you.

Michael Shepherd

In Answer To Your E-Mail...

If she wants
that extra two inches,
that six more hours of ecstatic sleep-deprivation,
that concrete-and-steel erection to win architecture awards,
then send your e-mails to her,
she can pay for the bloody things.
I'm not proud.

Michael Shepherd

In Praise Of Euphony

The music of the poet's mind

sings silent songs to all mankind

Michael Shepherd

In Praise Of Poetry...

Apologies, folks
for slipping this one in
under the guise of a poem
but isn't it great
to open this site's window
and find 20 poems
by 20 poets
several for the first time
making a fantastically rich hour or two
just reading them
such as never could have happened
a few years ago
(three cheers for webmaster)

I know that some of us
write umpteen poems a day
but could you please
space them out, just one or two each day
so I can read them without hurrying?

Apologies again, and
consider this as really
a poem
in praise of poetry?

which it is.

Michael Shepherd

In Reply To Your Irate Comment...

...well, yes, I agree the 'Comment' box is for comments - but hold on -
I'm sorry, but I'm not sorry...

yes, growing up in the Bible Belt
must be purgatory with only heaven and hell
I mean who reads Dante?
just don't unload it all on me, OK?

I guess I should try to explain myself
(this could be a long one,
like the others I pass over on this site,
who's got time for Byron or Browning or Milton?) :

Trying to make sense of this world
in the allotted time, ho ho,
I've found it helpful in the mind
- though I'm not 'religious',
but not aggressively irreligious I hope;
but still rather pressingly interested
in life and death, that sort of thing -
the concept of some possible unity
through love, Providence, order, law
(the Sun doesn't take a day off)
call it what you will
(or not - the Indians have spent
thousands of years on this sort of language)
and the possibility of finding
things related in some way through
something more than Chaos Theory
(as in a teenager's room)
or Evolution from two atoms
(by Whose law, huh?) -

(are you still with me?)

so that as in the most beautiful
metaphors and analogies
that poets delight in,
you and I and butterflies
and blue jays

and the smell of Spring
and yes, love -
are in some way related...

I think I'll stop there.

Michael Shepherd

In The Clown's Dressing-Room

out there
I showed you sadness, happiness,
tears, and joy,
now sit here
while I take my make-up off
and let us speak
of life and death, of
death and life

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi

I said to My Beloved
I love You
May I know You?
My Beloved said
I am unknown

I said to My Beloved
Still, I love You
May I see You?
My Beloved said
I am formless

I said to My Beloved
Still, I love You
Might I lose You?
My Beloved said
I am eternal

I said to My Beloved
Still, I love You
Might You leave me?
My Beloved said
I am always present

I said to My Beloved
I love You
My Beloved said
I am love itself

I said, O My Beloved

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi - 15

To My Beloved I said

O My Beloved,
tell me of Yourself;
I yearn to know

My Beloved said

O my dearest one,
tell me, rather, of yourself;
for only in knowing yourself
and knowing what you do not know
may you know Myself

to My Beloved I said

I breathe; and yet
I was never taught to breathe.
I breathe perfectly;
who taught me then, to breathe?

In the light of the Sun,
I see all that may be seen;
who taught my eyes to see?
who taught the Sun to shine?

With my breath,
with my eyes,
I see love, breathe love in my heart;
who put it there?

Every day, I eat,
every day I need to eat;
every day there is some food;
who makes earth into bread?

Every day I make mistakes,
yet every day I live again;
my children I forgive their mistakes;

who will teach me my mistakes,
who will forgive me my mistakes?

Every day I find my world the greater,
every day my powers are greater;
every day the world's glory is greater;
who made these boundaries to be boundless?

Every day, I think of death;
every day, I am alive;
every day, I seek the truth;
who joins these three, and who divides?

my Beloved said to me

In your questions, love.
In the answer, love.

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi 32-The Garden

O pilgrim on the path of life,
you have travelled far;
now you have come to rest
and make yourself a home;
and plant a garden there.

You measured out the plot of land,
designed it with your love,
laid precious stones along its paths,
planted trees for shade,
beneath them, marbled seats; and
roses red as heart's red blood, or
white as purity; scented as all beauty veiled;
among the roses, jasmine, iris, lily, honeysuckle;
and in the evening, night's pale flowers that yield
all the scented charms of cooling dusk;
and in the centre, a fountain plashing,
ever different, ever the same,
to be the token of your resting soul..

now you build a wall around it,
stone by stone. Two things
I ask of you, O faithful one:

make an arched gate within the wall
that you may not make your neighbour envious;
where you may invite him to join you,
that neighbour who is yourself disguised..

and as you lay each stone
to guard your peace from fox and wolf,
remember - that a paradise with walls
is but a parable, a paradigm,
for that true paradise which knows no walls;
rest there, traveller.

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi 34-Chickpeas

Today I'm cooking chickpeas,
having, as the Argentinians say,
'earned my chickpeas' – since
they cannot always run to
bread-and-butter but I digress

As the heat rises, the chickpeas bounce
up to the surface as if they'll
do all they can in that – what? –
half-living, half-dead state? -
to jump out of the pan and
go – where?

Sometimes they bounce up so vigorously
that I almost feel guilty about being so ignorant and
so insensitive about Creation's arrangements
for chickpeas and men.. isn't being boiled thus,
becoming soft and nutritious,
being eaten with (barely) gratitude,
releasing the generous earth's minerals
to feed this great creation, man, in person,
their destiny, their self-realisation?

Come to think about it, they are in
some several ways more virtuous than I:
they've done their level best to be
good chickpeas (have I in my way, equalled them?) :
they've not tried to be anything
other than themselves (alas, oh have I not...) :
they've rested content to be as they are,
not as far as I know desiring
mutation, or whatever (I'm full of desires every second..) :
they've improved continuously through
their life (alas, what can I claim...?) :
and they don't waste their precious energies
fearing that they'll die before they're quite, quite ready
(here I won't even start to comment...) :

In the world of metaphor, it seems,

chickpeas and I are equals;
perhaps, dear Rumi, that's
just how it ought to be.

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi 44 -Between, Lies Beyond

Some men argue all their life
against predestination
Some men argue all their life
against free will

You argue with yourself all your life
about predestination and about free will
Wise men say that God is to be found
where opposites meet and are resolved

Between predestination and free will
is to be found belief.

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi,31-The Swan

How beautiful the white swan,
gliding effortlessly, it seems,
the sunlight shining on those feathers
protecting its skin and body better
than do clothes protect a man!

White as if to proclaim God's beauty moving
on the waters, like the first day of Creation,
it dips its carefully constructed neck so elegantly
to find its invisible food...

while invisibly too, under the surface,
its legs paddle hard and fast...
Who would dare to call the swan
a hypocrite because of this!

In India they call the saints
who seem to glide so effortlessly
through life, glide across our gaze
so that for a moment, we would be them...
call them Paramahansa, great swan..

who knows how hard a swan
finds its life, moving against a fierce current,
lifting its huge body into the air,
knowing direction more clearly than any man...

who knows how hard a saint
works invisibly all the time, has worked,
will work, eternally... for us,
watching on the river-bank of life
the river, itself yearning for the sea,
to lose itself in the vast harbour of the waters...

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi-1

My Beloved said

As a lover watches secretly
his beloved admiring in the mirror
herself, glowing with his love,

so I watch you secretly;

polish that mirror, so that
we may see each other in it

and laughing,
wonder whom we see.

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi-13

I said to My Beloved

O my dearest One,
tell me of angels

My Beloved said

When you are awake,
you hear of angels and
wonder about angels

When you dream,
the heaven is full of angels

When you are deep asleep
you are that angel

of this your dreams
remind you

When you awaken,
remember this

Then you will have wings
and fly over these three worlds
as one

said My Beloved

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi-16

I said to My Beloved

How, my dearest one,
do you know those who truly love You?

My Beloved said

Not by their smiling face,
nor by their eagerness;
nor by the quickness of their response,
nor by the force and wealth of their response
pleasing though these are –

but by their stillness: as
a rose is still; or as a fine-proportioned vase is still;
or as a sunlit golden dome is still;
or as the bluest vault of heaven is still;

they have a stillness all about them; for
their hearts are ever at rest; there is no need
for their still heart to move; they are
always the same; they rest in love;
they meet you with all love,
they greet you with all love;
you cannot add to their true love,
you cannot take away from their true love;

and if you wish to test their love,
the test is constancy; there is no change in them;
they speak, they feel, they act, from constancy;
what is their substance? It is constancy;
I stand with them in constancy,
they stand with Me in constancy..

if that is not what you would ask of them in love,
then they are not for you; but they,
they are My true lovers, lovers of the truth in Me

-said My Beloved.

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi-17

I said to My Beloved

Who is dearest to You, O My Beloved –
those who seek to know You
or those who seek to love You?

My Beloved said

Those who seek to know Me
must first know themselves;
look deep into themselves
to know that which is not themselves,
to discard that which is not themselves;
then when they have found themselves
so deep within themselves
they shall find Me there

Those who seek to love Me
must first love themselves;
look deep with love into themselves
and discard that which they love but
which is not themselves;
then when they have found themselves
so deep within themselves
they shall find Me there

and those who truly know themselves
shall love themselves and Me,
shall love Me in themselves;

and those who truly love themselves
shall know themselves and Me,
shall know Me in themselves;

two paths lead all to Me:
some love knowledge,
some know love,
the treasure lies
where these paths meet

in Me

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi-18

I said to My Beloved

O My Beloved

I fear I have forgotten You!

I have fallen in love with the world –
when I walk out of the door
I swoon with the scent of the Spring air;
I hear each flower singing in the garden;
I sink into the heart of every rose;
I am dazzled by the sunlight;
I see the sky reflected in the lake
and lose myself in its shining stillness;
I see the sky and lose myself in the sky's immensity;

when I walk, my feet want to dance;
when I speak, my heart wants to sing;
in every person who passes
old or young,
smiling or frowning,
I see myself in them;
wherever I look, I see only love...

I have fallen in love with the world –
O My Beloved, have I forgotten You?

My Beloved said

I am the one in you who sees all this.

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi-19

When the desert breeze blew
in the direction of Majnun's tribal camp
Layla stood there hoping that
the wind rippling through her silken robe
would carry the scent of her love to Majnun

while Majnun stood there hoping
that the breeze would carry
from her forbidden encampment
the scent of Layla's love
to meet his own and merge

When the north wind blows cold
with snow to blanket the shivering earth,
when the biting eastern wind
comes with the rising sun
that sparkles on the morning frost,
when the warm, scented southern breeze
comes with the sunlight bringing the earth to life,
when the gentle breeze from the west
blows briefly as the evening sun departs,

may I know you, My Beloved,
to be that fierce wind, that gentle breeze,
standing where they arise,
blessing me with silent air,
blowing my spirit towards that place
where there is no 'to'; no 'from'; and no 'away'.

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi-39-The Desert

As the cool dawn brings the light
to the desert where the blue-white sky
meets the sand that time and man have brought,
and you wake the camel boy
to lead the camels from the waterside –

before you mount the lurching beast
and sway off into the desert on your path,
the camel-bells tinkling on the harness,

look into the camel's eyes.
There you will see mingled,
pride in its being; patience in its duty.

The wise men say that God is found
where opposites meet and are resolved.
Proud in its being, patient in its duty –
no great wonder, then, that the camel
has been chosen of God to take you
across the desert of your destiny in faith and trust;

for in the world of metaphor, where man meets God
in the mind's own language,
the camel is your body; dutiful proud servant
for the journey you must take; your company
for the length of time that journey takes.

So, traveller, when you reach the green and cool oasis
at the ending of the day's sufficient journey -
first tie your camel by the waters of refreshment
before you kneel; for food; for prayer; then
resting in the bright-eyed company;
the eyes of those who scan the round horizon as they ride
and wonder always, what oasis lies beyond.

Michael Shepherd

In The Spirit Of Rumi-40-The Nightingale And The Rose

As cold winter turns to warming Spring,
two lovers return from their winter rest.

The first rose shyly blooms; .
the nightingale pours out its song.

These are the two most generous lovers in the world;
do they not deserve each other?

In the daytime, while the nightingale takes its rest,
renews its generous throat,
the rose opens to embrace the world with beauty;

In the nighttime, while the rose folds and rests in sleep,
waiting to drink that purest dew of dawn,
the nightingale tells the world of beauty;

So each speaks in turn; both speak of beauty;
one in sound, the other in silence.
This way, telling of their love to the sleeping other;

Do they prefer it thus? Or is their listening
as sensitive as a mother's nighttime intuition,
hearing more clearly, inwardly, in rest?

Which is the Lover, which is the Beloved?
Does the nightingale return in spring
at the first perfume of the rose,
drifting from the hedge and garden
like the messages of Layla and Majnun?

Or does the rose wait impatiently to bloom in Spring
until it hears – its petals trembling as they listen –
the nightingale's song from that liquid throat?

Which is the Lover, which is the Beloved?
Does it matter to the world?

It matters only if that love is not equal; full;
generous beyond all worldly measure;
and then the Lover has become the Beloved,
the Beloved has become the Lover..

You and I, on our prayer-mat each day,
seeking God within ourselves,
which is the Lover, which the Beloved?
Have we yet become each other,
equal, full, and generous beyond all worldly measure;
night and day, as nightingale and rose?

As nightingales and roses sing forever
of each other's love
eternally, the round world turning, turning..

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

Michael Shepherd

In The Steps Of Rumi 85: A Messed-Up Life

Your life is a mess? In every way?
And no sign of change?
Your fault? Or that of others?
Does it matter which, any more?

Tears maybe? Time, then,
for a laugh...
try this:

thank your lucky stars –
or whatever or whoever
you might thank, in the unlikely
chance you feel like thanking –

for the freewill that allowed you
to create this lifelong mess..

You're joking? What a laughable idea!
That's totally absurd and inappropriate..
ineffective, too...

go on – laugh at the absurdity of it..

Sleep on it... and if tomorrow morning,
there's still the echo of your dismissive laughter –

something, a tiny something,
may have lodged in the mind,
saying, it's not hopeless, not
there, where freewill and laughter
were first thought of..

are first thought of..

Michael Shepherd

Interfaith Debate

God is dead.
God is great.

My God is great.
Your God is dead.

Your God is great.
My God is dead.

Who made the Sun?
My God.

Your God.
Great God.

So, one God?
'Not two'

So why are we fighting?
Oh it's politics.

Then leave God out of it?
My God – no...

He's on our side
He's not on your side

Shall we start again?

Michael Shepherd

Internet Dating: Found Poem 7

'She claimed to be
37
but was really
47,
asked to borrow
30 dollars,
spent the evening
smoking spliffs
and told me
she could see
her therapist's office
from the club
we were in.

Then she said
she was already
in love with
someone else.

And also
pregnant.'

Michael Shepherd

Its Jerry Hughes Day

Yesterday was Tuesday.

Today it's Jerry Hughes Day.

Happy Jerry Hughes Day, One and All.

Celebrate it.

Read his poems.

Read them one and all.

Michael Shepherd

Jewish Haiku

Four thousand years of Hebrew
and still no word for 'tact'.
So who needs it?

Michael Shepherd

Jogruffy

I used to be so vague
about some place called...Prague?
but now my mind's enlarg-
ed, I know it's really Prague..

Michael Shepherd

John Betjeman, Poet

Six distinguished men, soaked to the skin,
others with the ladies following,
a coffin, underslung,
a walk of half a mile along a rough churchgoing path,
the coffin swinging like a cradle,
in driving Cornish rain;
an almost merry funeral,
green and flowered with thought,
full of the memory of laughter

There's a photo – he's
about two or three years old –
this is a child born
with fear on his face
at having been born
to death; (the cradle
swinging like a coffin) :
instead of looking at the
birdie in the camera, it's the void he sees.

how to fill the intervening years?
walking just as Pooh Bear walks,
(his beloved, patched teddy bear
which accompanied him for life
had taught him how to walk)
solemn, careful, tubby, smallish steps,
hopping across a road
as if civilisation had taken him by surprise;
squashed pork pie hat concealing
lugubrious face, immobile, melancholy
when not exploding into laughter;
laughter, beauty, won the day.

how to fill the intervening years?
with the gaiety of company, love of women,
declarations of love and offers of marriage,
love affairs for all of ten minutes, sometimes lifelong;
with beauty, observation, comedy; the gift
of finding life one long party is perhaps of those

who've not forgotten death;

a sad face walking so alone,
leaving behind him in the lightest verse,
which won a nation's laurelled love, writing of
the absurdities of class, the built beauty of
a nation's heritage, washed by sea and custom,
wind and Cornish rocks and shore;
an unspoken magnificence; hints of eternity;
joy; delight, and eloquence; and laughter.

Six distinguished men, soaked to the skin,
others with the ladies following,
a coffin, underslung,
a walk of half a mile along a rough churchending path,
the coffin swinging like a cradle,
in driving Cornish rain;
an almost merry funeral,
green and flowered with thought,
full of the memory of laughter.

Michael Shepherd

Just 22 Miles Of Water

'To understand all
is to forgive all' –
that's one French saying
that doesn't seem to have
crossed the few miles of
'The English Channel', or
the Straits of Dover or
'The Sleeve' or the
'Passage of Calais' or
however the French translates –
with the Normans; so

perhaps they left it behind
at the Conquest along with
Armagnac and crepes and
their blonde mistresses
and never went back for it

like I wonder if that blunt
English saying,
'Those who can, do;
those who can't, teach; and
those who can't teach,
become critics...'
ever made it across La Manche
to that civilised nation where
critics, teachers, and the mind
are held in such respect; but

suppose we equate football
and poetry here:
football supporters know their
playing days are over, if
they ever happened anyway;
they aren't equipped to teach
except their sons, for some
happy time; and so they
hold to their precious love of
the beautiful game

by criticising the team,
the manager, and especially
the ref. Shoot the ref. So

maybe it's because
you, and you know who you are,
felt you couldn't be
the great poet which you so wanted
to be, and found you
couldn't teach, that
because you truly, deeply
love poetry and all
it stands for, and need
to preserve that love, you
criticise poetry so savagely here
in England, and
are hated for it;

strange isn't it that
a few miles across the Channel
from aggressive England
you'd be feted, revered, honoured,
as staunch upholder in critical essays
of the ever-renewing greatness of
French literature...

I'll settle for understanding all and
forgiving all

Michael Shepherd

Langston Hughes

I'd just like to put it down
in black and white,
Langston,
while it's there
that I'm proud to see
your name on my
'also read' list

I just wanted you to know.

(and happy 105th birthday, February 1 this year 2007...)

{{ and apologies to all those who googled or indexed this in the hope of reading something brilliant about him... the selection of his poetry here on Poemhunter is no way a full representation of his own brilliance. There's much more to find. }}

Michael Shepherd

Laugh Or Weep, Weep Or Laugh

Those masks of Comedy and Tragedy
that hang over theatre doors and stages
go back to those two Greek philosophers,
the one, who wept at the follies of mankind,
the other, who laughed at those same follies...

In order to justify the invasion of Iraq
in 2003, on the other grounds to 'regime change',
i.e. that Iraq had 'wep-ma-struc' in Bush-speak,
the federal government has made public
48,000 boxes of papers captured from Iraq.

These include instructions on how
to make an atomic bomb.

Michael Shepherd

Life In Shadow Land (David Taylor)

Our future is a projection of our past
with the promise of an ever present now
to grace proceedings
with spontaneous life and hope
beyond the present forward reaching shadows
of our past deeds.

(poem by David Taylor, poetry student)

Michael Shepherd

Lifelines

'after the divorce
he resumed drinking
and continued to write
his poetry'

Michael Shepherd

Lights! Camera!Action! ...

I'm setting up this scene more carefully
than any other; it's the key scene in
that film that's forever unreleased:

we're sitting there, quiet,
comfortable in each other's company;
there's an anticipatory pause as
I turn to her and say
'You've been a brilliant mother...'

and it doesn't matter how she replies;
I've said it at last...

perhaps if I do the retake with
every time, more care in detail
(faint background music? No;
that would make it artificial...)
do the retake, how many, ten, a hundred,
a thousand times? it would
come true..

And now I've set that up,
I can't imagine setting up the scene
with my father.. even now,
I cannot bear to think of those
pale blue eyes fierce with an anger
I could not bear to meet;

where's the script..? whether it would
shatter his world if I said (I can't even
say the words in mind...) :
'You've been a...'

or worse: if he softened, instantly..
and in a gentle voice, began to speak
for hours on end, all he had hoped
to make this son of his, but how..

.. or if (and here the script

is stained, unreadable...)
he were, too late, too late,
to say what fathers must all hope to say
one day, to grown-up sons..

but who cares a flunkey's muck
for films about self-pity?

Michael Shepherd

Like That

It is chandeliers
brought alive with candles
and diamonds and emeralds
thrown up to them
and the beach after a storm
a homecoming
a log thrown on the fire
the taste of lips
a baby's smile
a song remembered
a walk with children
a dog wagging its tail
a welcome
a meeting of eyes
a sea-wet shell of pearl
alabaster
a kitchen smell's promise
an old friend after so long
the scent of daphne
laughter between
an unexpected touch of hand on arm
the first primrose in the hedge
fresh paint
the moment the tide turns known
a smile from a stranger
a love letter half read
the first bike
new socks
a baby rabbit that doesn't run away
lavender
a new knowing
wind-dried bed linen
a first memory
hand knitting
the garden after rain
tears of laughter
raspberries
a sky full of stars twinkling
cicadas singing at night

the smell of mountain herbs
a trickling brook
greenness

it is like that

Michael Shepherd

Lines From A Poet's Inner Landscape

His day is but a true disguise;
a quiet Sunday, uninterrupted by the doorbell,
unchained by circumstance, freed from fashion,
in loneliness so deep he can't explain,
almost crying because he can't describe it.,
waiting for the rain of the day which has yet to be.

He doesn't have the nerve to speak, just gazes,
but with sufficient humility to make him proud;
thankful for the conversation that he grasps,
but fails to speak out loud;
the surroundings say everything that needs to:
dry rot's concealed beneath his creaking boards.

Exploding words and questioned deeds -
to stretch his mind to comprehend this wealth?
He walks around outside to clear his head -

his cul-de-sac, come alive again.

(Each line is stolen from a fellow poet here)

Michael Shepherd

Lines To A Poet Of Middling Age

You are now too old
to indulge in arrogance

and yet you are too young
to have anything to be arrogant about

you are in mortal peril
at the midpoint of a life
which is not a life

which has no past and no future
for you are not present in it

yet grace abounds
and with it, poetry

Michael Shepherd

Listening To Lawrence Ferlinghetti

The story is.. no..
the history is.. no...
the story of the history is,
that back in the 15th century,
the wild battered shores of Portugal
threw up strange vegetable things,
strange woods, strange scented things, that spoke of
somewhere that was not Europe; so, was there,
far or near across the sea, between Europe and
the end, the plate's-edge of the world
where anything might happen
like, a fall into infinite space.. falling, falling..
an island? and if an island, large or small,
did it, at the other side, fall straight into that nowhere,
or did it have a West Coast?

what human excitement for the adventurous!
and as each of us grows up, this same excitement..

I remember when we were wondering
in a tired but changing world
who we were, what the world was, mid-1950s,
and word came (O brave new world
that hath such creatures in't...)
of people called the Beats – did that mean
beaten down, or beatific, or, right on the beat? –
from the East and then the West Coast
of that very large continent across the sea..

and after we'd read Ginsberg, Corso, Burroughs,
in 1958 came a sweet book of poetry,
its photographic cover all whites and blacks and grays
and lights – 'A Coney Island of the Mind' –
and I treasured it, even when it was closed...

The picture of the wild and loose and free
that we had then, did not accord
with the human being of magnificence
who stood there at the reading-desk,

huge in his eighties, with a face and build
straight out of Italy of the Renaissance –
even with a shirt of almost Tuscan red –
who fleshed out, statured out, the word
'patrician' – and read his still wild poetry
to a hand-held electronic score
of seagulls over harbour lights,
like some Dante who'd been to hell
and back, and walked Italian streets,
and ancient Palestinian mountains too,
who'd heard that message that time's tide throws up
of a tomorrow that's not like today;

proclaiming a humanity beyond even anarchy
with all the kindness of those
who guard the human race.

Michael Shepherd

Living In The Heart's Memory

A gentle touch upon the forearm
with a hand, gloved or warm with life,

outside the church door;
turning away from the open grave;
by that concrete place
where they lay the floral tributes
by the cemetery chapel;
or later, as you hand the food around;

a gentle touch upon the forearm
or a hand sought for to squeeze and hold; or
man to man, they favour a shoulder briefly gripped,
as if that's the pressure point
where empathetic camaraderie should be applied;

the single sentence of consolation,
sometimes so well rehearsed, it comes out awkwardly –
'she'll be much missed...'
'you have so many memories...'
'he'll always be there in our hearts...'
'if there's anything...'

they've been through this, themselves,
or fear the time they shall –

...'words must be said,
but yet there are no words for this;
accept then, these few words
in lieu of that deep silence
which is itself in lieu of words...'

* * *

measured, immutable, as precise
as any equation of the calculated world,
the heart's memories:
every moment that our heart in many years
opened to them, the heart has stored.

We know the mind can span the imagined world –
from travel brochures to the thought of heaven;
yet we forget that greater still, the heart is vast –
there's all the room for them to live on there,
sustained by every moment of love freely given; for
the whole creation is one single act of love.

[written for a bereavement website]

Michael Shepherd

Love Love Love

Oh it's so easy to say -

'Give what you think you lack -

You feel unloved? Then give love, and love, and love...'...

On the other hand -

Do you have any better advice?

Michael Shepherd

Love Me... Who?

Small-town romantics
once might live in fear:
demon lovers, married,
or didn't live near...

now the small ads
cry from afar:
'GSOH
for LTR? '

Michael Shepherd

Loveknots

In the community of this website
like a girdle round the earth
(did you read that, Will?) ,
sharing the inner lives,
the hearts laid open in poetry,

I see that love

brings insecurity,
and disillusion (where there was illusion) ,
and bitterness at love that's not returned
or worse, withdrawn,
and sometimes hate,
distrust,
withdrawal from love perhaps the worst

and is there any remedy?

only a small crumb of communal solace
and a curious technological discovery (thanks to our webmaster) :

that 'my' poem quoting a friend:

'What you think you lack - give that..'
(because by giving, you find you have it
and can never lose it, lack it)

has had 100 times more hits than any other poem of mine.

I leave you with that thought.

Michael Shepherd

'Me And Teddy Bears - The Truth' (Exclusive)

I've never owned a teddy bear (aw...)

my parents read the child-rearing bibles
of the time, maybe that's what it was

but I'm not pleading deprivation or
mental abuse; into my life
came Rex the lion cub

we loved each other from the moment
I set eyes on him. We were about
the same age, that was taken for granted,
since he was my best friend and

of course, since I can't compare
lion cubs with teddy bears since
I couldn't at the time, I'm guessing
what the pros and cons might be:

Rex wasn't someone you could easily
prop up on the pillow at the bed-head
and talk to – he didn't do talking-to
since he had an existence independent of me

but on the other hand
he loved to be rolled around with
with his prickly whiskers
and good nature, with the reassurance
that he was a lion, small but already
with very practical paws and would
protect me if required; his eyes were always ready for fun yet
very much set on what was ahead.
I think lion cubs are a fair match for teddies
but I would say that wouldn't I

there was probably a difficult time
when I fell in love with Pooh Bear
for life
but I've blocked that out

and my parents (child-rearing books again)
were very clever at removing toys at
the 'right' moment to enable their child
to grow up. Well that failed.

But Rex did prepare me
psychologically for
that first puppy who
welcomed me unhesitatingly
into his life

but just recently, to celebrate
my second childhood
I've taken to wondering if
it's not too late to acquire
a teddy bear

but no taking the first one offered thanks:
I've become a bit of a connoisseur
rather like signing up with
a marriage bureau: OK but
there may be better
around the corner...

I wander discreetly ('It's for my niece...')
round department stores
with all their vulgar rubbish,
charity shops with their loved, furry balding spotted
survivors hoping for
a second happy marriage
or happier

looking carefully at their expressions
full-face, side view
(Good God, are their manufacturers aware
of the difference 'twixt bear and bear?)
wondering if it's The One

please keep this to yourself 'cos
I don't want my friends fixing me up
with some merry widow(er) of a bear
just because they're sorry for the old git

I'll take my time thanks
since I'd like to think
my previous partners will approve my choice
after all it's for life and
we older and wiser ones have
so much to offer

Michael Shepherd

Medieval English Cathedral

Once I had this fanciful idea of recording
the silence in each great cathedral
and marketing these...

As you pull open the worn and squeaky door
there's a strange moment of apprehension as if
you're not sure what will greet you - a fullness
or an emptiness; a football-stadium roar
or a silence; an earfull of praise or
a mindfull of questions...

but the first step inside, and a silent gasp -
it's bigger inside than outside...
and the sound of your steps soars to the high
indescribably glorious roof like a
small bird looking for an escape.

so that you'd like to sing a note or two
to hear them repeated by those
invisible angels of the echo, waiting poised
in the stoniness of the walls and roof
like the mountain cliffs and valleys
from whence the stone was dragged
by devotion.

and you feel an intruder into the space of history
waiting for you to find your place.

How wonderful if at this moment, history unreeled;
played itself backwards; and as the years rolled back,
the cathedral nave would fill with the quietly respectful
devout. Then back again, and the voices would be more raw,
rich with the earth they'd just been tending.

Would the praise, to our ears, sound more heartfelt?
we'll never know.
Reel back again to that almost
unimaginable scene - the walls rising, still part built;
the clambering masons, chisels singing on the stone,

lifted only a little lower than the angels
on wooden planks on slender wooden scaffold,
the squeal of pulleys, the sudden silence of tools
and the call for the master mason;
and up there where the roof is still blue-grey sky,
the occasional bird from an optimistic nest
built the year before in the part-built spire, fluttering,
searching for a crumb or two from
the mason's heady meal

as birds may wheel again over half-there walls
when please God no the roof falls in and
respectful visitors walk down the tidy gravelled path
where once the aisle was walked, bowed head and singing,
but now so neatly grassed where pews and praise once stood,
remarking out aloud or in their heart
how the silence is, still, living, there.

Michael Shepherd

Metaphysical Weblink Love Poem

How can I COMPUTE love's DATABASE?
Thus WATCH as saintly love, God IN THE END,
INCHes its way into immortal life's ASSURANCE
in the seeming OYSTER of my heart?

As SPAM is to the living red-blood MEAT,
or TURKISH harem to a WEDDING vow,
so are my SPIRITS to your LONGed-for BEAUTY;
thrice DISTILLED within th'alembic of my soul,
since but EXTENSION of your SATISFACTION,
the PLEASING of your BEAUTY, is the FASHION
of my so painful-LENGTHENED, longing love?

You, the LONG-LASTING perfect pearl,
the faithful JEWEL 'twixt the BREASTS
of Venus' very self. Though mortal flesh
may wither, crumble and to DEATH, DECAY,
love's ROCK, love's MUSIC, live eternal FRESH,
and jewelled STONES and SOUNDS proclaim Your day.

(acknowledgements to my agent, Bill Wordsworth-Cash)

Michael Shepherd

Misty Pings

Sometimes fat fingers on the keyboard
produce the surreal that leaves me
not cursing as usual
at the way my brain brain he says
and hand were not wired up properly,
but laughing out loud
with sheer delight like a child
meeting the joy of absurdity in words
which somehow gets suppressed
in the years of growing... down?

I've just written a comment
about such matters of mistyping, and
there on the paper it is in black and white -
'misty pings'...

remember those old steam typewriters
with their tap tap and just before the end of the line,
a bell pinged to warn you?

I'm sitting here entranced by
misty pings,
thinking yes, could describe some of my poems...
I think I may have hit a brand-new metaphor, like..
like a nail hit on the head.
In the fog, or the mist of dawn.
ping.

Michael Shepherd

Montage Triste

The hyacinths intoxicate upon the window-sill
and I think of you

Intellectual montage –
Eisenstein was the first to spell it out
and use it memorably;
a quick clip of one scene,
then another; the agile mind
in each of us, connects the two;
it's routine now.

The candle on the bath-tub flickers
and I think of you

One close shot of fires reflected on a window;
then a long shot of the beach below, the tents, the fires;
then the sky and fatal stars; seen before Eisenstein –
read Pope's Iliad, the night before
the fall of Troy; it reads like
a shooting-script, a hundred years before film...

The sound of church bells down the road
and I think of you

Then there's the jump-cut; one scene, then another
but what's the connection; only emotion
may later turn the key; this too, poetry may use.

The candles on the altar burn, burn as if for ever
and I think of you

Michael Shepherd

Mr. Edward Lear Meets The Australian Poets In Limerick

There was a young laddie named Pefecation
Who passed hugely and frequently, defecation;
But the social disdain
And the blockage of drain
Made poor Pitt dig a pit for his defecation.

Michael Shepherd

Mutant

disconcerting from the first moment. how to know
freak from mutant. what rules and if not rules, what.
freaks release the mind from proud obligations of duty.
hate, admire, destroy, venerate; easiest of all, ignore:
all these are permitted by the freak;
mutants threaten status; lessons to be learned, vain glory
to the first to claim to place, relate, pin down, tame.
but not this. where it comes from, quite uncharted yet.
not freak but mutant. that is certain. regret that this is so
diminishes us in our own image.

it lives, works, by night. invisibly. under the skin
so to speak if speak. in what speech. what brain. for when tomorrow
next week next year we speak to it, its language learned
we'll know we knew it not yesterday even today. it speaks us
not we it. easier then to write it off as freak
but irrevocably, echo on echo, it's mutant. gratitude
might even be in order. but not yet, not now.

for uneasiness is the nature of this thing, that lives. the easy-going
are not invited here. it's there to bring unease. only when
we have lived with it for say a year, may, may not, reveal,
not where it comes from nor where it may be going as it passes
but perhaps a glimpse of why it is here, no more than that.
you will not like it any more than you like this. naught
is for your comfort gentles all. one day you may see
beyond it, a fleeting invitation to gratitude. one day
you may see beyond it, something like a love so great
that it's not what you wanted to want from love.
and then it may vanish whence it came.
or perhaps become so familiar that you wonder
why it seemed a freak, a mutant, for now
forever it speaks you. poetry.

Michael Shepherd

My Olympics

There was huge pressure –
we was under a lot of pressure...

But I remembered the instructions -
keep cool, do just what you've been trained to do...so,

to get through, do so well
was just amazing..just amazing...

I feel – just – fantastic..
the whole experience has been – fantastic..

and yes, I guess my sights are now
on London two hundred twelve..

the stadium, the village, the facilities, were just fantastic..
but now it's over, I just want

to get home again – I'm really proud
I volunteered to be a lavatory attendant..

...amazing... just fantastic..

Michael Shepherd

My Sacred Ant

The milk bottles were resting amidst geraniums
on the doorstep this morning,
to be picked up with half-open eyes

but then, put down in the alien land
of steel sink's draining board,
two ants caught in their morning explorations
who had inadvertently hitched a ride, jumped off;
and now, bade fair to steal my heart;

two chaps who lived to work,
they presented the soul of agitation –
backwards and forwards on the steel sink they scurried,
seeking orientation, seeking to continue their allotted work
in an alien land where the sun
had spun a cartwheel in the sky

how to return such swift and now so agile movers
to their colony which lurks around the wooden gatepost
as if around some benevolent totem,
giving itself to its devotees, to be eaten totally away?

I took a sheet of A4 paper, trapped the one
against the steel; the other refused to join its fellow;
both evidently suspicious of my kind.

I started back to the front door with my precious cargo
which was becoming more precious by the second;
but in its agitation, it dropped off, to find
some path to life's purpose on the floor;

I with some indefinable sin
to expiate on behalf of mankind
which cares more for large things than for small

Michael Shepherd

My Wife And The Other Man

My wife is having
a relationship with
the bank manager

those extra three inches,
that 20% increase in girth,
those 18 hours of
chemically induced
extended pleasure
come courtesy of

the overdraft sanctioned by
the bank manager whose
smug image comes to mind
at the most ecstatic and
inappropriate moments

Michael Shepherd

New Balls Please... Yes It's Another Rant...

Big sports weekend...
in a coupla hours, Wimbledon,
or to local residents, Womble-din...

someone's gointa win; someone's
gointa lose. That's life
for millionaire sportspersons;
love-all. New balls please, loser...

then those post-match, post-coital,
exquisitely embarrassing how-was-it-for-you,
high-thrive or detumescent interviews...

will the dreaded HOW virus strike again?
live-mike brings on rabbit-in-the-headlights syndrome –

at the end of the day, we know
the answer – that's what it's all about,
all credit to the other guys...
yes, there was pressure – that's what it's...

it's the questions, though, where the new
HOW virus strikes –
'HOW pleased are you to have won? ...'
'HOW sorry are you to have lost? ...'

that's like, on a scale of nought to infinity?
No lawyer would dare to use such
a leading phrase: 'HOW sorry, Mr Under-age X,
are you to have murdered my client...? '
'Objection! Objection! ...'

'Oh, I'm really sorry to have won today...
it'll put me in the supertax bracket,
I'll see less of the kids, with
all those personal appearances...
who'll get the kids anyway when we divorce? ...'

'Oh I'm really glad to have lost...

gives me something to aim for, I'll
get to see the kids more, the wife's
quite relieved... I can still afford
the tinted windows and the limo,
then I don't get to hear the shouts
of 'loser! ' when they see me...'
and anyway, the other guy
was better on the day... all credit to the lad/girl...
I've got better legs, I'll get more modelling contracts
than that ugly bull-cow...'

OK that's enough, time to switch on
to those pre-match interviews –
'HOW confident are you of winning
today, with that extra pressure
of being the favourite...blah...blah...'

'HOW much does the prospect
of being a nobody-yet
and playing the hugely popular favourite
with better legs and a winning smile
bother you...? '

HOW much do you care about sport,
fatso saddo beer-belly couch-potato,
in that wanna-be-part-of-it, expensive
T-shirt...? One bowl of popcorn?
Two bowls of popcorn? How many
packets of crisps...?

Hey look at the time,
there's high drama out there
on Henman Hill...
see yer, chizmate..

Michael Shepherd

News Headline Found Haiku

National Split Pea Soup Week
has passed its midpoint
without incident

Michael Shepherd

Northern Haiku

In the April wind, white cherry blossom;

On the ground, snowflakes.

Michael Shepherd

Not Quite Drowning But Waving

Please
scroll back
to Chris Higginson's
'Zimbabwe' plea
for your
poetic sympathy.

The prize
is in the international currency
of the heart

Michael Shepherd

November 28,2007 Is The International Day Of Stillness: A Poem For The Day

'Stillness is my beloved teacher.
From her, I learn new things every day.'
I said to Stillness,
How can you teach me so well?

Stillness said,
By being with you always.
I said to Stillness,
How can you teach me so much?

Stillness said,
Because you have much within you;
I, but a mirror for your mind;
I, but a mirror for your heart.

I said to Stillness,
O my beloved teacher, will you
promise me you will never leave me?

Stillness said,
I cannot leave you;
though you can leave me..
but what is stillness without a companion?
I said to Stillness,
Is your work hard?

Stillness said,
I have the most wonderful task that I could wish for:
I sit with babies while they smile;
I sit with children in the classroom
as they delight to learn;

I sit with the angry and disturbed,
and watch them grow to peace;
I sit with the sad and lonely and bereaved
and watch them rediscover happiness and joy;
I sit with kings and queens and rulers

while they find wisdom and mercy;

I sit with governments and committees
while they find reason and justice;
I sit with artists and scientists,
and watch them find new things outside themselves,
and find new things within themselves;

I sit with those who pray or meditate,
as they find God in themselves;
I sit at the feet of saints
while they become perfection;

I walk in the gardens of the dawn,
I walk in the gardens of the dusk;
in the deep of the night, I watch;
I fly with birds, in the silence of the air;
I watch the animals as they explore the earth;
I listen to the growing of the trees and plants;
I listen to the opening of the flowers;

Said Stillness,
I am the friend and the companion of all;
who would not love to share my life with me?
I said to Stillness,
May I never leave you.
And Stillness looked me in the eye,
and Stillness smiled at me:
'I am born with every creature born
to be their friend for life.'

Michael Shepherd

Nude Erections In Contemporary Poetry

Is the whole of Canada
supporting itself by the export
of Viagra and such? And how
did they get my email address
and share it so generously
amongst those who don't know my age
and how the doctor says
I shouldn't get excited with
my high blood pressure and all that?

I hope they all take their work home
and get fired next day for being late to work.
I think it's called a pyrrhic victory.

Michael Shepherd

Oh It Can Happen Any Time

it can happen any time
and there's no place which is
too improbable for it or
cannot be contained in it

you're walking down the familiar street
or on the familiar crowded train

and you step out of what was before
though there's no longer a before
and into here and now into

that place which has no place
that time which has no time
where love is not a word but is
and inside knows no outside and
you know you've always known it
in that somewhere which is here and now
and that you always shall

and there's enough love for everywhere
and everything and everyone
now that you've met yourself
oh it can happen any time

Michael Shepherd

Oh Lord...

O Lord, out of the depths do I cry unto Thee,
O Lord, hear my prayer:
I am stricken unto the heart,
and mine enemies close in about me;
to whom but Thee may I cry for succour?

* * *

'We do apologise, but due to an
unusual volume of calls,
all our supervisors are currently engaged.
Your call is important to us –
please continue to hold..'
(music)

Michael Shepherd

On Modern Poetry

On the cover
of those old black hymnbooks
in those old dark churches
you can just about read
'Hymns Ancient and Modern'

As time goes by,
'ancient' gets a longer and longer history
and curiously so too
does 'modern'

Michael Shepherd

On The Dawn Of Christ's Nativity [sonnet]

This starry dawn – the wise men yet afar –
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?
All birth's a miracle; no less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;
straw is rustling as they, manger-drawn,
find unfamiliar form – so warm – to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed,
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

One For Andy

Loved your poem about those
carefully-prepared but slightly
mis-timed, Famous Last W...

but as Lazarus said, there's always
the replay factor.. though not many of us
get to check back on our timing
or so we might think but then who knows

but the audience, they have
to live with it: a farmer friend
saw to the cattle, came back in,
had his supper, suddenly said to her
I've got to go m'dear
she said oh won't you stay for a cupper tea
he said no I've got to go
and dropped down dead

she remembers the conversation all too clearly

Michael Shepherd

Palinode For An Equinox

this time of year offers
naught for our comfort
so it might appear

days draw in. the year
seems tired at the thought
of doing it all over again

colder as if
the heart has said its last
and hope itself had forgotten
what it's supposed to do

this time of year
is a test of mind. a huge
seasonal game, thought up
by a child's wisdom and
suppressed laughter, lips
bubbling with love

on a sunny day, this time of year,
feel the spring, with
suppressed laughter haha caught you
stealing in like Dad to your bedroom on
Christmas Eve with
something the heart hopes for
but didn't expect it would get this year

pull this cracker with me
and a little present falls out
wrapped in a curl of timeless...
here, read it for yourself

Michael Shepherd

Philosophy

Philosophy
means, from the Greek,
the love of wisdom;
I'd like to think
it also means
the wisdom of love

Michael Shepherd

Plato's Cafe

Scrolling Wikipedia
for entries on 'Perception'
this entry – scrappy and unclear –
produced a new conception:

referring to the standard quotes
tradition offers, to be safe,
before the bolder modern thoughts,
it mentioned 'Plato's Cafe'...

imagination leapt for joy:
dazzling hubbub of philo-sophy,
sunglassed and gesticulating;
strong wine, expressive coffee...

or should it be pronounced today
as genteel afternoon café?
or, workmanlike, the niff and naff
of greasy spoon and bikers' caff?

but thanks, O Wikied editors,
for this so joyous Grecian twist:
long may this Left-Bank image stay
of how philosophers should exist,
and spend their dialectic day:
coffee and exquisite gateau;
Gauloises at Le Cave de Plato..

Michael Shepherd

Poem For Godfrey

You wear your heart upon a sleeve
that's shaking with sad laughter,
knowing a world of tears and smiles –
yet, which before? which after?

your answer, friend, is blowing not
in winds of time nor gain nor loss;
but from a heart that's not forgot
where tear meets smile upon the Cross.

Michael Shepherd

Poem For Tara, By Request

I may be
dyslexic

but I know
not to

carp
over someone else's

parc

Michael Shepherd

Poem For The Sorely Tested

Beside the telephone
a full-size, professional
real leather
punchbag
on a hefty, weighted
non-shift stand
and with a substantial
recoil

inscribed in fine gold lettering
'I am sent to try you'

that deals with
the human
and the divine
aspects
together

(For Tara)

Michael Shepherd

Poetic Swedes In Outer Space Sensation

Did you see today's news headline?
'Swedes Beam Poetry into Outer Space'
it takes 25 years to get to Vega
and the review comes back 50 years after writing it.

so get your kids to start right now
and in 50 years time the review comes back
when they're 60 years old
saying
'This poetry reads like a ten-year-old's...
is that the best you humans can manage
after all these years? '

space-time has its problems

Michael Shepherd

Poets Are Holy Hypocrites

poets are holy hypocrites;
it's their blessing and their curse.

they sit for as long as it takes
like terriers at a foxhole

or for second-best practice,
at a rabbit-hole,

totally still, alert, all their powers
poured into attention;

what a lesson dogs
are for humans

then – a movement in
their consciousness; it could be

anything creative – a film, a poem;
and with it comes the sense

of wonder; they are as children
living in an eternal present

of the universe as gift;
they take up their pen or keyboard

and, so carefully, as they
would handle a new-born baby,

write down this spell for that it is
for the benefit of others quite unknown

and then like a christening shawl,
white, soft, handmade with love,

offer it to the world.
then some who believe its magic

read the spell, are reborn
or cured, or restored

to good health and humour
or simply have a good day

while those who don't believe the spell,
well of course the magic doesn't work for them

so far so very good. But then
those who aren't into wanting spells

and have opinions about
their opinions, say, that word is wrong,

so it's not a magic spell. it's a bad spell,
in fact it's not a spell at all

and others who also have opinions
about their opinions, say, that word is right,

so it's a good and magic spell; and there they are,
all crowded round peering through their

dirty glasses, pushing and shoving and shouting
to get nearer the spell and have their say

and oh dear, there's the poet in there too
saying oh do you really think that

I'd better look at it again
and see if you might be right

and sad to say, some poets
begin to worry, about whether

the words of their spell are quite right
not trusting the magic, as if

it came from them and not from itself...
and the magic shrugs its shoulders

and says oh well and goes some place else
where it might be more appreciated

poets are holy hypocrites;
it's their blessing and their curse

[with more than a little acknowledgement to the vision of Michael Leunig,
cartoonist and Living National Treasure]

Michael Shepherd

Politically Incorrect Feminist Poem 1

So how would you feel if
you were lined up with the
80 virgins (I always thought
it was 76 - tough...)
lined up for
a 'martyr'
who'd just killed 80 people
including the odd fun-da-mental-ist?

Read the small print, honey.

(And that goes for you too, guys,
if the guy was.. well, you know?)

Just askin'...

Michael Shepherd

Politically Incorrect Poem 2

Tell you what

I'll pray five times a day
if you love your neighbour as yourself

deal?

Michael Shepherd

Politically Incorrect Poem 3

The latest European edict from Brussels
commands that horses
must have a passport, with photo...
(our local brewery
still used them for local deliveries -
accountants proved them cheaper;
and of course, great publicity)

How many horses
can you get in one
photo-booth?

And they'll need quite a few more
shit-hot
passport inspectors

so watch that arab stallion
strolling so casually
onto the cross-Channel ferry -
might he....?

Michael Shepherd

Politically Incorrect Poem 4

Which is the greater hypocrite -

One who kills for the sake of Allah, the Merciful?

One who kills for the sake of democracy?

One who kills for the sake of oil?

Michael Shepherd

Politically Incorrect Poem 5

I'm a hunky
babe-magnet
so should I
be wearing one of those
black postboxes
to spare the chicks from
lusting after me?

Yours metaphorically,

Michael Shepherd

Politically Incorrect Poem 6, Or, Jolie Jolie Wedding Vows Updated

... for richer, or for richer still,
in status or in wealth,
in parenthood or career opportunity,
for as long as my current commitments permit,
I take thee...

Michael Shepherd

Pollution And Climate Change

First, of nature's course, it was the birds;
for theirs the air, above and over all;
knowing by intuition without need of words
as providential, seasoned, sure
as sparrow's fall;
and knowing too
how much to trust to men
who do not even trust each other.

It was, of nature's course, the snowy eagle
entrusted with the task:
the only bird who may look straight into the sun; and thus
to whom that message might be given, to ask,
to pass on to his lord; the only bird
whose plumage may reflect the sun's majestic rays,
and live; perhaps to bring a message back.

As to the message - was it just a sprig
of leaves from tallest tree - polluted, withered, black as crow?
or was it something inner in the words
as spoken on the flight from wintry sun to warmth, or
warmth to Northern spring?

They watched, the conference of the silent birds,
while snowy eagle, like the teepee's early morning smoke,
ascended higher, higher, into the sun's great eye,
which never man - eagle alone - may see;
and... do birds hope?
Or as the twilight falls upon the earth, accept
that what shall be, shall be?

Michael Shepherd

Pour Gonzille (From The French)

Put art
into life
with your work
and your work
will put life
into your art

Michael Shepherd

Pride - For Mike

You, Lord, are the pride
You are the bananaskin
You are the fall
I am the fall guy
You are regret
You are humility
You come before

Michael Shepherd

Primavera

Some years, Spring steals in slow and steady,
evoking a daily increment of warmed gratitude.
Not this year: first it came too early,
then thought better of it: a nip of proper winter first
would strengthen human gratitude, thought Spring...

Now it's trying again, reminded perhaps
that all this Easter stuff is due; and markets must recover...
the sunlight curves into that yard or too
of sheltered space in the garden where
I dare to sit, five minutes of passing sunlight one day,
ten the next, and so on.. will the warmth now
reach my medicated heart?

Botticelli – Marsilio Ficino breathing
over his shoulder, some suspect –
tried to cram all this into a 2-D version
of a moving 3-D world: the spinning top
of divine love, passing through
three worlds, the physical, mental, spiritual,
on the first day of eternal Spring itself.
A mighty work of failed success, successful failure,
God's work depicted in a lick or two of fresh paint..

And I, sitting in the sun my fifteen minutes,
am Primavera too: sun on chest and legs,
upbeat thoughts in mind; and in that world of spirit,
the springing stirring of some memory
of that world sometimes inhabited,
where childlike wonder was the daily norm;
and later, that enthusiasm, stirring of the gods within,
that takes teenagers towards some ultimate career;
then, adult stirrings of the wiser heart:
praise; gratitude; and laughter; care, concern;
all ancient virtues loved for their own sake;
and shining there beyond, a glory and a splendour,
a light beyond belief..
these, to the wintered heart
bring again, the stronger for that testing time,

the first green showers of the loving spring of truth.

Michael Shepherd

'Proportionality'. A Disgusted Rant.

We here in Britain have a traditional
belief in fair play.
Like, if we lose an away match,
we trash their town centre,
hold the town square as our turf
for several hours against the
full might of the police
who hours before, got us safely
to our seats and kept the home crowd
from throwing more at us
than we could shout at them

(That's one thing about
not learning foreign languages:
they have to learn English
to insult you...)

Proportionality.
It's reassuring.
A level playing field.
And if one end dips away,
change ends at half time.

Like Waterloo, as we were taught,
was won on the playing fields of Eton.
Whatever that means.
That's Waterloo in Belgium,
not the rush-hour and every
man and woman for themselves.

So it's really offensive to our sense
of fair play when those countries
of the Middle East who love fighting
and who's ever going to stop them,
do they want to, it's
a national sport, kinda gun Olympics –
when those countries don't play
the rules of proportionality:
the death toll in the 'conflict'

- and Dubya-or-quits agrees with this –
should be more or less equal;
and in these democratic days,
that should include civilians
in with the troops.

Proportionality.

It's reassuring.

A level killing field.

Bodies strewn equally.

Perhaps if it dips away one end like this,

They should change ends at half time.

Though, would anyone notice?

Michael Shepherd

Pushing Up The Daisies

Suppose that in the graveyards of our grief,
so still and silent, frozen by our tears,
those corpses, by some heavenly alchemy
pushed up, not only daisies, but new flowers
of strange, new, glorious species, in their love:
messages of all not known or said
when merely human; now, in heaven's bright light
their gift from death to life of timeless love
to generate a generation 's seed:
what heaven on earth would flowering graveyards be...

Now close your eyes, and wipe your tears away-

Why yes - perhaps that's true.

Michael Shepherd

Rate This Poem

I'd love to be inside the head
of the Phantom Oner as she
strikes again... with one deadly One,
cuts the previous ten right down
to a grovelling 5.5...

'that'll teach you, you big-headed smug,
with your groupies and brown-nosers; all your pissy posse...
THIS IS NOT A POEM...'

and with one bound – I'm free!

No longer need I try to write
a poem rich in metaphor like some jewelled scabbard,
declaring sparkling wealth and power;
distracting from the question,
is the sharp sword, of discrimination,
still there, sharp, inside?

or a poem so full of music's sound,
it sings itself into the mind
like leprechaun with emerald guile,
in the ear of sleeping child...

or, any other sort of poem –
I'm free ... now I know I can
please everyone, someone, no-one.. on a scale
from nought to ten or should that be
from ten to nought?

I can now just be; be my one self...
write from the heart;
remembering that all others have a heart...so,
thanks, O noble one...

Michael Shepherd

Ratting On The Ratings

They've been at
my stats!

it's taken them weeks,
the stupid geeks

I've gone from nine or ten
back then

to average four
or not much more

they haven't finished... so it seems...
do I feel diminished? In your dreams!

like a melting, sad poetic snowman?
the answer's a belting, glad, oh no, man!

doing all those hits
must be boring, silly shits

but although it's boring
they've sent my 'total hits' soaring -

raised to the skies my poetic cred -
you'd think, by thousands I've now been read!

sticks and hackers
may hurt my knackers

but at least these nerds
can't mess with the words

yet

Michael Shepherd

Relationships

'I love him – that's why we're together...'

'I love her too – but sometimes
we drive each other up the wall...'

If your past, mate, were her past –
this person that you oftentimes love;

if her pain – which she does not
herself understand, yet feels;
(and always at the wrong time for you..):

if her self-awareness – sometimes
so sharp and so perceptive –
matched at every moment
your fluctuating, sometime
equally sharp, perceptive, own –

then, you would think and act
exactly as she does...

ah, there's forgiveness;
there's compassion; and there's peace;

and then, there's only - love;
there's only love.

Love is always now;
and then, there's only love.

(With acknowledgements to Eckhart Tolle...)

Michael Shepherd

Rilke To The Young Poet

Believe that
with your feelings
and your work
you are taking part in
that which is greatest;

the more strongly you cultivate this belief,
the more will reality
and the world
go forth from it.

Michael Shepherd

Rudagi's Wine Song

I'm writing to you from that blessed place

where desert meets oasis, in Iran

and it's the 10th century, now, today, just here:

and so I write of wine; and how

it speaks of God's great grace and gift;

you may wish to translate the word as 'beer'...

this Al'Cohol is given us to reveal

that, which we hide but really are:

who guessed you had such courage

and such strength when you, (with all divine respect)

so wisely measured, generously, your drink,

and drink revealed the measure, too, of you?

And you – who think yourself a slave to home and work

or lack of all the things you most desire,

now know yourself to have been born as free..

for freedom is the first thing men require..

and if I say the joy of drink

is like 'the rose's scent or jasmine bloom' –

remember, I, Rudagi, was born blind..

a rose or jasmine flower lights my dark room..

The arrogant stiff upper lip; the cold, aloof thin man;

the wild of mind – yes, even they may yield;

the miserly; who finds his real self

and showers bounty on the world;

with my poured art, yes, even they may yield;

I, Rudagi, prince's princely poet in Bokhara,

drink to you at ease in friendly pub,

in mutual praise at what God's secret art

may show you of what lies within your heart..

*

Freely adapted from Rudagi's poem, as his tribute.

Michael Shepherd

Saint Valentine Defines Tough Love

When those you most love
die
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

When those you have most loved
up and go, without a word,
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

When those you would most love
want nothing to do with you,
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

When you feel that all you need right now
is a little love, to change your life,
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

When you feel cheated by love
because it's never come your way,
that's the time to speak in praise of love
(said Saint Valentine) .

Trust me. It's not easy to become a saint;
said Saint Valentine.

.V.

(revised)

Michael Shepherd

Samuel And Harold Discuss Ovid's Dictum

S You look much the same, Harry
H You don't look much different, Sam
S Though times change
H They don't stay the same
S Or perhaps they seem to change
H Or seem to be different
S And we change too
H We're not quite the same
S Though perhaps they only seem to change because we've changed
H Perhaps we're different and they only seem to change
S On the other hand, perhaps times do change and we only seem to change
H Perhaps we only seem to change because times do change
S Or perhaps both change
H Perhaps neither stay the same
S That would make it difficult to tell
H It wouldn't be easy
S Perhaps you've changed and I don't notice it
H Or perhaps I've changed and you don't notice it
S I feel mostly the same, though
H I don't feel much different
S Though in some ways I feel different
H I don't feel quite the same myself
S Life moves on
H It doesn't stay the same
S Though I'd know you anywhere
H I can't imagine not knowing you. Anywhere.
S Our plays change, but the dialogue...don't you think?
H They are different, but the dialogue...as you say..
S Alive or dead... the play doesn't change...
H Dead or alive...the play stays much the same, , ,
S Though the dialogue...
H Ah yes, the dialogue...
S Yours, for instance...
H Or indeed, yours...
S That dictum of Ovid...
H Ah yes, Ovid's dictum...
S So true...
H Not untrue...
S Plus ca change... as they say, Harry...

H... plus ca la meme chose, as they say, Sam...

(Curtain)

For Jerry.

Michael Shepherd

Sandy Claws, Avenger From The Ocean Of Goodwill

The tale I have to tell, children,
is not a pretty one – so,
PARENTAL SUPERVISION IS ADVISED;
though on the other hand,
as moral tales should, it has
a happy Dickensian ending,
where, as moral tales should tell,
the last state is infinitely better than the first;
and perhaps, who knows, your parents
may even benefit from the telling
though, naturally, without mentioning the fact.

'Twas Christmas Eve. The Smugg family
were sitting around their fine dining table
made from wood from sustainable forests
in their photographable and photographed
Bahamas beach bungalow in its
gated enclave with 24-hour portage and security,
about to tuck in to their Christmas Eve locally sourced
corn-fed free range hand-reared organic
turkey –
Dad, Mom, and their 2.4 children;
Point Four was attended by his personally recommended
Filipino nanny who it was understood
did not take part in the general conversation.

The Smugg family were feeling good in themselves
and let's leave out the obvious wordplay here.
Since October 1, when the calendar in the main
restroom had been annotated 'Start Thinking
About Christmas Presents! ', they had each
in company with their Family LifeStyle Consultant devised
exactly the right present for each other
and their family (Dec 15 5-9 pm)
and friends (Dec 15,12 noon-3 pm) .

* * *

Christmas night (the turkey was rich in vitamins and essential oils)

was a disturbed one for the Smugg family -
snug and smug as a bug in a rug yet
afflicted by nightmares which despite
24-hour security and panic button with
guaranteed five-minute guard attendance
all shared the same dreadful sound -
the sound of sandy claws... scraping... scraping...
at the locally constructed handcrafted
front door... scraping... scraping...
a sound so terrible that not a hand
reached out from the bugsnug Smuggs
to press the panic button... for how unSmugg
a false alarm on Christmas night...

I need not tell you how
there were no marks on the handcrafted
front door - just the most horrible smell -
and... and... footprints of a hideous size
leading from the so-innocent blue morning Bahamian sea
with hand-raked foreshore sand (Christmas Day: afternoon only)
to the front door.. and back again...

The Smuggs, after their fairtrade morning coffee
and non-biologically-enhanced cereals,
sat around, opening their predictable, expensive
presents with feigned surprise and delight but with
an overpowering sense of anti-climax,
despondency, and all that post-Christmas
jaded exhaustion without the Christmas bit before it..

However, their Family LifeStyle Consultant,
paid to be bright, and fearing for her job,
had the solution on hand - a Roman Style
Anti-Event in ancient traditional style,
a re-run where however the presents were to be
the worst and cheapest and most inappropriate;
the games, the ones they all dreaded..

never had shopping been more fun,
or games so merrily acted out.
New Year's Eve that year at the Smuggs'
is still talked about; a riot of laughter, fun;

indeed, you could hardly distinguish
between the Smuggs, their family, and
their friends – and that, I needn't tell you,
is Quite Something at this merry time..

There's a moral here, somewhere buried in the sands of time;
the Smuggs' Christmas parties are renowned,
the gated enclave comes together, invites
the under privileged (from 2-6 pm, approx.)
but in their hearts – for in their hearts – they don't forget,
know each, the deep significance, of
the footsteps in the sand, and at the door,
the scraping...scraping...scraping... of those sandy claws...

* * *

(For Max Reif, who introduced me to Sandy Claws...)

Michael Shepherd

Sculptor Under Tree (Zimbabwe)

The sun so hot,
green grass now brown

under a tree
a sculptor
working
his eyes shining with -
all

all
is not lost,
Zimbabwe!

Michael Shepherd

Seeking Metaphor

Metaphor's the soul of poetry:
this incongruous instrument of speech
with which we say one thing,
when we mean quite another:

I wish that Shakespeare, its greatest English user,
had coined a truly English word for it –
or perhaps, those blunt and foursquare Anglo-Saxons
who came before; their words as hand-hewn as are spades –

the word comes from the Greek, and means a transference;
'My lord, your transference is apt and shrewd...'
no, even that's but transferred to a Latin stem,
'carrying across'. Too late to seek some native word –
a 'thoughtshift' or a 'mindmatch' then?

We wear it down, and make it less
by thoughtless grabbing at the candy-jars
upon the shelves of sweetshops of our speech,
as if to mimic poetry that we haven't earned..

but at its height, a metaphor shines like new light;
bringing together, two images so disparate
and making of their neighbouring, a moment magical in memory
as if we'd never seen the world so brilliant
or so revealing; moments when the mind's a god,
and life itself a metaphor; a glimpse
that somewhere, two things mentioned meet
under the astonished, single gaze of eternity itself..

Metaphor's a holy sacrament: one should never dare
to use it without some faint echo, of a moment clear recalled
when that which one refers to, came dazzling bright into the mind
as life transfigured to another world,
time lifted to the timeless;
the radiance of the world's first day,
Creation, in itself, one glorious godly metaphor..
and nothing ever less than one.

Self-Respect - To The Troubled

'Your only enemy

is yourself'...

Easy to say?

Prove me wrong.

Michael Shepherd

Several Oranges

At what age does the recognition dawn
that grown-ups aren't quite as bright
as they would like – and would like you –
to think?

An early proof among the many
was marmalade – the stuff best tasted
when licked off the marmalade spoon, or
if Mom tried to make it (big wooden spoon) or
scraped off stodge pudden at your school...

and best, the one that came in brown stone jars
because that was cheaper; lettered in black
to say it came from Keiller's; and was made
from several oranges, so grown-ups said...

well, how obvious can you get? A big stone jar
or even a glass jar, was bigger than a single orange..

and couldn't grown-ups spell either?
Their later proffered excuse was to be just as phoney –
How could all that marmalade
come from just one town which the Jogruffy mistress
said was somewhere in Spain?

Yet another reason to add to your growing decision
never to be a grown-up... so sadly over-rated...

Michael Shepherd

She Of The Heavenly Happiness

No-one knew what subsequently became of her
after he went so dramatically, and after all those goings-on.
He got all the headlines.
The police didn't even bother
to take her in for questioning.
There was talk of riots,
they needed every spare man.

But the story never quite went away.
You know how it is with journalists -
we file it away for a rainy day,
then it sticks in our mind
for when we retire and write a best-seller, I wish...

I doubt we'll ever know the truth of it;
but every now and then
some nutter with a convincing sighting
makes a free gift to journalists
with no personal responsibility for us either.

France, Spain, Italy, gipsy communities -
you name it, they know her
except she was never there that day.

The story among her friends is
that she went on a long Mediterranean cruise
with two other ladies.
Yet there's no account of their returning
and there are stories that they all separated
and took up new careers in foreign places
where they acquired new names, locally
so the trail's gone cold.

But stories like his, and hers,
and whether they - well, you know -
never quite go away
and the part she played
though brief, sure was dramatic, so
it's made her a role model for those women -

and there have been many over the years -
whose lives have taken a turn for the worse
(no man can know what it's like
for a woman to have to sell herself)
and who see in her story
a hope of life's big U-turn
and all that we really hope for.
God knows we all need one.
Could be a Lloyd-Webber musical,
come to think of it.
After all, she was there
at one of the world's big events
- that most of the media
strangely missed...

Maddalena - it's a beautiful name
in Italian.
And then there's that delicate cake
that Proust dipped in his tea.
There's a place in Italy
where they take her story very seriously,
because some local writer
turned it into a classic of hope for the socially rejected;
a rather 19th century theme.
The critics panned it; but does it matter
whether it's truth or fiction,
if it goes so deep, that it's true in a different sort of way?

It's called 'Maddalena of the Heavenly Happiness';
it sounds better in Italian.
no, it never got translated into English -
it's rather
Catholic
if you know what I mean.
Though it actually took place
in the Near East
or whatever it was called then.

Michael Shepherd

Sicker Soccer

The £10,000 a week defender can't quite
catch the £20,000 striker who's got
the ball at his nimble, expensive feet, the stadium yelling
fit to raise the roof – what does he do? why,
he pulls the striker's shirt, of course...; the ref, the commentators
remain silent. We, we were told off at nursery classes,
for pulling little Johnny's shirt... I mean, for Pele's sake,
what is this about? ! ..

then at the end of the game (one side's got to win,
you'd think the fans are like they used to be,
paid good money to watch a good match)
the managers spit out their gum, pat each other on the back
whilst walking away, and not looking each other in the eye...
none of that love of the game stuff, the sparkling eyes
of those who love their sport, shaking hands
with a worthy opponent...ha...

and as for cricket – 'sledging' – can you believe it?
making sneery remarks to the batsmen while you stand in close...
never happened when sport was something you
enjoyed, loved to do, enjoyed the challenge and the company...
'oh it's all in good fun'... yeah?

tennis, being one-on-one, ain't so bad; psych yourself up
but put the venom in your shots; but then,
when the match ends, run up to the net (or so they
used to) , eyes meet, shake hands, a few words? not
so often – shake hands without making
eye-contact, off to thank the umpire who's
up there out of reach...

it's like some sorta natural law: when sport is a game
like life, the game's the thing, and well-played, sir; pay
your 'sportsmen', your mercenaries, in the name
of 'popular entertainment' and big business, and
something disappears, as revenues increase;
how long before poetry becomes
a 'spectator sport' with a World Slam League out there

and TV rights?

Michael Shepherd

Sin And Stuff

Lord – if that is how
a stranger, I, should address
that stranger, you –

I – or one resembling I –
have done so many actions
which the world would classify
as crimes, or sins, according as
the one who classified them might believe...

and in the classifications which
men attribute boldly to that presumed you,
there must be crimes or sins which are unnamed
which I have done; good left undone...

indeed, your devotees would see it as a sin
if any single breath, any heartbeat passed
without their holding you in mind...

So if I understood forgiveness, as beyond
the way we scold our children, even punish them,
yet never cease to love...

then I would ask forgiveness of my sins
in that same spirit; yet I would ask, first,
understanding; mine, and yours
(though I would hope them finally the same)

for I believe that really, the you
that I perceive you as –
that really, you're my best friend...
who understands my crimes and sins
better than I do myself...

and in that understanding, love.

Michael Shepherd

Slither

Slither.

If you're a fellow sufferer,
you'll know exactly what I mean.
Is it worse for those who live by the word,
or those who hope to avoid it?

It's that pile of papers, CDs, books, leaflets,
sitting beside the PC, vital at the time
when time was of the essence;
soon covered like a game of impatient patience
with another vital document...
file everything after use? Who's that anal?

It's that pile of mail on the kitchen table
with a touch of marmalade between some items, that
you opened during many breakfasts (it's a cereal story, this)
and hope will answer itself.

Above all, it's the pile of mail-order catalogues
that come in cellophane wrappers
which you haven't taken off of course,
knowing that you will, one day, be grateful
(as so you thought about the previous editions of same,
further down the pile...)

And the pile of folders, which obey that law of nature -
that spines of folders are thicker than
the other edge - they're the first to

slither. And you should know by now -
there are demons in them thar piles:
if there's a page or two
which you need right now as you fly out the door: abracadabra! -
five minutes ago when your right hand and eye put it right there
(who's taken it, c'mon, quick...?)
in two seconds flat, your left hand and eye
slipped something else on top of it..
left brain, right brain co-ordination? ha!
RH reason put it there; LH emotion said, hate work, hide it....

and then, one day -
slither! And
you hate yourself, look around for someone else to blame,
blood-pressure goes up - again -
your day's ruined and it's still breakfast time...

Slither. Moses didn't have that problem.
It's yet another giant step
sideways - damn - in the evolution of the human mind.
Maybe marmalade is the answer, after all.
You've suffered, too?

Michael Shepherd

Slugs And Snails And Homelovers' Tales

You asked me for a poem about home and I remembered
that millions of years ago there was plenty of food for all
in the Garden of Eden and slugs
were well supplied with greenery and all was one big happy family
until slugs found that other species found them tasty
chocolate jellies or unjust desserts especially when after
a good night out they were, well, sluggish about getting home
and the sun came out and gulp quick as a slug of Jack
but spotting one night or was it day, a battered caravan
serai, it occurred that a portable home would be a good thing
to evolve. Became snails. Just took time.

Poetic point of this is for there is a point, that
human beings are much the same, there's the bricks and mortar thing
we call home but really home is
in the head or heart, we carry it with us, it's the place we go when
there's no other place to go.

And next time you feel a bit sluggish
about going to work, or like a snail unwillingly to school
you'll have to admit that Evolution
does a goddamned good job, a home in your backpack
beats commuting to work any day. Respect.

Michael Shepherd

Small Talk Angel Style

I saw something white in the bushes
it was a bunch of angels
wings folded taking an
ambrosia break and
laughing gently over
the lies they hear most often
when they're passing over

they were saying that
apart from the old ones like
we must have lunch sometime and
the cheque's in the post and
I promise to take it out before.....

there's now I could do this with you
all day where's the remote

but then they got on to the
more serious ones like
we only ever wanted the best for you
so this is what we...

and their voices got quieter
so I crept away without their
looking my way

but I bet they knew I was
there listening and
I bet they knew
I'd tell you

Michael Shepherd

Snow

Snow,
remember those tender shoots
and smile
warmly

Michael Shepherd

Snow: A Haiku

Grey clouds,
brown earth,
a broad white smile

Michael Shepherd

Sonnet And Sonata

May sonnet ever match sonata form?
whose opening movement catches restless mind;
whose new and ever-fresh harmonious sound
puts spark in eye and ear, and feet on ground;

then, slower movement, drawing us to still peace,
takes mind within to where all movements cease;
murmuring all that inner nature knows,
restoring to our self its true repose.

Then! final movement, dancing out new joy
in life within to outward present joined,
send us out Creation's messengers
to sing that song our heart in truth enjoys.

Coda, last, or couplet: solemn sum
of all before; that's present; may become.

Michael Shepherd

Sonnet For The Day Of Epiphany

Their wives were not too keen about it all:
beyond the call of duty, so it seemed;
for, if they read the heavens' portents so well,
what need of proof, of presence at the scene?

And then, to go without due retinue
through unforgiving deserts; foreign towns;
and forests hiding thieves and wild beasts too?
And carrying rich gifts? And worse, their crowns?

And so to risk three kingdoms, not just one?
And for the sake of some religious creed
not even ours? 'Nay, love - it must be done;
we crown our lives and kingdoms with this deed;

these crowns are symbols of our rule on earth,
to yield the King of Heaven at His birth'

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

Spider On The Hedge

The spider on the hedge
doesn't seem to catch anything
but grows larger.

Sometimes not knowing is a blessing.
Sometimes it's sad-making.

Sometimes it's bloody annoying.

Michael Shepherd

Sporty Thoughts On Wimbledon

Henman, Henman,
winning-now-and-then man,
give the other guy a chance, right?
tennis should be just a game...
why be in a hurry
like that wee brash Andy Murray,
who's on the way to riches, and to injury, and fame?

Michael Shepherd

Squirm Worm - For Cj

Can you remember
when you were, oh, five,
and something just more perfect than
whatever that word meant then
and more delightful than
delight
just made you squirm, it was so - well, that? just - right?

today I squirmed
and I'm great-grandfather's age.

I wonder how many others there are
around the fountain of life
squirming with delight
like a wriggly mass of
white
cherubic
maggots

at poetry

Michael Shepherd

Suspended Sentence

and while children, to whom
the future's still a playground,
are complicit in computers' fantasies,

not so this adult; scared
witless, that one wrong button pressed
will spell oblivion; a lifetime's guilt
stirred by the one word ERROR! in its deadly box;

and then that solemn judgment that
'this computer has committed
an illegal act' – so that I go
to the window, switch out the light,
and around the curtain look for that
dark unmarked car across the way with its two
immobile figures frozen in a mindless anonymity
which could not be more suspicious –

and now it tells me in unrolling words that
'an uninterrupted playback will commence
in more than one day' – and life's put on hold,
the present time is stopped, and all our yesterdays
are to be fast-backwarded, as it's said
may happen at the moment of our death;
no longer are those sci-fi films the mind's brief game;
today I am to live in no placed place
nor now-timed time; and as tomorrow's dawn
breaks grey and fearful, outside time itself,
the playback of my puny life will roll...

time (so to speak) for final cyber-irony:
press Start to stop this virtual memory's oblivion,
and wonder if Prince Hamlet felt like this.

Michael Shepherd

Temporarily Pissed-Off Poem

Why the hell should I respond to
'I'm new to this site, please read
all my poems and
comment (you'll enjoy them) '- when
you haven't the courtesy
or even the guile
to read just the odd poem
of mine? Why should you
trust the judgement of a poet
you don't even admire or
despise?

OK I'll have cooled tomorrow but
I'm glad I've let off steam
and
by the way that first bit applies
to older acquaintances too.
'Lousy poet but
good for a comment', huh?

(OK, guys - the moment passed...)

Michael Shepherd

Tenworder

Does this laughing baby brook know how far its journey?

(A tenworder is a one-line poem with no more than ten words; can be less)

Michael Shepherd

That Damn Cupid

...who or which is the main topic of this site
in any season, let alone this one in the Northern hemisphere,
as the hormones stir a young man's fancy
and an old man's mind...

It's difficult I find, being a poet, and a scientist by training -
you want finality in the experimental results
but you love the constant mystery and beauty of the world,
never quite reached, never quite expressed.

Take this Cupid. Not the actual one,
but the head of Eros, Venus' very active young assistant
obviously under general orders
but with a very free remit under his blindfold -
or so it seems to us who don't get to see
the universal script if such there be.

He's one of the few 'archaic' treasures of Greek art
neatly plundered for the British Museum
in circumstances not to be enquired into -
'saved for civilisation' would be the spin -
but a winged messenger to this house
in no small way.

Which brings the whole matter of the non-material
into question. And which is what some scientists
find a challenge, others try hard to deny with cold facts.

To get to the point. The beloved point.
A reproduction of this little chap
in a mixture of polysomething and marble dust
sits on the table by the window here,
I'm looking at it now. Why do I know
that it's not just anyone's baby, baby,
but Eros himself? (Venus, note, is a mature woman,
Cupid just an innocent (ha!) child...)

The problem, O scientists,
the blessing, O poets,
is that his expression, his intention dammit,

is never the same two seconds together;
and, always two seconds ahead of what
I'm thinking now he's up to...
he's always up to something
and he knows I know it...
and don't exactly know what
and I'm two seconds after him, all the time...

For instance, right now
before I wrote this, I thought it would be good
to give him a wipe.
He submitted to it with the closed eyes of a child
just old enough to submit to having his face wiped
without screwing up his face into a performance;
a beautiful, gentle submission
(for once; first time I've seen him look like this) :
now already, he's up to something - the corner of his mouth
on one side has a mischievous little thought (or maybe not so little)
playing around it; while his eyes are resting within himself
in a meditation on pure wisdom, it seems

(just a second, let me check on him,
you can't leave him for a moment)

aha! that's his game - the sculptor
who trapped him, or thought he'd trapped him -
no - was trapped by him! has seen two sides to his face:
the left side would pass for a meditating Buddha, almost;
almost blind, unknowing, unjudging of all worldly actions;
the right side has an up-to-something muscle-pull
at the corner of the mouth and cheek and eye
which gives that side of his face a look of active goodwill;
put the two sides together, and ha! it looks like mischief;
but more like the divine mischief of Krishna
sporting with his cowgirls.

Is all this the moving theatre of my fantasising mind?
Left and right lobes of the brain in see-saw mode?
I think not. Ikons are famously said to play this game
with the devotee; outer portrayal drawing out one's inner truth;
and here's this Cupid, more alive than I am, I suspect...
allowing me, who have acquired him/been acquired by him,

to watch him as he makes the whole world go round
and conquers all.

But as to warning you in advance
what he's up to with your erotic stirrings this fine Spring morning,
all I can tell you is
he's always on duty; always hatching some new divine mischief;
and I'm always two seconds late in catching his newest
cast
of mind..

Michael Shepherd

That Jones Boy

Seattle, 1943. He's just ten.
The family's poor beyond hunger,
thrown out of Chicago by Al Capone
for making too much money.
When it's dark and quiet,
they break into an armoury
for - pie. In the dark
he sees a piano he thinks it's called,
plays a note or two and knows
this is what you'll be doing all your life.

Later, after years of playing
stuff like Debussy with Ray,
he gives Frank a jazzy edge,
later again, a thriller
for Michael

He says, don't wait
for the paralysis of analysis,
listen to God's whisper,
and if it gives you goosebumps,
go with it.

It's said that truth
is stranger than fiction.
I think not: it's sweeter, for it's
nearer the bone,
sweeter as the sweet notes
that he hears

Michael Shepherd

That Poem

It was a day much like any other.
Too many letters to open right now;
The phone pipped and bleeped and hissed
as it recorded too many requests
to read here, go there, answer these questions,
be interviewed;
why did you write this poem,
did you mean – ten lines
of prosaic speculation follow, about some mere
two words; wouldn't this poem
be better without the last two lines?

please read my poems and
return the manuscript with
your extensive comments...
(the invisible PS reads 'I'm just
as good as you, and younger, and, moreover,
more in touch'...)

the occasional face peering
over the gate; once every few weeks
a stranger boldly knocking at the door
so sure the poet would be glad
to meet a fan, unannounced,
eager to tell them what their
poetry really meant...

his fame, like some dark aura
which he would have craved, in those days
when he rose early, wrote for hours
to preserve his sanity, before he went out
to that job which made him miserable – his fame
now pressed around, demanding.

It was a day much like any other:
a poem might come, life
might flow; flow down, flow through, flow out..

Dusk and a sigh and a laying down of pen;

should today's lines go straight into the overflowing bin,
or be returned to tomorrow, in the fresh of day -
there seemed to be something there
around coffee time that morning,
it was going somewhere...

Years later, this poem, found in his
random papers when his widow
paid her last gleaning respects to the genius
which she loved less certainly
than she loved the man -

this poem would be pounced upon,
chewed, spat out with discriminating pride
by literati - look, our idol has his feet of clay..
shall we measure his greatness by his failure
or feed our envy and our self-regard?

No. Sit here, in his chair; take up his pen;
put that poem in front of you;
be there, on that day like any other
when no sublime inspiration came;
yet, work was done, somewhere, innerly;
know that;
love poetry.

Michael Shepherd

That! ? Moment? !

What would writers do without
the question mark?

(luckier still, Spanish writers, who can begin their questions with
an upside down, wrinkle-your-brow-here question mark,
to begin their questions...) :

and then there's the rather immature mark, some say:
of share-it-with-me exclamation - surprise surprise!

But beyond all punditry, there are those moments
when life unexpectedly confounds us
with some event that's simply! ?
- or one that's rather more? !

Once when I wrote for a magazine now defunct,
I was offered one day as a kindness by our Editor
to present myself to a famous ophthalmic
(that's an eye-test in itself, that word)
surgeon, who might have a part-time job
to suit an underpaid journalist:
an Indian in grand, top people's Harley Street.

this Dr. Hiranyagarbha ran a sideline,
a magazine for the Diplomatic Corps;
in return for which he begged 'spare' eye corneas (don't ask)
from more wealthy (or loosely-regulated?) nations
which he then implanted nobly free of charge
in the less fortunate around the world.

The job was not quite up my Grub Street;
but he offered for my trouble,
a free eye test...
I checked the exit at that stage.

The test done, a dramatic pause...
Then the great man announced
'Your eyes are ten years older than your face..'

That's what I mean by a

! ? moment.

A vision then arose, so to speak:
ten years of blindness while my dying face caught up...
dark glasses? or a small but decipherable, poetic
plaque, pirate-slung over the forehead:

'Here lie those eyes of wild surmise
which I unwisely failed to prize...'

Maybe on reflection it was more of a
? ! moment, do you think?

Though the other way round for eyes and face
would be pretty scary and! ? for the funeral director?

Michael Shepherd

The Everlasting Throes Of Those

The Everlasting Throes
Of Those
Who Argue about Poetry versus Prose
And about the Propriety or Crime
Of Meter and Rhyme
In Poetry:

as I see it, it's back to the ancient Greek idea
of three near-absolutes – Truth, Beauty and Goodness
and although they're all absolute in their aim,
and therefore theoretically equal,
most of us, I suspect, have our personal order for this list

those who put Truth first at all costs are more likely
to write prose; but if they love beauty in words
and have the urge to write something beautiful in words
they may try poetry; but to them,
rhyme is untruthful, dishonest, because
looking for a rhyme
becomes a crime:
and leads your mind away from the strict Truth.

while those who put Beauty first don't have
a fixed attitude – they may, as children do,
love the formal music of hearing about

A certain Mrs Dhutti
Who was very slightly nutty
She wouldn't wear a saree
As her arms and legs were hairy
And thought it was much better
To wear trousers and a sweater
etc.

or they may feel that their response to the world
is so full of love, of awe, of wonder
(of which Aristotle said the second and third
are shared by philosophers, that is, lovers - note the word - of wisdom,
and poets – though a poet
may not know it...)

where was I oh yes, their response to the world
is most truly - note the word - expressed
in free verse
which may be better poetry
or worse

and what about Goodness – oh let's not
get into that: the poetry Forums are full of the emptiness
(though it's a necessary evil, looked at in a way)
of poets and readers and critics saying
what's good poetry and what's bad
according to them and feeling
they've made a contribution to
Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, in that order
by pronouncing this.

some few, some worthy few, and I'll mention no names
for reasons not unconnected as Milton might put it
with the previous stanza,
whose brilliance of that servant mind which we all share,
manages to juggle Beauty, Goodness and Truth,
in that order in this instance, and not only juggle but
remain faithful to them all; we could call them
The Absolutely Great – they speak straight from heart to heart
and they don't worry about prosaic considerations like the above
because they've got it all, all this, within their art; within
their constant heart.

(Readers, please note,
that last line's a quote.)

Michael Shepherd

The Family Room. For Mary.

You put up with it because
as tiresome as it is, and as they can sometimes be,
somewhere there, there's always love.

He may take interest
in something to be repaired
that's mechanical; and
there's cars to wash and clean,
hobby things to sort and tidy.

Some kids are good or disciplined;
but there's never quite the time
in their expanding world
for doing just what you do
for the house..

But in the human heart
there's this locked, dusty room - you haven't dared
to look inside for years - or indeed
since childhood, for some people -
full of junk, of cobwebs,
broken windows, their sashes jammed,
cupboards that won't open, drawers
whose contents stop them opening; even
the birds have stopped their nesting there;
a room of memories that whisper when it's dark

It's the room that's family.
And surprise - the light still works..
A family can sort and dust and wash and clean and tidy it
in less time than they take
to slam the door
yet only you know that it's done, and how it's done.
And you say nothing.

Somewhere, two strangers
smile at one another

The Foolish Verges On The Wise

You hear it said at
the oddest times and in
the strangest places

often with a knife-blade at
your chest or
a thumb expertly on
your wind-pipe or
a hand itching towards
a holster or the belt of jeans

nobody tells me what to do

seldom are the crime,
self-knowledge
and the remedy put
so succinctly
together

Michael Shepherd

The Guy Who Stands At The Entrance To The Year

Round about 4 a.m.
when I get up for a pee
or just occasionally, go to bed
there's a light on across the way
every morning

and I wonder, is he the guy
who starts the whole of London off?
Is he the one who drives the unscheduled train
which gets all the other transport workers to
their stations and their trains? Or just gets that first train going?
Or unlocks the gates to where the trains are sleeping,
relieves the night security man, pats his dog,
brews up those cans of tea the drivers take with them?

Or opens the gates for the milk lorries
to come in, the milk floats to quietly trundle out?
Checks in and out the storm-tossed vans that bring
the vegetables and flowers overnight
from Holland on the ferry? Rolls up
the shutters on the yet unbloodied meat market floor?
Switches on the lights that light
the daytime panels of the electric grid,
his footfalls echoing in some vast white hall?
Sees the first dawn passengers, red-eyed, stagger
Off the plane and into the half-empty terminal?
Wakes up the rough night sleepers outside department stores?
Cleans up the beery sickness around Leicester Square?

First down the sewers to warn the big black-brown rats
that the chemicals and the water are on their way?
Or at the best, sociably relieves some night staff, themselves
relieved it's homing time – 'Morning, Jack! '
'Goodnight to you too, mate! '

I sometimes walk past his housefront – it's unlit, no clues, whether
he's been up all night with the teething youngest of their six; or lost
a partner who just couldn't stand his hours..

Regular as clockwork, though he missed
'seeing it in' until the wee small hours,
he's the one who started up
January the first, two thousand and six;

and after a lifetime of devoted service
no one may think to recommend him for a medal
for Services to the State. I may catch him, shadowed in the light
from the window he has no need to curtain at that hour, and
glance a silent thanks his way, wondering
if he loves his job; in the sacred stillness of unsullied dawn?

Michael Shepherd

The Honest Man

The honest man, it's said,
does exactly as he says,
and says exactly as he feels,
feeling as if he is
the whole wide world;
himself the universal man;
lives a measured life,
nothing too little or too much;
the universal man, himself

Michael Shepherd

The Last Day

The eyes of the guard
who motioned her forward
told her he'd done this
many times before

behind his peremptory bayonet
his eyes were dead like
an anaesthetic before
the operation from which
she'd not recover

after that, it was merely
a bad dream
the stripping,
the clang of the doors,
the singing. the singing

for death had spoken her already
a small mercy
in a day without mercy

Michael Shepherd

The Man Who Fell Into Eternity

It may be one of the few images
that last as long as the world has eyes
- no shorter, no longer -
the man who fell and was uniquely caught
amid so many others, on 9/11

Which of us, bearing eventually to examine
those photos with an open mind
and open heart
can make a leap of faith
and invert that photo,
of a man rising
to the occasion?

Michael Shepherd

The Mind's Strange Beauty, With Its Smile

It's said, that when our mind
awakes, out of that sweetest place
in which it sleeps, rests, is refreshed;
in the morning; or in those
rare moments when we let it take its rest;

this wondrous instrument, invisible,
yet holding all we think is ours...
in the twinkling before it spreads our world
before us, like some awed geographer
unrolling with two hands a map from polished rods,
inviting exploration, conquest, or desire...

in that great moment, as it emerges from that place
which is to us no place... that holy place,
of universal mind before it's individual –
that bran tub where we thrust our eager arm –
splits its precious unity, which some mighty force
beyond place and time itself, has decreed that mind
may find itself, or lose itself, in multiplicity –

splits this onely mind into polarity:
scans like some godly radar,
its whole vast world surveyed;
surveyed in truth; indifferent
as that sweeping line which arcs incessantly
to show, there's this and this...

a fraction of a moment, and then we
clothe all this playground of the soul
(glancing so quickly, setting up
imaginary walls, beyond which
be dragons and our mortal enemies...) with our illusions,
our beloved illusions, the land
where we may play, pretend ourselves
to be ourselves... our world
of friction and duality:

from small (it thinks) to great (it fears) ,

from good (it likes) to bad (it scorns..)
the pleasing and unpleasing there;
the loves and hates; all the illusions
that we defend, fight over, argue, build...
the friction of the tire on road...
all set against each other – in our mind;
'nor good nor bad, but thinking makes it so'...

This is the magic of the mind; with this,
ourselves as conmen, tricksters – sometimes
healers, teachers, wise men too –
with this, in this we play,
as poets with a dictionary;
know this – and watch this ticking, exquisite watch,
its intricate fine mechanism
running on until its spring winds down:

know this, and laugh that heavenly laugh
that blows away illusion; that laugh
that has the sweetest sound you ever heard,
as if you laughed with gods; or,
smiling as a goddess smiles.

Michael Shepherd

The Monday Bluesky

It's true – 'true love no alteration finds' –
love is a state of being, as yourself:
your love is not outside, but deep within;
it is not something you can ever lose;
nor something that can leave you 'low and dry';
does not depend upon some other form,
some other body's sometime warm embrace;
and when you're silent, still, you know this so...

Believe me, love – I know this in my heart;
beyond all blandishments, this loving rhyme
rhymes all our hearts, which cannot live apart;
we know we know this, past all timeless time..

Michael Shepherd

The One Who Wrote

and because their soul
had found a rest
beyond action

their spirit, freed,
roamed without movement
in freedom
through the world
whispering

of rest,
of freedom,
of words,
of silence

singing, singing

Michael Shepherd

The Pain Of Not Being You

How can you say,
I never felt in possession of my life
until this moment, to
someone who has not felt
the each, the both?

or, I shall remember this moment
for the rest of my life
not for what it is but
for what it may yet mean?

a lifetime with a pen
may alleviate this pain
somewhat
while I write

Michael Shepherd

The Poem That Failed

There is a place where significance ends -
that is the place where the metaphors tire
and the similes dimmily fail to inspire
and the poem runs out in a meaningless flood
but the poet won't give up and declare it a dud

for the critics they spot and the readers they know,
you can get up and go, it's the end of the show...for
there is the place where significance ends.

Michael Shepherd

The Sadness Of This Afternoon

The sadness that, this afternoon,
pours over me, settles
like a dark cloud, watched
as it descends, inexorably,
becoming heavier as it encloses me,
blotting out all thought -

where do you come from, sadness?
where are you taking me? do you have a purpose?
and will I ever know what you intend? do you
come to me, or have I secretly
come to you? dragged my heavy boots to this dark marsh? am I
to welcome you, as if some long known friend
who comes slowfooted, bearing an uncomfortable truth –
'you won't like to hear this, I know... but as a friend...'?

or are you some bitter enemy, whose only way
of stealing what I am, is to leave me flaccid,
wearied, slumped into the chair
a backbone without spirit, naught but sorry flesh?

or do you have a secret spell, which like a fairy tale
I only have to speak, and zap! you'll vanish whence you came...
And look up there, there's movement in the sky
and edging round the cloud, a rim of light...

or are you like a children's birthday trick,
conceived with excited giggles in the other room,
a bundle made of old brown paper, dirty newsprint, knotted string,
which, shed, reveals some little gift they knew
would tell you of their love more warmly than
a shop-wrapped parcel with its ribboned neat rosette?

sadness, you shrank immediately I named your name;
now I'm laughing at you, like some old friend
who steals up on you, bored and dreaming in some queue,
to give you then, that gentle shock of love;

and after you've gone, sadness, I may remember

something valuable.

Michael Shepherd

The Search For Self. From The Indian.

I read about the Self
and sought it
but it said nothing

I worshipped the Self
but it did not smile at me

I surrendered every action
to the Self
but it only watched,

said nothing,
did not smile

now I am silent,
watch, and smile:

how can you find
that which you never lost?

Michael Shepherd

The Unwise Wise

Proudly, fiercely, they guarded wisdom;
wisdom that had outlasted fashion,
the cults, the sects, the mass conversions,
the messiahs, and the promises;

They had gathered this knowledge
in the days of garnered wisdom
250 years before that guy from Galilee;
and then around twice his lifetime upon earth
as numbers dwindled, they stored this knowledge
in a cave not so far from Jericho,
near the sea that died into a lake.

Discipline, ritual, held them together;
and cleanliness; the communal latrine
was 1,000 cubits or a little more, say half a mile,
from the city where they lived; I guess
some walked, some ran
there from Qumran
– except on Saturdays, when
they were not allowed to leave the town
and therefore did not defecate that day..
then on return from the latrine, their faeces neatly buried,
a ritual, totally immersed bathing was required.

Alas, if these wise men had asked the Arab Bedouins
they would have known that, had they left their faeces
uncovered in the sun, it would have killed
the roundworms, tapeworms, whipworms, pinworms,
which, walked back on their feet and thriving in the ritual bath, slowly
killed this community of wise men from inside,
so that only 6 percent lived beyond forty years;
eventually depositing their wisdom on scrolls
(how few men left to place them there, that solemn day?)
to be uncovered after nearly two millennia
darkly in a cave.

That is the story of Qumran. I guess it's one
for those who say, what you live by, that, you die by;

in this case, ritual.

Michael Shepherd

There Once Was A Poet Of Ireland, A Bore An' A Pest...

If a dactyl's reversed, it's then called by the name 'anapest',
Used by Browning and Swinburne for horses and wolves in their haste;
Though Matt Arnold of Rugby found sadness could be to its taste,
It's the writers of limericks use it – alas – to excess...

Michael Shepherd

There's Hope For Hypocrites...

Yes, there's hope for hypocrites –

hypocrite poets, who write
from the goodness of their hearts
of the good, the true, the beautiful;

out of the chaos of the well-intentioned
and sometime messy life;

hypocrite readers, who turn
to those same poets for reminders of
the good, the true, the beautiful

out of the chaos of the well-intentioned
and sometimes messy life;

(hypocrite editors, dare we add, who,
knowing the good, the true, the beautiful,
turn down our poems, because
it's been said oft and better, long before...)

the blessing for all hypocrites
is that they know better; and one day...

may match their actions to their words;
words, well-intentioned, sometimes messy,
written from the goodness of their heart;

and in the heart, as given timeless time,
hypocrisy dissolves...

Michael Shepherd

These Poems

Greet these poems as you would greet
at your tent-flap a wise man come from far;

drink with him a cup of wine
that tastes like the memory of roses;

then sit and eat with him as the evening falls
by the flickering flames, under a canopy of desert stars,

remembering great men and great deeds;
feeling your backbone tall with their memory;

recall lines of poetry which have crept into your heart
like your faithful hunting-hound, sprawled with a long sigh
beside the fire;

and look around at the glowing embers catching
with their light, the shining eyes of your companions
cross-legged in a circle,

rejoicing in their hearts at a fortune which is theirs
so great that they can only sit in silence and become
a stillness beyond time.

*

Freely adapted from Ibn Qutayba's 9th-century book on literature.

Michael Shepherd

Theses, Faeces, Syntheses

O the language of the thesis!
O the octopus of Academe!

'As I argued in my previous book,
'Some definitions of 'definition' in contemporary philosophy' –
an argument which I hope to pursue
in a following volume, (and I quote) :
'to define what we mean by 'definition'
we must first consider
the nature of definition:
can it be itself defined? Is
its definition itself a retreat
from what definition defines? ...'

and the wood of academic chairs
creaking as a lecture ends,
from which once the young sap rose
like the hope of definition
dries, decays and dessicates.

Michael Shepherd

Things Encyclopaedias Don'T Tell You

Where do bogies go
when you leave them be?
Do they, Dr. Einstein, cling
to the nostril wall until
dessication overbalances the force
of adhesion against gravity, and
they fall on someone's floor?

How can one equate
the working-out
of natural law with
a clean, scoured, functional nostril or
the pleasure of finger food?

Michael Shepherd

Thinks - Sphinx?

Yes but has anyone tested it lately?
(Or Him. Or Her?)

Well, wouldn't you get fed up?
You've sat there, haunched,
for tens of thousands of years,
all your friends have long ago gone
to that place you could tell tourists about
if they only asked

but no, they take photographs of you
or pay over the odds for them,
make silly rude comments
about your missing nose,

concoct theories about the Pyramids,
eat fast food, Nile style, which goes through fast,
and you've waited all that time
for even a half-decent question
which could pass on the wisdom of ages,
hit the Nile on the head,
restore civilisation to its true stature,
questions that didn't arise
when the pyramids were being built
since they reckoned
they knew the answers

like, how did it all begin? or
have you allowed for the precession of the Poles? or
where do your builders go
on the days they're not here with you?

Michael Shepherd

Those Wild Pink Salmon

Now, this 'wild pink salmon' thing...

are they just wild about pink
like that designer with the limp wrist

or wild like you wouldn't want
to share an estuary with them

or wild that they're not so good
at jumping up the waterfalls

or wild that they're pink
when they'd like to be red
and so, wild that the other salmon are red

is it some muted colour-snobbery
like used to be in the Windies
between chocolate and coffee

and possibly I don't know
between Red Indians and Pink Indians
whose mother got around a bit

though on the other hand
it could be boring on the reservation
being a Hiawatha brave or squaw
10 to 5 each day for the tourists

envying the other Indians
with a real job
like standing outside a cigar store
stained with nicotine
or even inside

is it like the Monty Python sketch
the pink salmon look up to the red salmon
but look down on the tame salmon

but then, are wild and tame

really opposites anyway
even if those are the correct terms individually

is it any consolation to wild pink salmon
that we think
they're supposed to be salmon-pink anyway
so red salmon are the ones
to be red-faced

I mean how wild is wild
and how tame are farmed salmon
if at all
they could be wilder inside
about being hemmed in
when their wild brothers and sisters
are having a wild time
in the spawning grounds off Newfoundland
(though salmon won't know it's called that)
and so, excuse the phrase, see red?

and – the thought's just struck me
like a slap around the gills
with a wet fish –
they probably don't
read the label
there's a message there
for all of us in this
colour-conscious age

Michael Shepherd

Thought For Today

Today's Marathon Day here in London.
An unpleasant image strikes me:
suppose the journey to the Pearly Gates
looks just like the TV coverage of the marathon?

Michael Shepherd

Thoughts On World Poetry

To coin a metaphor:

It's like a Protestant
wandering into a Catholic church
and hearing someone just out of the confessional
muttering 32 Hail Mary's as instructed
huddled in the nearest pew,
and thinking
hey once is enough...

for some, a ceaseless act of worship;
for some, a wake-up call;

the intention
could be the same

Michael Shepherd

Through A Glass Darkly

The Chinese lady optician, her upbeat manner
coming over rather strangely in her pronunciation,
peered deep into my eyes, though giving no sign
of having found my soul there.

My roving mind suppressed something between
a giggle and the heard sound
of holy laughter – as of a group of nuns
laughing at the teasing of Our Lord,
or the cow-maidens laughing on the river-bank
of cool clear mountain water, at
the mischief of that boy Krishna...

and through my mind, scrolled the Book of Psalms –
... I lift up mine eyes unto the hills...
...O Lord, help me in my unbelief...
...look upon me with Thy merciful eyes, O Lord...
... and renew a right spirit within me...

now and in the time to come,
to focus on infinity...

The Chinese lady optician,
acting out inscrutable,
turned and wrote down in some timeless book
the record of my sins, visual, visible and invisible,
as in a glass, darkly;
but now, face to face,
resumed her study of how my mind if not my soul
has limited my vision.

Michael Shepherd

Time, Perhaps

Time perhaps, for wonder –
to look around in awe
at how all that surrounds us
has somehow come about..
we who do not even know
how to grow a fingernail...

time perhaps, for gratitude –
for what we have already,
forgetting for a moment, our desires...
we who have forgotten
whom or how to thank..

time perhaps, for praise –
if not the Lawyer, praise the laws...
if not the lover, praise the love...
we who might become
praiseworthy through our praise...

time perhaps, for imagination –
to consider how things might be,
for then they might become...
we who have the world itself
inside us, just as much as that
great cosmos that's out there...

time perhaps, for simplicity –
to pare life down to those things
which give us greatest joy –
and then, enjoy them all the more...
we who love complexity
when masquerading as the new...

time perhaps, for time –
to live a measured calm
of stillness, peace and rest
and find the joy there all the time ...
we who ceaselessly invent
the labour-saving, and then find

ourselves a slave to these new toys...

time perhaps, to transcend time –
and live a timely life
of timeless joy; and know then,
all that's not been mentioned here...
we who have yet to know
what human beings really are...

Michael Shepherd

To A Fellow Poet, Rmw

didn't ask no explanations;
list'nin' cuz youse an honest man;
t'ain't the words but the sound behind 'em;
so keep 'em goin', cuz i knows yer can...

Michael Shepherd

To An Almost Unknown Poet As Of Now

Poetry and that's without quote marks
poetry is the place for the big things
and long may it be
but that would be an inappropriate dialling tone right now;
quiet sincere OK?

You
regard the world with
affection
it's the first time I used that word in a poem
and meant it.

Affection.

I hear the angels murmuring it among themselves.

Michael Shepherd

To Be The Veda

Who am I?
Who put me here?
Why am I here?
What should I do?

Who will tell me who I am?
Who will tell me, who put me here?
Who will tell me, why I'm here,
and tell me then, what I should do? ..

Sometimes, I am all thankfulness
for what keeps all of me alive;
is there a greater one whom I may thank?

And sometimes, I'm alive with praise;
Is there a greater one whom I may praise?

Sometimes, as thunder rolls and lightning strikes,
earth quakes; seas foam,
I am all fear; is there a one
who'll tell me, the other, or the greater
things that I should fear,
and tell me what I need not fear?

From day to day, my thankfulness
wells up for this; and then for that:
the earth that yields me food,
the rain that helps it grow,
the sun and light that help it ripen,
the air that I must breathe,
the sounds that draw me to my fellow men:

so are there many such, whose mighty powers
I should thank and praise,
or is there only One?

Or are there many in the One
whom I should thank and praise –
and what then do these greater powers

know of each other; know of that One?

Sometimes, when all is silent, still,
I seem to have a hint of whom I am;
of why I'm here; what I should do;

then who will tell me the greater more
of all the more I think I know?

Sometimes, when all is silent, still,
I wish to spend my days deep in that place;
but I must work; then should I trust
some other man or woman, who will spend
their days in thanking, praising, in my place?
or can my work be also thanks and praise?
who judges thanks and praise enough?

Sometimes, when all is silent, still,
I feel a greatness in me, that
joins me to all things in myself..
who shall tell me more of this?

Sometimes, when all is silent, still,
I seek for sounds, and words, and song,
to measure all that this heart feels:
oh, who will teach me greater words?

Is there a teacher, and a taught?
Or is the teacher all around?
Or is the teacher all within?

Oh, who will tell me whom I am,
in words that sing as from myself?

*

[An ongoing attempt to 'imagine myself' into the spirit of the Veda]

Michael Shepherd

To Hn: A Nonsense Rhyme For A Troublous Time

bind your books
in crocodile skin

and then thereout
won't trouble therein

Michael Shepherd

To Joyce And Blue Jays Everywhere

Thanks be to God
or Darwin's theory,
or perhaps both?
that blue jays
and all the birds that live in splendour and eternal peace
on the pages of Audubon
still, but some now only there... and
who look through our windows
at the TV screen,
maybe sneak a look at the newspapers,

can't read - yet -
or understand
intellectual montage like Eisenstein
and the jump-cut in film
and are spared the question
whether mankind is evolving

William Blake would put this better
through his tears
and faith

Michael Shepherd

To Jrr Tolkien And Christopher

Do cats dream of lions,
and shirts dream of irons?
Do cats dream of leopards,
and sheep dream of shepherds?

Michael Shepherd

To Linda Smith

'I play all my country and western music
backwards -

your lover
returns,
your dog
comes back to life
and you cease to be
an alcoholic'

(Linda Smith, comedienne and humanist, died yesterday.)

Michael Shepherd

To Mary Ruefle, Poet

and since you're an
American Poet or
a poet writing in English
or however you might put this
in a cv which you'll surely
never need being unique
and therefore beyond all
job descriptions except poet

since you're, well, those things or
that thing
you may never have seen
a kangaroo (and in a zoo
they can't hop..)
but if you do you'll recognise it
when I say it - your mind
is metaphorically, and no-one
handles metaphors like you do may I say,
like a kangaroo - huge hops
off into the horizon of thought
with what in marsupial body-language
may be bounding, boundless
joy

a kangaroo which might in the world
of your poems which I can't hope
to imitate but I'll have a go,
be carrying a baby roo in its pouch with
its head sticking out
and a backward glance towards you
who one day will return grown-up
with a crumpled poem
in its own pouch
addressed to Mary Ruefle
mentioning in passing
immortality

Michael Shepherd

To Sandra

As I walked in the sunlight
and slowed at the pedestrian crossing
a woman waiting there
laughed

and I saw in her,
pure joy

and a fine, quick, timeless
vision of soul

and yes, God.

Michael Shepherd

To That Future One

the brain a gray worm
ceaselessly explores itself

and sometimes I think of all
the poems yet to be written
and which I'll never read

and marvel

Michael Shepherd

To That Guy Towards The Back Of The Class, He'LI Know Who I Mean

Yes you,
the one who's noisy when
he's here which isn't so very often -
you'll never believe it but
I know you better than you'll ever know...

□

oh yes I do and
maybe I could tell you but
the one who I don't know is
the you that stands in front of you,
that writes your name, and not much else, that sits in class,
that looks at me as if
we were born into two different tribes
sworn to enmity

sometime in your life
someone told you you were nuffin
maybe they didn't say it, just assumed it
maybe they said it when they were feeling foul
maybe they even said it when saying
the very opposite but
the way they said it meant
they didn't quite believe it themselves because
they felt themselves to be like that
know what I'm sayin?

yes I know you better than you know
I know it from that great great place,
that great great space
that's the same in you and me
and maybe we'll get a chance

to talk about this some time
maybe meet accidentally in MacD's
you'll be embarrassed by the intimacy of that
as if you'd been captured by the other tribe
and you have to bribe your way out but

maybe we'll chat and I'll try
to hint to you about that great great space
which somehow doesn't get
into the classroom... targets etc

that's if, I don't change schools first
or give up teaching, it's a near thing; maybe
we'll both be glad of the chat, it
could be the start (but keep it quiet)
of something new for you
you'd better believe it; with your life;
('bettuh bleevit')

so try to attend more often,
know what I'm sayin?

Michael Shepherd

To The One Who 'Ones'

Sometimes I wonder what it's like
to be you - eagerly seeking out
new poems of mine and of some others, too;
triumphantly scoring them a 1,
or if they're scored already 10,
then, zap! it's down to 5.5;

or if it's already so enjoyed, it's scored two 10s,
zap! got it down to 7.0...
have a go at this one, while
it's still unscored...
the superscription calls it 'user rating' -
how can you rate it when you've haven't 'used' it?
just abused it? (You'd score it 0
or -10 if they allowed it...)

what really saddens me is that
you can't distinguish between
a bad poem and a bad poem about goodness..
so when you 1 my next poem, does that signify
the narrowness of my mind, or of yours?
Sometimes I wonder if you write
poetry of your own; and whether
your poetry improves, or worsens,
as you demote on your own private scale,
the poems of others...?
Now that's a serious thought.

Michael Shepherd

To The One Who Taught With Life

When I first looked
so deep into your eyes

I remembered
all that I knew

and had forgotten.

Now, your eyes are closed

but mine are open, and
I look around to see

whose eyes meet mine.

Michael Shepherd

Today A Windy Monday

Today a windy Monday,
brisk, businesslike north wind,
I would make a great altar
and pile it high as heaven
with washing straight off the line
shirts like roly-poly hunchback
astronauts like human kites
a sharp flapping of hemmed edges
the squawk of hens surprised
laundry baskets full of the smell
of Spring and freshness and new beginnings
laundry baskets that smell as if
a walk along the shores of love

all Your wind and air and water, and
sunlight soap, soapy sunlight making
iridescent bubbles in the washtub
the squeak of the mangle,
dripping into the sink
stained heavenly with Dolly Blue
the smell of love and motherhood
the hot iron's steamy smell
the starch, the sharp warm ironed piles
ready for the cupboard shelves

and say, look everyone
this is a woman's lifetime of unspoken love
see it made of the holy elements themselves
as on the first day of Creation
that is ever a woman's life

men, worship this

Michael Shepherd

Too Much Self Criticism Can Be Stifling

this poem just
doesn't come off
because

Michael Shepherd

Trench Warfare Haiku

kick aside that rat as you charge
that's busy on the face
of your dead mate whom you've no time to bury

Michael Shepherd

Truth Is Stranger Than Friction

The joy of truth is
that it can be funnier,
crazier,
than fiction.

On September 16 the referee
suspended a football match
following complaints by the spectators
that the players on both
multicultural or should I say
multiracial teams
had been racially abusing each other
with terms like 'black bastard'

a player corrected this, explaining
that it wasn't racial abuse but
'sledging' - to put off
players from kicking penalties etc.:
'Sure it was abuse, but there
was no racism'

well that's alright then, after all
it's a multi, er, cultural society
and the tackling was clean and
good sportsmanship sorta

Michael Shepherd

Two Poets

You know what it's like
- surely you do -
you introduce one of your bestest friends
to another bestest friend,
hoping for something wonderful..

and they shake hands warmly,
greet each other,
then find nothing to say..

so you leave the room, hoping that
they'll start by saying something about you,
then find how much else they have in common;

if you come back, and they're talking so vigorously
that they soon leave together, forgetting you...
a little child in you may be sad a moment,
but the grown-up will rejoice
that great things may come of it...

but if you come back, and
there's still a strained silence...
and later, each of them implies
they can't understand why you like
that other one so much...

that's why I'm a little fearful
of introducing Rilke and Rumi to each other...
since they both live in a place
where I'd like to walk too,
and listen to them talking to each other..

but suppose they didn't get along,
I don't think I could bear to hear
why not...

All this in my head, chatting
with my heart...
and not the movement of an eyeball

to tell you this. You'll understand,
I hope, now that I've mentioned it.
There's love somewhere there.

Michael Shepherd

UNICORN 15

Those to whom it has revealed itself
- grazing in a grove of trees,
a ray of morning sunlight
lighting the dewdrops on the mossy grass;
or galloping, white mane flying in the wind,
over the high green hills;
or briefly glimpsed, shining-eyed
between the white-spumed waves –
they bring back with them, the experience
which always will be theirs;
some place of inner peace
to which they may refer all the events
of life; so that, like some shaken bright kaleidoscope,
all falls into its place.

Some never speak of this; some see no reason not to speak;
and risk response: thus, some envious, as 'why not me? '
some, just curious; some, eager to hear all,
as if they always knew, or 'thought they guessed', that it exists...

Even spoken from the heart, words live a life that's perilous:
some who are so fortunate as to catch it there
in that sacred grove of trees, and on whom
the unicorn bestows its glance, as eye to eye,
speak of a softness, of a sweetness; some
say, it looked into my inmost soul;
some simply fall in love with their true peaceful self;
some speak of being so at one with it,
that all the world is ever one: so that,
its glance bestowed on them, their every glance
henceforward, sees that unity in everything.

some speak of it; some hold it in
pure silence of the heart, and live it
in themselves, as if
they are its children in the world;
their glance, as sparkling eye meets sparkling eye,
will tell us all we need to know

that moment when we know
that there is something which we know, have ever known,
but knew not what it was until
- like some glimpse of the unicorn,
here, now, always; one glimpse, one glance,
and its work done -
we know we know

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 10

Did they already have the image of that creature
grazing deep within their heart and mind
before the day when it revealed itself, gentle, sweet and mild,
living its life of glorious detachment,
invulnerable, free as freedom lives forever, is itself?

Or did it reveal itself to those who needed
the vision of itself, magnetic in its beauty;
the reassurance that it's there, and
may be loved; loved unconditionally?
It's difficult to say which is the truth.

But those who've seen it, leave it with the memory
that their lives are merely a battlefield,
a place of examination, a ground for test -
but that within, without, all this
the unicorn lives within themselves; detached; serene; and
shining; shining.

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 11

Where the unlimited, expanding, limiting itself as it expands,
reaches where it can limit itself no further –
there it is; there in its, our, world; there you may see it;
where it could not be more beautiful
and yet be seen; where it could have
no other form, and still have form;
where it is most itself.

And so, where we are most ourself,
when we are most ourself, it's there;
near; you may see it; you may not; near;
you and it, so close; and where
we are where all the stories tell –
the gate, the door, the mirror, the key that calls the hand,
the undergrowth pushed through, and there –
in the clearing in the woods, it is;
treading on the silent mossy ground,
can white be so transparent?
waiting for nothing and yet there;

where the limited meets the unlimited,
where we know
that whom we always knew we are,
unlimited;

Unicorn.

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 12

where the unlimited meets the limited,
and the unimagined meets the imagined;
where the unseen meets the seen,
and the eye meets the heart;

where the earth meets the seed,
and the seed meets the root;
where the root meets the earth;
and the flower meets the air;

where the heart meets the thought,
and the thought meets the sound;
where the sound meets the word;
and the word meets the voice;

where joy arises,
and where sorrow ends;
where love arises,
and the world is one;

where magic lives,
and miracles are law;
where childhood lives
and freedom is always now,

the unicorn is.

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 2

Whenever we're nearest to one in ourselves –
that's when they're most likely to be seen:
as we step out from the trees
into the gently sunlit glade, moss under hoof and foot,
it's there. And so, because the unicorn already in our mind
is now prepared for this, it's not a shock, or palpitating heart,
but like an old friend whom you've never met before.

Some, of course, have waited years
and only want to touch, to register for future tales
some special personal relationship –
they're least likely to be given the chance;
but even those, I'm told, who live to touch,
in its so quiet presence, cease to want to touch.
And if you did, the story goes, this animal would know
your reasons – and might disappear; or yet, it might submit;
as woven hangings show it; meek in Mary's lap.

Those who were so graced and speak of it
say little. For when the unbelievable
just happens, what is there to say
in words that were not used thus yesterday?
All that they can tell us is, that they and it,
under its sweet and gentle understanding
were so at one, that what was known, was known...

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 3

What was known, was known. They asked
the artist who had sat all that bright morning, cool upon the hill,
to draw the trees in front of him, as sunlight crept
among the leaves, now here, now there,
lighting, upon the moss, the dewdrops one by one
sun-sipped; when the unicorn was, in a moment, there;
there, detached, yet offered; they asked the artist how it was.

He said that as the sun moved round and caught the leaves,
a love arose; so that when that creature was, so quietly, there,
it was no different from the love.
At first it stood quite still,
as if it knew what made it easier for him;
then later, walked around, sometimes its head raised so that the
sunlight caught its horn; moved, so that the artist then might know
what moved it. It was love.

Some asked eagerly: was it then as if the creature
drew itself? The artist could not answer. That was not untrue; and yet,
it was not quite like that. Rather, what was known, was known.
Known gently; meekly; sweetly. It seems
there is no other way for love.

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 4

What is known, is known – known gently,
meekly, mildly, sweetly; that's the experience
that men bring back who've seen that creature plain.
But since the unicorn grazes in all our minds and hearts,
each has his image. Poets love to write of that creature
as they picture it; but what of those who met it plain
in forest glade, upon the hills, or white amidst the waves?

It's said that, then, some poets put away their pens forever or awhile,
despairing that their word-hoard holds no words
that can describe those things invisible which
that creature brings to the mind, when met;
some can no longer give it even a name
as if that very word can seem to falsify.

They're asked, was it, just, beautiful? – and hesitate,
because what yesterday, was 'beautiful' is a different word
today; that creature shows them that a word
means what it does; today, 'beauty' has done more in them;
it speaks a unity which is not static – can do all things
as Helen's beauty, so we're told, could make a war from peace;
so beauty can make peace from war – as poets prove.

And so, those who've seen it plain but wish
to say no word that might be less than truth
find that its subtle magic guides their pen
so that they may write with that same ease
with which that creature lives,
write of any, and of all things.

And all who've seen it – who've seen it move
within the utter stillness of itself
as never before have they seen a creature move
and hold that in themselves, wish, wordless, to return
to be again in that creature's still shared self-presence;
the wisest of them finally to find
that it may graze forever in the poet's mind.

Unicorn 5

To graze forever in the poet's heart; how could this,
they asked, be possible? An image, yes;
a memory; but could it really live its life within the mind,
graze undisturbed, at ease, at home,
and glance the grave, sweet meaning in its eyes,
when there's so much of else that fills the world, the mind, outside?

Those who first saw it first, were content to be, just gaze,
attention focussed as its heavenly horn marks head and mind,
drinking in that other which themselves would be;
but as its sightings grew, so various,
the theorists sought to build an image
around that which they had not seen,
worshipping a space in which it was not yet;
it must be questioned, says the ordered mind.
Others who had not seen it wished
to have some part, share in reflected glory; maybe learn.
It's understandable. That, too, the creature understands.

But those who'd met it, in a forest glade,
or, mane tossed by the wind, among the high clear hills,
or proud-necked, white-toothed like a smile, clear-eyed,
among the white-foamed waves – they in whose minds
a space already was; a space, a peace, a stillness -
knew, gracefully, that it grazed in its forever, lived
within themselves;
self-moved; self-stilled.

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 6

Self-moved; self-stilled; why then for us
this noble creature takes the form of unicorn?

Part horse, with shaggy goatlike hooves,
and lion's tail; and on heraldic shields
its glorious spiralled horn so fitly crowned
with liliated coronet, marking royal intelligence;
proud in its humility and gentle in its strength,
sometimes rearing up, and sometimes bowing low.
Why then this form?

Forgotten, then, the ancient reasoning, or only
part remembered: that the Creator gave to man
dominion and tender care of all His creatures.
All living things called animals, share living heart;
Thus all with heart are in our close-knit care.

Man and horse
the ancient working team; so agile in the battle,
so bonded in a war of death and life; so faithfully
untiring in the working, drawing, ploughing day;
and in play, in tournament, so joyous,
bonded to mankind; what wonder
that this creature looks so nearly as a horse?

A lion's reminiscence, lordly in authority, there too;
and goat, so footsure feeding on the crags; so when
the kingdom of the beasts seeks to repay mankind,
it's said their gratitude then takes this creature's form
to be more ready recognised by man; leaving
to those beasts more domesticated – and more consumed –
who used to share even man's abode –
the cows, the sheep – and, prophetically,
the humblest, least complaining, beast of burden, ass,
the honour of attendance there
around the stabled birth of God as man...

When love and gratitude bonds man and creatures in his care
- with fellow creatures of his own mankind -
this creature, purest love, is seen to gently graze

as if it were forever there; self-moved; self-stilled.

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 7

This forest glade, mossy, silent underfoot,
shaft of sunlight catching the quivering flight of woodland moths,
tempts even the shyest, slender deer
whose slightest nostril twitch, reveals a whole forest's map;
the crackle of a single twig, a disappearing, graceful leap;
yet even the deer graze undisturbed
when in a thought's space, that creature's there;
for not proximity but presence, is what they share;
each, in peace, moves in the other's presence;
this we know as peace.

and on the high hills where the air is ever on the move,
the eagle, circling like the first navigator
of the globe – yet seeing so much more –
glances undisturbed; with knowledge, and love, too, that's beyond
family, or prey, when that strange, familiar white creature
with flowing mane, prances, canters, into sight; their presence shared
so far apart; so near.

and in the foamy waves, the dolphins leap and sport
around it, as that creature, open-mouthed as if in joy,
shakes from its wet and glorious mane
the salty drops of water, while the dolphins
speak to it in a language beyond beauty's sound –

so this noble creature in its turn
undisturbed by those to whom it shows itself
beyond all perturbations of the world;
detached, yet gives itself to all;

Orpheus, or unicorn, or Muse –
to be led by such a creature, joyously,
knowing nothing of the where or here or there
but trust – this the poetry of the world.

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 9

For most of those who are graced to see it, the vision's enough –
they bring humility, are still, drink in
this creature, which for a space of time
is in this world, and yet not of this world,
who shows them who they are, and always were –
so what is known, is known; they leave its presence
as themselves.

but some find it's quite natural to speak,
as one might bear a sacrifice in outstretched arms
of all that is and is not of themselves.
That glorious creature does not speak; but listens:
listens with, as if, the one point of its horn which brings
its ears to its eyes; gazes as it listens; a gentle, mild, sweet gaze;
listens, gazes, with its whole wise, understanding presence;

and having spoken, or not spoken, all leave
as themselves; knowing themselves to have
the whole universe as their measure.

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 1

Those who've seen one, all give differing accounts;
that's how it should be. No in-depth video. No coffee-table book.
But the collected book of sightings –
that's hairs on the back of the neck stuff.

One detail, though, they all agree– it came at just the right time;
although they did not know it at the time;
but time brought truth; as truth brought time.

The place they saw it– now that was surely a surprise;
and so they wonder
how their own hallowed place can not bring further sightings;
forgetting that unicorns are not bound by the same space and time
as we the spellbound are. Their space and time if we could see them
would be like joy and sadness indistinguishable.

By night, they live as unicorns must live
within this world; so that they may live among us
while living free from us; this the law of magic
which to them is natural; it's said they live at night
by the light of their own horn, that glows like fireflies glow,
light without fire; except that we cannot see that light.
(Scientists may explain this; EM wavelengths, ultra-infra ...;
all they, we, really need is taken care of...)

And then by day, they love the quiet places; for
they do not seek us, or seek to show themselves;
but we are drawn to seek their mystery.
For mysteries are not mysteries unless they hide a truth.
Forest glades; among the hills; white amidst the waves;
wherever we are nearest to one in ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 13

who does not wish, openly or secretly,
to meet it, in some quiet place?
even a secret image in the mind's dead index
of those materialists who
deny it a reality, calling it a
'mythological creature' – as if
the mind were not superior to flesh and earth?

this, the very reason for
its longevity – who would not,
were it material, have hunted it by now
for a prince's ransom, its magic horn ground down, hunted to
extinction – so that we would say
'as dead as unicorn' and left
the dodo forgotten and unmourned?
and so, to be a myth is logical...

and thus, the unicorn lives, beyond
some banal death at a hunter's hands;
easy, peaceful in its own preserves,
grazing in the pure air of our minds,
free to remind us that we too are born free.

the secrets of creation
hide in such unthought hills as paradox –
we, yearning for a meeting
in a place we know not where
where in that still and silent place
loud with silent joy,
moving in ways beyond the movement seen,
we meet it when the looking stops

and paradox on paradox,
once met, we do not seek to meet and meet again –
its tender single glance
tells us for ever that it always lived
inside ourselves; we ourselves
that 'mythological creature',
more real than our mirrored self,

grazing in the wooded groves of stillness,
the mossy dells of silence; or,
its wild mane wind-tossed,
on the flying highest hills of freedom
or bright-eyed, salt-browed, white
between the spraying waves and curling surf:
knowing ourselves to be, forever to have been:

unicorn

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 14

When you catch a glimpse of it,
in the sunlit glade,
among the high hills,
among the white-crested waves,
does it move?
or is it unmoving,
this graceful vision of it?

it seems unmoving, yet
faster than the mind moves;
ahead of all your senses;
even roaming wild and joyful
among the high hills,
its white mane flying free,
somehow it's still
within its movement,
within your stillness;

can you see the tracks of fish,
or the airy passage of the birds?
it's beyond movement, even beyond stillness;
and yet, you love it,
yearn for it, although it - because it
runs faster than the mind of man.
Is that its love?

Michael Shepherd

Unicorn 8

In the deepening dusk of forest glade,
in the mist of clouds rolling over the high hills,
in the sea-fog rolling in at turn of tide,
what feature of its form alerts us first
that it's so present, now, and here?

That spiralled horn – why is it that we know
that's where it should be seen,
that place upon our forehead we can feel ourselves?

The unicorn within us knows –
when attention spirals to a fine, fine point
and thought is stilled; that's when
our single-pointed horn calls presence to its purest form,
its purest place, within ourself;
ourself; unicorn.

Michael Shepherd

Valedictory On A Failed Love-Affair

No sorrow
Tomorrow

Keep grief
Brief

Michael Shepherd

Website, Spider Style

Do spiders think? or simply learn
without a thought (well, lucky them)
by observation, as great scientists?
Does Nature do it all without a 'thought',
the spider just some robot, programmed thus?

The spider which the other day
built daring, acrobatic, gossamer bridge
across the path a guy-lined full six feet
so that to reach the gate, I had to genuflect
as if in some most holy church's aisle,

That bridge of San Luis Rey, already doomed
to break - the postman, paper boy, the milk -
I watched while seated in the sun for hours;

and as I watched, grew humbler by the minute;
myself the smaller in respect, the spider greater;
my lunch was cooking; the spider awaited (hers?) :

and we grew closer, in some unknown place in mind.

Today, a small, great miracle
of nature - who may be
beyond miracles; or yet bound in a web of law:

Neatly - thoughtfully? -
the web was now aligned
along the hedge of neighbours and ourselves.

And I was humbled by knowing nothing
worth a spider's web.

Michael Shepherd

What Awaits

What awaits us after certain death,
nor I nor you nor any here may know;

some may prefer to hold the unthinking state;
knowing only, what shall be, shall be;

and yet, it may not harm to have a dream,
a hope, a thought in purity;

why, it may even smoothe our latter days -
not by some mental last narcotic drip,

but curled around the treasure of our heart;
resting in our dearest, dearest love;

for some, it will be family:
perhaps to know our parents as new friends;

to talk to them of all unspoken things
we never thought to ask of them in life,

to throw aside the separateness of things;
to love our selves in them as they loved us;

- or if it be that all was fear and hate,
to learn a way to pass through that to love;

or, watch perhaps, in some angelic way
over our children as they live their lives;

watch them in some wisdom quite uncritical,
encompass all their life with eyes of love;

yes, those things would be good; and surely not
what our Creator would not want for us?

So, noble-hearted philanthropes might wish
above all else, to guard the institutions which

they built so generously from their rich and loving lives;
to watch benignly as those institutions grow;

I have a passing fancy that, the relay race as run,
some glorious gift to pass, might be to hand:

and to some soul unborn, now waiting there
ready to run - reach out and smiling say,

here, take this I hold out in my hand -
to you, a seeming torch, or jewel beyond price,

a flower, or keepsake of a life of love -
take this, my treasure throughout all my life,

this is what I loved, and worked at, polished bright;
this is the jewel of my life.. Do with it, what you will;

know that the joy is in the passing on;
what else is there to offer, heart to heart?

* * *

meanwhile, I'll treasure that high moment when
all change became the strange; the eternal, natural.

Michael Shepherd

Whingeing In The Wind

Suck and blow, suck and blow,
like a pair of windy bellows -

why do you whingers wheeze on so -
aren't poets supposed to love their fellows?

Michael Shepherd

Whodunnit?

Providence? It's 'What the Butler Saw' -
and ever sees, and ever shall have seen:
the One who knows what's needed long before,
and sees that it's delivered at the scene;

prepares it for the feast of human life;
presents it in due style at this repast;
then, in the festive moment, stands aloof,
invisible to him who plays the host;

sees that new dishes come, and plates removed
- fleet opportunities that come and go;
unseen- unless His presence sought and proved;
unspeaking, silent - unless spoken to.

Whodunnit? why, the butler, since you ask,
named Providence: God's world, and Word, and task.

Michael Shepherd

Why I Hate Poemhunter's Googly Ads

Emoticon, emoticon...

(which syllable to put the accent on?)

nasty jumpy upandown thingies

I'll like to hit you out of court with a boing..., like Martina Hinghis

and as for Fart Button,

what sort of a site is this to have that crudely put on?

Michael Shepherd

Wimbledon's Unsung Hero

You've watched my work in your millions
every year without fail, as
I'm on the screen so frequently;

and yet few know my face;
that's how I'd like it:
do your job, go watch the game...

there's some doubt whether I do this
just for love; or whether money
changes hands in some offshore account;
or indeed, whether I'm a conspiracy
involving the better-known;

the less known, the better, is what I say;
who wants the dread words 'product placement'
bandied around this hallowed turf..

but yes, you've guessed it:
I'm the guy you never see
who turns the labels on the Robinson's bottles
(once of barley-water fame, in the days
before 'probiotic liquid supplements')
to face the TV camera..

my service never faults.

Michael Shepherd

Words Worth

'His little, nameless, unremembered acts
of kindness and of love...': so Wordsworth sings;
and if I may a word-play thus extract:
HIS acts and words are worth remembering...

Michael Shepherd

Worldwide Web Of Mind

The spider with which, with whom,
I share the sunshine of these late summer days
and the front garden – though in truth,
the silver filigree denies me two-thirds of it,
so broad the span of this ambitious engineer –

the spider which or who has grown so large
that its claws are some rapacious hawk in miniature,
almost scary in their taloned, threatening curve,
and which yesterday sat immobile in the centre of its web
either sleeping, or awaiting, or perhaps both,

is not there today; and I recall that yesterday
it had a silvery bag attached to it, which now I guess
could be some exquisite womb worn like a jewelled pride
which needs no protection..the web's undamaged
so surely no marauding bird has pecked the spider
from the undamaged centre of this web?

Where has the spider chosen, for its special day,
Its birthing place, its private ward –
and does it have its huge emotions in miniature,
its pride, its special love, around that tiny thing?
There is no clue; the guy-ropes of its web are silent.
Will I see it in the next few days
teaching its baby all its circus tricks,
abseil, swing, launch in the wind to far-off unknown lands?

Or is it true that, having borne a little brood,
this creature, so magnificent,
gives its life to them, to carry on the silken line?
does it know that sacrifice it makes
which is as noble as that of any man?
and will its brood also carry in their blood
a memory, inherited, that there,
across the front garden, six feet from East to West,
that silken line their mother made -
their only inheritance from her, apart from life itself,
awaits their darning needle?

I inspect carefully the web, as one might inspect
and read the menu for some blind lunching friend;
amused a little, embarrassed a little, solemn a little,
as the Creation's relative dimensions
shrink, expand, draw me into the web of universal mind;
a filigree humility; a life not owned but shared.

Michael Shepherd

Write Yours Now

The 'Journal of Death Studies' for April 2004
(maybe you read it? It's in the
hospital library, top shelf
just out of wheelchair reach,
on the shelf labelled 'Reference')
observed that

nonfiction writers tend to die, factually, at sixty-eight;
novelists tie it all up at sixty-six;
playwrights lower the curtain at sixty-three,
and poets close their stanzas at sixty-two.
Well, thanks..

six years - looking on the bright side -
for your favourite biographer to write you up;
four years for novelists to borrow
your untidy life and win the Booker Prize;
a year for playwrights to emulate
the bitter dialogue of your later,
less romantic household years
with less fear of being sued.

Those whom the gods love, die young,
said the optimistic poet
shortly before he died.

for PoHo, who gave me the damn book with the reference in.
And yes, I wondered too..

Michael Shepherd

Yogi Post-It To William Carlos Williams

Thanks for leaving one...

I can only say,
that in the passing moment
the cold perfection of that plum
reflected my perfection
reflecting all perfection

and the beauty of that moment
was but my own beauty
which must be, is, the beauty of the One

so I hope the remainder
were as perfect, beautiful
for you

so why not
write a poem about this?

Michael Shepherd

You Can Read Me Like A Book

You can't write
much out of spite

but if you make nice you
may find that poetry
can surprise you

and write itself
onto the shelf

and you'll be proud
to be read aloud

love has a way
to win the day

Michael Shepherd

You Saw It Here First...

Today the front page top spot in my upmarket morning paper elbows aside war, crime, politics, famine, election bribes with a manicured hand on an elegant arm, to bring you the ultimate guide to your seduction scene or marriage-freshener - the famous ball-player's plump chicken of a girlfriend presented by Vogue, no less. Here is your Complete Jane Austen Condensed Edition, the Jilly Cooper Omnibus, the Credo from the Vatican of fashion. This is the stuff that dreams are made on.

You'll need a chaise-longue to drape yourself on; and here it's day-dress - of a sort; expensively revealing enough to press all the buttons, but informal enough to be ripped off; thus the zipped skirt, open just above the panty-line, clearly awaits His pull.

The material of the blouse (I'm told it's silk-crepe) clings as if it were but barely there; it's gathered slightly between the breasts, just where (follow the dotted line) He is invited to rip it. Or there's a loose tie below as well; some men work upwards; some work down. It's good to be prepared for that dark stranger with as yet unknown preferences. A spotted neckerchief enhances the area between neck and breast, suggesting perhaps a modest withdrawal from full-on take-me-now; (though don't knot it; it could ruin the moment) : and an arm draped languorously over the head makes your armpits charmpits, as the ads used to say, though cramp would not be helpful, so the timing's crucial.

Ah yes the timing. The chaise-longue, it would appear, is conveniently situated in the front hall, with its old and plastered wall, just showing its age, to offset fleshly beauty; a reminder of say, Blenheim, where in Her Grace's diary those immortal words, 'His Grace favoured me in his boots...' Imagine if you will - the clip of hasty hooves on gravel; He, hot and hormoned fresh from battle, or chasing fox, or polo-field, the smell of horse that stirs Her Grace's loins...

the timing's all; now in a shutter's click...

And if
you haven't thrown the morning paper aside in
the passion of the moment, there's
a chiller on Page Three.

Michael Shepherd

Your Footprints

You left your footprints across my life

I hate to see your photographs:
passing history impossibly frozen,
demanding out-of-date thoughts.

You left your footprints on my life

I hate it when people talk of you:
as if they were asking for my blood
to warm their own false memories.

You left your footprints through my life

I hate it when I find a letter from you:
I read a richness and a loss in them
and am torn apart by myself

You left your footprints in my life

Footprints claim nothing, offer nothing;
they do not ask to be preserved, or to be erased;
they are clean, yet they are there;
where they lead, I have yet to find

You left your footprints across my life

Michael Shepherd

Zen Haiku

japanese dove on tree

high coo

Michael Shepherd