Mow Cop Village

The road's coil banks up, here passing between
two rows of houses that will not relent,
gritting their square stones, a fossilised scene
from a faction fight, its old fury spent.

A pigeon loft squats among walls, tied in
to the sky by the flight-paths of its birds;
and a tree grips the edge of a garden,
bursting out of the shallow soil like words

from the millstone grit, strangely lyrical
counterpoints to the raw black crops of rock.
And above everything else the deadlock
and dissent of the towering summit,
the village wrapped like a collar round it
clinging on. It's a kind of miracle.

August 1977

[*Cheshire Life*, October 1978, p.80 ; printed with initial capitals ; this poem (and also Mow Cop Railway Station, below) is one of a sequence of sonnets representing the five photographs that make up a multiple-view postcard of Mow Cop, dating perhaps from the 1920s but available until quite recently ; one view, captioned 'Post Office', with its two facing rows of houses, pigeon loft, and tree, is the starting point here ; appropriately, though entirely by chance, this was my first published poem (in October 1978) ; Philip Leese's book *Mow Cop: Living on the Hill* (2011) quotes the last four lines, and as it happens also reproduces the postcard (p.4)]

Mow Cop Railway Station

The captive flyers wrenched from their home soil
and stacked on the platform, know their one goal;

the train deceives them, screeching like an owl,
and takes them to the edge of a big pool.
The landscape tries to fool them, and the wind
brings rain to make them heavy, make them blind;

but nothing can distract their one-track minds:
they know exactly where they are destined.

As though their vision curved with the bent earth
like radio waves, or their scent could sift
from vast winds the smell of a single hearth,
they fly faultlessly straight for their own loft.

Restored in triumph to this their nation,
the collier takes them back to the station.

August 1977

[*Thames Poetry*, December 1978, p.20 ; printed with initial capitals ; even after it had closed to human passengers (in 1964), trains still stopped at Mow Cop Station to pick up pigeons ; keeping and racing homing pigeons, or 'pigeon fancying', was the typical Mow Cop working man's hobby ; see note to previous poem ; this poem and the two following were my first poems to be published in a proper poetry or literary magazine (though see note to The Omen, below)]

Picking God's Fruits: A Ranter's Love Poem

Into his incomparable garden
we have strayed,
where fruits are ripe and waiting to be plucked:
your pineapple hair
rippling by your neck,
you offered me red plums which I sucked.

Later when we were drunk
and lay still,
the sap of a fallen tree flowed into your lap;
in this orchard
of tempting and transgression
we forgive each other, and consummate God's passion.

September 1978

[*Thames Poetry*, December 1978, p.21 ; title printed with the word 'Fruit' instead of Fruits ; I don't know whether the change to 'Fruit' was a printing error or a silent correction – the editor A. A. Cleary may have thought that the plural of fruit is fruit (as with sheep), since fruits is uncommon and mostly used figuratively ; I admit that 'Picking God's Fruits' sounds a little awkward, 'picking fruit' and 'fruit picking' being the usual idiomatic forms – though that doesn't make it correct ; in fact fruit is the collective noun, not the plural, and anyway line 3 would have to be altered as well, and wouldn't sound as good ; so I stick with 'Fruits' ; Francis Celoria wondered if pineapple may be anachronistic – he was almost right, they were first cultivated by English gardeners about 1660, marginally after the heyday of the Ranters about 1656, though it's reasonable to assume they had been familiar as an exotic fruit before then ; the original Ranter sect, an unruly offshoot of Quakerism, was notable for its rejection of conventional morality and its pursuit of ecstatic religious (and other) experience]

Baskeyfields' Pigtrough

Jesus in Anglo-Saxon clothes,
a bird and a serpent,
vine-scrolls and straw from the midden
in the sodden field, now on the altar carpet.

Flat on its face at High Carr,
bowed at by pigs,
hollowed by chisel and snout
and the green water, its desecration and its scar.

A standing stone and a well,
holy among ravens,
enduring beyond alteration
to be kissed by the lowly.

Deep as the roots of Calvary,
coal-measures and leaf fossils,
crossed with galleries and shafts
under Chesterton church.

Here on the edge of the oppidum
now like a womb
the church encloses its ancestor,
praised by archaeologists and caretakers.

1977

[*Thames Poetry*, December 1978, p.22 ; the hollowed-out segment of Anglo-Saxon cross shaft formerly used as a pigtrough on Baskeyfields' farm at High Carr (near Red Street) is preserved in Chesterton church (Chesterton near Newcastle-under-Lyme) ; beneath Chesterton and stretching under Holditch and Dimsdale, as well as coal mines, is a large Roman town or 'oppidum' (see Dimsdale Golf Course, below) ; Gloria Evans Davies told my mother she liked this poem]

The Omen

One of the old men come to visit us in the coal mine
roaring like an imbecile, his beard of white gas
blowing from the slashing gap between his black teeth,
the blue flashes of his eyes sucking-in candle light
from our clay-cold, worrying hands stretched across

to where coal becomes flesh, and the terror of the omen
wakes up the miners and death is beside me.

1977

[*Samphire*, Spring 1979 (March), p.26 ; this was my second poem to be accepted for publication, but didn't actually appear until after the issue of *Thames Poetry* containing the three preceding ; ghosts or goblins haunting mines are sometimes called 'old men' ie the spirits of past miners ; they were blamed for scary noises and for poisonous or inflammable gases and explosions, though what ignited the gas was usually the miners' own naked flames like candles or clay pipes]

Notes on the Architectural Embellishment of Some Terraced Houses in the Potteries

Flowering brick along the rows
redeems this sacrilege of clay wrought
to a new shaping of landscape,
as if to say by such gesture
that Word is dumb
now that loud man acts upon the earth.
Disguised in foliage for repentance,
it is the enduring Fall.
And yet, these petals were formed
to hold the seed
which will be fruitful until eternity and then
go forth, out of its burnt ground.

1980

[*Friends of Gladstone Newsletter*, March 1980, p.3 ; the answer to the riddle (the word that is dumb) is terracotta, which means burnt earth or 'burnt ground' ; in the heyday of the Potteries even quite humble working-class terraced houses might be built with decorative terracotta and/or tile embellishments ; written specially for the *Friends of Gladstone Newsletter* (Gladstone Pottery Museum, Longton)]

Love Song to a Quaker Girl

In all the countryside of our quiet friendship
there is not anyone seemlier than thee
or more virtuous, daughter of the workshop.

The long moorlands which rise above thy bonnet
and the bleak hills beyond them are not
more beauteous than the tiny linnet,

oh sister of the heath and the outcrop;
and in the compass of thy cape are
all the wonders of the universe transcended.

Hurry to our trysting-place in the valley,
and walk beside me until we are in the doorway;
our love is everlasting as the holly,

and thou art fine and delicate as a dewdrop.
In the clothes of night, hatless and silent,
let us celebrate this until all else is ended.

December 1977

[*Thames Poetry*, March 1980, p.10 ; 'art' in line 13 (3rd line up) printed as 'are' ; Roger Garfitt liked the poem but criticised 'dewdrop', and obviously he was right ; perhaps it should be raindrop, indeed I can't imagine why I didn't write raindrop in the first place, and I certainly should have changed it as soon as the soppyness of dewdrop was pointed out ; Gloria Evans Davies (in a letter to my mother) also picked out 'dewdrop' but hated the entire poem, which she condemned as 'sexist' and 'oppressive' – unfairly I think, as if she'd missed the point ie that it's a historical fiction (the poet isn't addressing a Quaker girl in the 20th century but imagining how a rustic youth in, perhaps, the 18th century might address such a girl) ; Quakers, also known as Friends, worship in silence, but refuse to remove their hats]

In St John’s Wood, Kidsgrove

I

The dead whose angry cousins hid the here
and blamed a gargoyle, grit their grinning bones,
and tip their heads back, grassroots in their eyes,
where monuments fall down and Kidsgrove tilts.

Clenching mouths of soil, they hold the swallow,
and the timeless tension of their postures
grips in every clotted joint, and drives
their fingers upwards through the coal-black mould:

to break in silent hundreds out into
the universe that banished them. And here
and here, around the great collapsing tomb
of some enchanted girl whom no one kissed,

the bark-skinned arms thrust up, grown long and mad,
from armpit roots to elbow twists; until
the numbly groping fingertips at last
erupt, into the blasting yell of leaf.

II

Here, your victims go through –
the victims of the wood,
who’re now beneath the trees, set out and stacked,
stitched down, labelled in stone, all
relentlessly dead on the face of this hill.

Caught fast – they hadn’t bargained for this:
the scapegoats of your lush beckonings,
swallowed in pool or pit, the foolish
carrion of your gun, your knife
thrust, your hands embracing.

This *is* where they are –
what else could produce
this infection, but the empty dungeons of anger,
growing from death’s innihilation of everything
except pure pain,

of which this wood is the catharsis?

III

No one kissed her, she lay
untouched within her moat,
upon her isle,
inside her long
mound, her castle,
in her tower, in

her mortuary chapel.

So long undefiled, undead,
waiting for the taste
of twilight on her lips, not this
incest of the soil;

until the touch that roused her was a dog.

Its yelping stirs the woodland
where she walks,

rustling.

IV

And here around the crumbling walls of stone,
the worn features of faces, and the roof's
ribs on the floor, the flowering fingers
rise from roots of violence in the bone-joints;

until it comes to boundaries, and then
the wood thickens and tangles, dark pours in,
and a breeze transpires from the arched doorway,
refining agony down through the leaves:

taking shape, seeking revenge.

August 1977

[*Thames Poetry*, March 1980, pp.11-13 ; title printed as 'St.' (ie with full-stop) ; too much explication of this Gothic horror poem might well do it a disservice, though it's worth mentioning Kidsgrove's notoriety both as a haunted place (so much so that its old name 'kidcrew' became a dialect word for a ghost, while ghosts named 'Kit Crewbucket' or the like can be found all over the country, from Kidcrew Boggart) and as a scene of violent death – several (unrelated) horrific

murders have occurred there, while being a coal mining town the victims of innumerable mining accidents and disasters are buried there (and in the 17th century, before there was a town at all, the earliest recorded incidents of men killed in coal mines on the North Staffordshire coalfield are at Kidcrew), not to mention drownings in the canal and lake (Bath Pool) ; as its name indicates (bath indicating sacred or healing water) the original lake was a holy place, while the surrounding valleys (the Cloughs) were densely wooded ; so the haunted landscape has succeeded to an ancient magico-religious landscape with elements relating to healing or rejuvenation, resurrection (the hare of Harecastle), and the survival of spirits ; the famous Kidsgrove Boggart is usually a white lady or headless woman, though there are also hauntings of the black dog type, a characteristic the two have in common being a 'rustling' sound ; the first section of the poem was written sitting by the ruined Gothic mortuary chapel in the overgrown St John's Wood cemetery, where many gravestones refer to coal mine fatalities while the neighbouring house was the scene of a multiple murder ; having Gray's Elegy in mind the poem commences (and ends) with iambic-ish ten-syllable lines, but one of the interesting technical things about it is that there is also a hidden syllabic structure or arithmetic to the middle sections, in spite of their free-verse appearance]

A Nordic Housewife

The van thrums up to the shore,
red locks hum, under eyes of fire
they wade onto the pebbles, roar
at the ones who cower before them –
rip them down, burn everything.

She stays with the scythe and yarn
and the crying children, gazes toward the sea,
stacks oats in the barn,
carries milk, carries hay;
shivers by the hearth, goes alone to bed.

The van thrums up to the shore,
crying children gaze toward the sea,
they wade onto the pebbles, roar
at women carrying hay, carrying milk;
shiver them with iron, throw them across beds.

She stays with the scythe and yarn,
red locks burning around eyes of water,
stacks oats in the barn,
cowers when the slaughterers fail to come home –
rips down the children, burns everything.

June 1975

[*New Poetry*, June 1980, pp.18-19 ; one of a pair of poems trying to picture the Viking's left-behind wife, its somewhat sillier companion called The Charms of a Nordic Housewife (unpublished)]

Padarn and Peris

The gnarled tree dances
the scarred rock scowls
the owl-eyed leaves fall
and Dolbadarn growls.

The white-faced mist comes down
the white lakes shiver
and cool the silver rain falls
on the turf of the fierce wind-giver.

And Padarn sleeps uneasily
grumbling under the ground
and breezily the grass moves
over his stony mound.

The oak-trees twist and writhe
the wind from the mountain moans
the leaves dance in the mad mist
and Dolbadarn groans.

A gnarled face with owl eyes
watches the well's grey water
and in the scar-faced quarry lies
the rain-man's silver daughter.

And Peris sleeps uneasily
grumbling under the ground
and breezily the grass moves
over his stony mound.

July 1974

[*Ore*, September 1980, p.14 ; the two lakes at Llanberis (church of Peris) are Llyn Padarn and Llyn Peris, named from the legendary Celtic saints who established Christianity there ; really of course they were older local demi-gods associated with an older holy place (Celtic pagan religion being based on local deities not universal ones) ; this original holy place was the area between the two lakes, named Dolbadarn (meadow of Padarn), beside which is a magical wooded hill with ancient stones and elf road ; this ancient sacred landscape is of more than just local significance, as Llanberis is the northern gateway to Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon), from where pilgrims set out on the arduous path to the summit of the holy mountain ; my notes from which this poem was developed, written at Llanberis, include a sketch-map of Snowdon showing how there are (archaeo-mythologically) gateways at all four compass points, each 'guarded' by similar clusters of sacred

sites and their twin demi-gods ; this is the earliest of my poems to have been published ie earliest written, written when I was 19]

The Seven Sisters

The seven sisters
side by side
show their beautiful
moonwhite breasts

to the roaring, milky sea
spreading its arms at their feet.

February 1979

[*Ore*, September 1980, p.20 ; The Seven Sisters are chalk cliffs on the Sussex coast west of Beachy Head ; the poem was written at Eastbourne]

Gratton Chapel

If you open the door of this brick box,
the music of old hymns will come out.

It could be a goblin's house: a little gnome
ought to sit in front of it.

But in this doll's-house chapel, people
have been placed by God.

It was ideal for its purpose, for two or three
gathered together would just about fit in.

Children of Primitive Methodists, belittled by sin,
thought it was a cathedral.

Local preachers who came across the Moor
used to shout at them in it.

God knows why there is a nude woman
on the noticeboard outside.

September 1978

[*Pennine Platform*, October 1980, p.16 ; my only excuse for the last couplet is that there *was*, when I visited in September 1978, honest, though God knows why ; and God knows why the poem got published, though the idea of a series of jokey images (musical box, doll's house, etc) is good, and perhaps the breathtakingly brilliant 'belittled by sin' redeems the whole ; 'where two or three are gathered together in my name' (Matthew 18:20) is Jesus's famous definition of his church – and heartening to small congregations of nonconformists ; the chapel, as you'll have gathered, is very small]

My Hawk-Poem

Is it a kite
nodding at us from its altitude? Is it
aerodynamically correct?
Or is it a dead bird, floating like a fish?

We scatter in a kind of instinctive reverence. Why
does its line become identical with ours?
can we never escape
its surveillance? Has it got radar?

And how is it we only see it fall
when it falls at an angle?

It's raping my sister!
It's tearing into her, carrying her
off, up,
to a world above chimneys and sparrows –

leaving us
like mice in the bottom of its pantry.

February 1978

[*New Poetry 6* (Arts Council anthology), November 1980, p.170; funny story goes with this one: various poets wrote poems about hawks in the wake of Ted Hughes, even so un-Hughesian a poet as Charles Tomlinson, and this poem was written as a spoof of the genre (hence its title) as well as in a caricature of the highly imitable Ted Hughes style ; it wasn't meant to be taken seriously – though admittedly it's better than it deserves to be, or if it isn't the last line redeems it ; anyway, when submitting poems to the annual guest-edited Arts Council anthology *New Poetry 6* in 1980 I threw this (as I thought) less worthy one in as an afterthought, to make up the number, or else make the others seem superior (the joker in the pack) ; needless to say it was the one that got accepted – but that's not the irony, the real irony is, the guest editor turned out to be Ted Hughes himself ; more ironically still, not to say embarrassingly, the entire anthology reads like a convention of Ted Hughes impersonators]

The Bilberry Pickers

Lammas Day on Black Bank Wood:
the stooped people, picking the blue,

and the wind, blooming across the heather.
A terrifying ceaseless hush

showers the bowing pilgrims who
gather beneath the aerials,

their fingers bleeding. I look back
aching to the hill's edge:

mist lying below, and the sun
full, gliding towards Sandbach.

It is not for the towering silver
we reapers bend, nor for the breeze,

but for the firmament of purple black
spheres, that contain the sunset.

1978 & 1979

[*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.21 ; Black Bank (called Black Bank Wood in the tithe apportionment) is the hump with the aerials a little north of the Old Man of Mow, where I and many before me used to pick bilberries ; I actually picked bilberries here on Lammas Day (Aug 1) 1978, and the following day wrote notes for and the first two lines of this poem ; an inferior poem called The Aerials emerged instead (unpublished), and it was nine months before I returned to the idea and completed the masterpiece ; the first of no less than five poems published in issue 18 of the distinguished poetry magazine *PN Review* (see also note to Dimsdale Golf Course, below)]

Penmaenmawr

You are less yourself than Moel Cynghorion:

splashing waves at its feet,
where gulls graze and curse.

And also less than Elidir Fawr:

the deepest cavern of the ocean,
its head a forest of white horses.

And likewise less than Carnedd Llywelyn:

in the river of a sheep's eye,
penetrated by blackness.

You are your own namesake;

your looks differ but your thoughts are identical,
and are what you are the twin of.

July 1976

[*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.21 ; pen-maen-mawr means great stone headland or hilltop, though the coastal promontory of that name seems less worthy of it than the great inland mountains of Snowdonia mentioned in the poem ; pronunciations include kung-horrion, va-oorr, and karneth]

Song at Shoreham

When I came down from Thundersbarrow Hill
into the same breeze from the sea, I remembered
the time before the Romans came, when we were free –

you and I, on that long brow of the Downs,
my hands reaching to weigh the braided trains
of your Gallic accent, to follow their sway

into evening. Here, among the Atrebates,
your name was noble, and wise men bent when they saw
your Catuvellaunian eyes;

while I had come from the borders of Brigantia
hardly knowing who I was, and still
you let me love you,

for a while – till political changes came:
they made you a kind of princess then,
your palace on the shore, and I withdrew

north into the land of the Cornovii,
and almost without noticing
lost you.

June 1979

[*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.21, and reprinted in *Poet's England 5: East and West Sussex*, 1982, p.48 ; Atrebates, the name of a Celtic tribe, is pronounced atree (rhymes with lavat'ry) bar-teeeze ; the dominant tribe of southern Britain at the time of the Roman conquest was the Catuvellauni, while 'the land of the Cornovii' was Shropshire and Staffordshire, bordering to the north on the territory of the great northern tribe the Brigantii ; a Roman palace that has been discovered on the shore at Shoreham presumably housed the family of a Romanised Celtic official, nobleman, or prince, and is I think regarded as the earliest great house in Roman Britain ; an inferior poem (now called A Sea Breeze, unpublished) drafted but abandoned in April 1979 shows that the idea of a metaphorical story of landscape, love, and loss, transposing mountain and plain to the south coast, was in my mind for some time before this much more subtle and beautiful poem emerged]

The Straw

When they laid straw outside the house,
I was afraid.

And when they bore you, men in tall hats,
I followed speechless.

It was windy in the churchyard, rain blew across.
Nothing was resolved.

There was some talk of redemption but
your stone grows mossy.

Later, when I began to think again,
I remembered:

the house named Tall Hat Cottage;
the straw they brought from the Glebe.

April 1979

[*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.34 ; in traditional society neighbours used to show respect to a person who was very sick or dying by bringing straw and laying it outside their house, almost like making an offering at a shrine, though the practical purpose was to cushion the noise of clogs and hooves and cart-wheels ; my great grandfather Harry Beech received this accolade in 1904 at the age of 27, as he lay dying of typhus in the house next door to Tall Hat Cottage, Biddulph Moor]

Dimsdale Golf Course

If I put the golfball along this line,
will it err towards the mound? And is this
the slope and invisible contours of the grass,
or the ancient magnetism of the precinct?

When I have got into the rough
around the undefined moat, my aim
is distracted by the legend of a temple,
and the shot describes an arc from the lost centre.

As I move north along the next fairway,
I defy Dimsdale's forces; but
a greater pull approaches. I hole the ball,
a pointed, black mountain across my eye.

1978

[*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.34 ; the excavations ended on reaching the edge of the golf course, but the fact that they had still not found the edge of the large Roman town of Chesterton-Holditch (near Newcastle-under-Lyme), and still not found its temple (all Roman towns had temples), lends credence to the legend that Dimsdale was the site of a Romano-Celtic temple, and thus, in all probability, of an even older religious site ; the mounds and hollows around Dimsdale Hall are thus not all golf-course landscaping, to say nothing of 'the ancient magnetism of the precinct' ; I need hardly identify the 'pointed, black mountain' visible some miles to the north ; this was the first of the five poems that the editor Michael Schmidt accepted for publication in *PN Review*, but his policy or method was to make poets sweat by demanding more evidence ...]

A Maze in Ireland

A name as alien as Phnom Penh
is a touchstone for Irishmen in a foreign land,
like Croagh Patrick. The pilgrims come
by dangerous lanes, afraid to show their faces.
A mythical island impales them, a vision
of Granuaile, bleeding and fertile,
dipping her feet into the ocean off Munster,
Uisnech and Tara her breasts, and her head
bridled by a crown of thorns.

Their perilous journey brings them to this beginning
at Long Kesh, where the sons of Tailtiu come to die.
We might prefer to think of all Ireland
as a maze, from which narrow young men, lost,
emerge articulate and vital, each one
desperate for resurrection.

August 1981

[*Critical Quarterly*, Autumn 1983, p.73 ; the poem relates to and was written during the 1981 hunger strikes by Irish republican prisoners in a prison named The Maze, at Long Kesh, near Lisburn, the first to die (on May 5) being the poet Bobby Sands, aged 27 ; altogether ten hunger strikers died, all young men in their twenties, the last on August 20 (the day before my 27th birthday) ; the hunger strikers were serving paramilitaries, their sacrifice deemed equivalent to being killed in action ; poems and stories often start with a slight or even trivial thought that leads into something deeper, and the starting point here, and the meaning of the first line, was a curious sensation that 'lon-kesh' and 'nom-pen' (I'd heard them on the wireless but didn't know how they were spelled) sounded equally alien ; I looked the names up for the purposes of finishing the poem, but in an odd confirmatory twist some forty years later, writing this note, I checked Maze and was astonished to discover it's a real place-name with (like Kesh) an Irish Gaelic origin – I'd assumed it was a nickname for the prison, which started as a jumble of huts on an old airfield (RAF Long Kesh) and developed into the 'H Blocks' (from their plan-shape) ; the first draft of the poem was hurriedly scribbled on the back of a small envelope (a letter from my sister just received in the post) while sitting on the toilet early on the morning of August 6 before going to work, and it was developed and more-or-less finished later the same day – the result being one of my most profound, moving, and intelligent poems ; Croagh Patrick is the great sacred hill of Ireland, a place of pilgrimage to this day, and Uisnech and Tara are the ancient holy places and religious centres at the traditional centre of the island ; a maze or labyrinth was originally a structure or site (or idea) of magico-religious significance ; Granuaile (called Grace O'Malley by the English) is the goddess-personification of the island, a kind of Irish Britannia cum tribal goddess, of whom the earlier, early 19th-century Irish hunger strikers had visions ; Tailtiu, a Celtic dawn goddess, is the tutelary deity of Ulster, to whom Ulstermen fallen nobly in conflict come for their eternal rest]

Brill

Consider the windmill, for instance,
a rocket, shipwrecked among craters
which its crew gobbled out, thinking
the hill a loaf.

Or suppose a Renaissance millwright
built a flying-machine, which ground
to a halt before reaching the edge,
and turned on its end.

When mist covers Otmoor, imagine
Brill as Buckinghamshire's prow,
its figurehead a wooden bishop
with lifted arms.

Someday, the one-eyed captain
who steered this wheel, setting
sails towards Muswell Hill,
will return to his craft

and grind a galaxy of flour.

1982

[*Critical Quarterly*, Winter 1983, p.54 ; living in Oxford and desperate to find a hill that was worthy of the name, I drove around and followed something that kept appearing in the corner of my eye, ending up at Brill and its spectacularly-situated windmill ; in fact what I'd been following was probably Muswell Hill, the smaller but nearer hill west of Brill, where I stopped to talk to some cows]

The Arrival of a Group of Wandering Entertainers at Mow Cop in the Time of the Wake

In the strangely tuneful
bending of a song
from the warped lips of a man along
with a fiddle on his arm
and a fluted pipe
and dancing legs at the root of the throng,

for the oddly changeful
movement in his eye
when the wind curls from the hills that lie
on the torque of the sun
twisting with his hand
and a turning head in the bottom of the sky,

all with old Whitehall
the jesting man
and his family and friends in a ragged caravan
up the dusty lanes
with a trick and a bow,
as we come to the foot of the Old Man of Mow.

July 1976

[*Ore*, August 1986, pp.7-8 ; the Whitehall family were entertainers and musicians in east Cheshire in the 18th century ; this and the two following poems were published as a sequence, preceded by a brief introductory article entitled ‘Mow Wake’ ; see note to The Faction Fight, below]

The Rhyme of Mow Wake

It’s twelve long months since I was here
upon the ground we love and fear
a-drinking of Kath Peever’s beer
  at old Mow Wake.

Our mouths run wet with bilberry stain
and mould a cry in field and lane
of how the end is here again
  at old Mow Wake.

So gulp the joys till you’re agog
for daft and idle is old Dane’s dog
and sweet and bitter is Kathy’s grog
  at old Mow Wake.

*

Thomas Wedgwood grits his feet
and springs aloft from Singing Seat
and Thomas Rowley drums the beat
  at old Mow Wake.

And Randle Whitall bends a song
his curling mouth and a fiddle and a gong
and nimble legs a-dancing along
  at old Mow Wake.

Then from the centre of the sun
the Guisers with their master come
and rule the roost till day is done
  at old Mow Wake.

*

So in the noon by Kitty’s ale
we fight with foot and tooth and nail
till all are down but Willy Dale
  at old Mow Wake.

Old Tom Pickering dances fine
by Lady’s Well at eventime
and Randle Whelock spins a rhyme

at old Mow Wake.

The sun is dead so I'll be gone
but you will see me back odds on
when past and future meet as one
at old Mow Wake.

July 1976

[*Ore*, August 1986, pp.8-9 ; 'all' in line 'till all are down' in 7th stanza (3rd line of 3rd section) omitted as printed ; all the names are real people living on Mow Cop or its slopes in the early 17th century – the ale seller Kath Peever, née Wedgwood, for instance was born in 1608 and died in 1680 ; Guisers is the local term for mummers, who perform a folk play ; see note to next poem]

The Faction Fight

The bloody sun at the world's bend
  and dust under our hair and eyes,
in the twilight of summer we bite the dirt,
  the night and the morning our prize.
Bittersweet bilberry-juice poured on our mouths
  and a foot in the back of the head;
by aching at this moment here on the border
  we bleed with the furious dead,
    the borderless god.

Purple ale at the pulse of the world
  and the world's jolt in our bones,
in the noon of evening we see the red window,
  the roaring darkness of the stones.
Better the love that rages after hatred
  and sweeter of limbs they that pour it;
by being at this moment in eternity's order
  we are swallowed by the crimson sunset,
    and the eyes that saw it.

September 1976

[*Ore*, August 1986, p.9 ; this and the two preceding poems were published as a sequence, preceded by a brief introductory article entitled 'Mow Wake' explaining the background and some of the allusions (the article is reproduced below as an appendix) ; the Wake was a non-parochial 'rustic feast' of ancient origin, originally a pagan harvest festivity at Lammas and latterly occurring in mid or late July ; a faction fight was an indispensable component of the Wake, not just because fighting was the menfolk's favourite pastime but because enacting the eternal conflict between east and west, sunrise and sunset, Moorland and Plain, Staffordshire and Cheshire, 'top end' and 'bottom end', etc was at the core of the Wake's purpose, 'when past and future meet as one' ; all the names in The Rhyme are real people living on Mow Cop or its slopes in the early 17th century – the key figure of the ale seller Kath Peever, née Wedgwood, for instance was born in 1608 and died in 1680 ; the Whitehall family referred to in The Arrival were entertainers and musicians in east Cheshire in the 18th century, probably descendants of the Randle Whitall mentioned in The Rhyme]

A Little Croft Near Flash

The stile is perfect, two small menhirs
fording the wall – up to your waist
they baptise you, a sacrament of passage.
The patriarch who parted a sea of heather,
to claim a land flowing with wind,
left us this narrow way to enter
his kingdom. He built a megalithic bridge
over the brook; but its meaning is lost:
it might as well be a burial chamber,
and the tilted croft an imperfect henge,
from which he (the inscrutable mason-farmer,
the geomancer of Quarnford) would survey the moors'
whole horizon – from Flash to Cloud End.

1984 & 1986

[*Poet's England 8: Staffordshire*, 1987, p.72 ; begun but left unfinished in April 1984, but then revived and re-written in February 1986 specially for the Staffordshire anthology that I edited ; the little croft is a real place, in the steep valley just below Flash Gritting Station]

William Hopkin

Out of the firmament of Cromwell
you became Headborough of Brerehurst
in the year of the list.

Now the battles have given over
you have come to Harrisea
with your shovel,

and from the wet gravel
prise coal with its corner,
you and James Baddeley.

The Court puts a pain on you,
but Margrett Hopkin
your once and future widow

shivers in the autumn landscape
at the end of your cottage
hard under Mole;

and you are only a soldier
a Dissenter and a workman
furious on the hillside.

Anyway, God's grace will triumph,
and while you are yonder
your grandsons Abel, Moses and Joshua

head out for eternity.

March 1977

[*Prospice*, 1987, p.55 ; comma in line 8 omitted as printed ; headborough = annually-appointed chief man of a township, the smallest division of traditional local government ; Brerehurst or Brieryhurst = an extinct township stretching from Kidsgrove to the top of Mow Cop ; the year of the list = 1662 (the restored King Charles II commanded constables to draw up lists of former parliamentarian soldiers who had fought in the Civil War of the 1640s and were now living in their jurisdictions, a potentially repressive act which must have caused apprehension, though in the event the lists were not utilised – William Hopkin's name is on the list for the constablewick of Tunstall) ; Harrisea = Harriseahead (Hopkin and Baddeley had dug pits in Harrisea Lane, which is probably the road through Harriseahead village rather than the present Harriseahead Lane) ; puts a pain on = orders to rectify (fill in the pits they'd dug) under threat of a fine ; once and future widow = Margrett (Margaret) Mottershead née Gibson was a widow when she married William Hopkin in

1640 (she a native of Mow Cop, he a newcomer) ; Mole = an old spelling of Mow (Mow Cop) ; yonder = the word is often used colloquially to mean in heaven, or dead ; Dissenters (Protestant nonconformists or Puritans) at this period often gave their children Biblical names that had hardly ever been used in England, signalling not just their religious position but an identification with the characters and stories of the Old Testament, which they could now read in an English translation ; hence names like Moses and Joshua (successive leaders of the escape of God's people from bondage and their journey to and settlement in the Promised Land) actually tell us something of the otherwise unfathomable personal aspirations and philosophy (and politics) of working-class parents who bestowed such names – Abel Hopkin (born 1673) was William and Margrett's grandson, Moses and Joshua were actually great grandsons ; this and the two following poems were published in *Prospice* at the invitation of the editor Roger Elkin]

For Emily

Over the moor, its heather daughters grew
knotted, ugly, in mad branch-twists
like little witches, thought stark, thought tough,

till the patient summer suddenly whispering
got its message through their thick skins,
and they breasted into delicate flower

with a quiet, triumphal brutality.

May 1975

[*Prospice*, 1987, p.56 ; yes, it is, you're right – it's *that* Emily]

The Garden That Cultivates Itself

The garden that cultivates itself
jungles us in:
wild bushes of grass around the opening we squat in.
If we move here or there
the clearing goes with us,
the same forests wrap us.
This
is instead of being clothed,
instead of being ourselves responsible
for the shape of the universe,
instead of relentlessly beating the bounds of our existence
across deserts we must keep crossing,
through sky we must fly through.
As yet
we are innocent of the sin of agriculture.
The garden, the clearing, move with us.
It is a culture of freedom:
without knowledge
we are not yet ignorant.
What will force our hand?
Sex
is our first discovery.

August 1978

[*Prospice*, 1987, p.56 ; title printed as 'that' (ie without capital) ; unfortunately lines 9 and 10 'instead of being ourselves responsible / for the shape of the universe' were omitted as printed (the typesetter being deceived by the repetition of 'instead of', presumably) ; the thinking is that the Garden of Eden is self-defining and requires no cultivation or tending, 'sin' originates with the Fall ie the expulsion from Eden, after which human beings have to adopt agriculture and cultivate their environmnt, becoming themselves 'responsible for the shape of the universe' ; originally part of an 'In the Garden of Eden' group or sequence of poems (the others unpublished)]

To Vicki on her Miscellaneous Birthday

I

No, I had never been to Barthomley
when I did your geography homework.

I had never leaned on a motorway bridge
watching the traffic move to and from Birmingham.

I had never tried to tell anyone
how landmarks map out our destiny.

But there had been no violence.

II

We have traced Roman roads across Cheshire
without knowing it. But gravity
pulls us in to Mow Cop,
pulls us apart.
Time
is our only revolution.

My ancestors were radicals like you. Their routes
zigzag, sewing the plain to the hills.
Their itineraries form the landscape of my past,
enticing me in.
And the centre of time
is a place.

Have you considered
the generations of angry pilgrims
following streams to the sky?
the timeless semantics of mountain and motorway?

Fate is fooling with me.
Myths
repeat themselves around the same symbols.
When I was young, the plain was at Kent Green
and she had pigtails.

Time's savagery is enough.
Time's revolution
liberates all of us at last.
But can it destroy
our legacy? our predestiny?
the emotional forcefield across the catchment of the Wheelock?

It isn't the past, is it?
Like Roman roads, after all, leading us
a few degrees away from everywhere significant.

I have suspended understanding.

We are moving too fast.

III

Mow Cop comes and goes above the River Wheelock
according to the weather. The stream never fails.
We walked in your orchard at Sandbach
once, in summer. How could I tell you
I came from the source of your waters
afraid of your bidding? how could I
cope with reciprocal worship?
Should we have gone to Barthomley?

We were not brave enough.

1977 & 1978

[this poem was accepted by Valerie Sinason for publication in her poetry magazine *Gallery* in 1981, but as far as I can discover it never appeared ; the planned issue 7 was postponed, though a circular reassured subscribers and contributors that it would appear and listed the names of poets whose work was to be included, including mine ; sadly that was the last I heard of it – my set of *Gallery* (which was one of the nicest of the 'little magazines' of that era) consists of nos.1 to 6 ; it must have been early 1972 when I did Vicki's geography homework for her (historical geography and map reading), which was about Barthomley, which by curious or spooky chance became of heightened symbolic relevance (along with Mow Cop and motorways) once Alan Garner's *Red Shift* was published in 1973 ; the River Wheelock rises on Mow Cop, and the principal place on the river is Sandbach, where Vicki lived]

Mow Wake

The principal event in the traditional religious calendar at Mow Cop, a sacred hill on the Staffordshire-Cheshire border, was Mow Wake, originally held at Lammas (August 1), and latterly for many centuries celebrated in late July, near to St James's Day. In Christian England 'Wakes' were usually parish saints' festivals; but the non-parochial nature of Mow Wake (the hill was a common lying between four parishes) indicates its antiquity. Lammas was the ancient harvest feast, the climax of summer. Like May (when the solar alignments are the same) it was a time for festive gatherings at significant natural features – hills, lakes, riversides, woods. In its day, not just anciently but in medieval times and perhaps down to the eighteenth century, Mow Wake drew pilgrims from across two counties, and must have been an important stop on the itinerary of hawkers and entertainers. Even in the nineteenth century, when the outdoor meetings of the Primitive Methodists adopted the old idea, the Wake survived on a small scale alongside them.

The sequence of three poems which follows evokes some aspects of the Wake. The first imagines a band of folk musicians and dancers being led to the hill by the Whitehall family, who were based at Macclesfield in the eighteenth century. Music, song, and dance must have been an essential part of the atmosphere of the occasion. The Old Man of Mow is a gigantic rock at the summit of the hill, and one of the centres of the sacred precinct. The second poem mentions some of the activities associated with the Wake – bilberry picking, a mummers' play ('Guisers'), a faction fight, the veneration of springs, and of course plenty of drinking and dancing. The names are those of actual persons living on the slopes of Mow Cop about the year 1640. Randle Whelock took his surname from the River Wheelock, which rises on the hill; Randle was a favourite Cheshire Christian name. Singing Seat is another, though smaller, outcrop of rock. The third poem elaborates the timeless feelings associated with the faction fight, fought between representatives of the two counties (or of east and west), a tradition which persisted in rivalry between the inhabitants of the two sides of Mow Cop, now a considerable village.

The fight was more than ritualised violence: it was an enactment of the ancient symbolic notion of conflict at the boundary, representing the struggle for reconciliation and renewal at turning-points in time and space. Sunset, death, and seasonal holy days were among such turning points; and the all-night vigil (the original meaning of the word 'wake') was at the

same time a ritual of defiance against the forces of darkness, and an act of respect in the presence of the dead, or spirits of the dead. The Wake will have been seen as a communion with gods and ancestors, placing its participants ‘in eternity’s order’.

[*Ore*, August 1986, pp.6-7, followed by the three poems pp.7-9 (The Arrival of a Group ..., The Rhyme of Mow Wake, The Faction Fight, reproduced above)]

LIST OF PUBLISHED POEMS 1978-87

Mow Cop Village [*Cheshire Life*, October 1978, p.80]

Mow Cop Railway Station [*Thames Poetry*, December 1978, p.20]
+
Picking God's Fruits: A Ranter's Love Poem [*Thames Poetry*, December 1978, p.21]
+
Baskeyfields' Pigtrough [*Thames Poetry*, December 1978, p.22]

The Omen [*Samphire*, Spring 1979 (March), p.26]

Notes on the Architectural Embellishment of Some Terraced Houses in the Potteries [*Friends of Gladstone Newsletter*, March 1980, p.3]

Love Song to a Quaker Girl [*Thames Poetry*, March 1980, p.10]
+
In St John's Wood, Kidsgrove [*Thames Poetry*, March 1980, pp.11-13]

A Nordic Housewife [*New Poetry*, June 1980, pp.18-19]

Padarn and Peris [*Ore*, September 1980, p.14]
+
The Seven Sisters [*Ore*, September 1980, p.20]

Gratton Chapel [*Pennine Platform*, October 1980, p.16]

My Hawk-Poem [*New Poetry 6* (anthology), November 1980, p.170]

The Bilberry Pickers [*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.21]
+
Penmaenmawr [*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.21]
+
Song at Shoreham [*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.21; *Poet's England 5: East and West Sussex*, 1982, p.48]
+
The Straw [*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.34]
+
Dimsdale Golf Course [*PN Review*, March-April 1981, p.34]

A Maze in Ireland [*Critical Quarterly*, Autumn 1983, p.73]

Brill [*Critical Quarterly*, Winter 1983, p.54]

The Arrival of a Group of Wandering Entertainers at Mow Cop in the Time of the Wake [*Ore,* August 1986, pp.7-8; introductory prose note entitled ‘Mow Wake’ pp.6-7]
+
The Rhyme of Mow Wake [*Ore,* August 1986, pp.8-9]
+
The Faction Fight [*Ore,* August 1986, p.9]

A Little Croft Near Flash [*Poet’s England 8: Staffordshire,* 1987, p.72]

William Hopkin [*Prospice,* 1987, p.55]
+
For Emily [*Prospice,* 1987, p.56]
+
The Garden That Cultivates Itself [*Prospice,* 1987, p.56]

27 poems

To Vicki on her Miscellaneous Birthday [accepted by *Gallery,* 1981, for issue no.7, but as far as I can discover it never appeared]

▪