

TONY JOHNSON 50 POEMS

Introduction by Bob Askew

Tony Johnson's son kindly sent me a file of his poems, and he said that Tony would be happy for them to be seen. I have always found it hard to read new poems, despite studying English Literature at University; but once I started reading them, I strongly felt that they should be made available to a wider readership. They are well-crafted, all are short and easy to read, and one of them even gives advice how to read poems! Tony seems to have enjoyed writing them as a quiet hobby. Some were printed in St Nicholas Church Magazine, and a few read out at an interval in the choir's singing, but they have seen little light beyond this.

There are about 160 poems in the file, and I sorted 50 that I liked. Martin Luther's 'I have a Dream' speech is also in the file, along with a few poems by other people, such as DH Lawrence's 'Baby Running Barefoot'. Tony's poems all have his name at the bottom, but they are unfortunately not dated. Some appear more than once, but I could find no differences, apart from one that had a couple of extra lines. This suggests that Tony only added poems that he had finished, but this could have been any time in the 50-70 years before the date of addition. The poems were all added to the computer file in the 21st century.

The subjects show Tony's keen social observation, and they also reflect the time in which he lived. He was born in 1936, and he endured the Second World War and its aftermath, as a child. He also spent two years of his life as a soldier, doing compulsory National Service, which he saw as a waste of time. If you have anything to do with parenting, do read 'Sand and Water', which is about children. There are some personal poems, written for new grandchildren, a couple of them are about a headteacher in Barbados, and another is an obituary for a teacher friend at Prices. Some more are inspired by a kiln, which his son built in the family garden. They are usually prompted by personal experience, but they all seem to have a universality about them, and to have been written for a wider readership.

Tony came to live in the countryside, just outside of Wickham, and several poems deal with nature and the environment. It is heartbreaking to think that we discussed the destruction of the environment with him at school in the 1960s, and that the threat is now worse than ever!

Tony never gave up. He lived to the age of 86, and there are naturally some poems about ageing, but they do not consist of resignation and moaning.

'The Deadline' ends with 'Go start a blaze before the last flicker'. I hope that you enjoy reading them as much as I did.

TONY JOHNSON 1936-2023 POEMS

HOW TO READ POEMS

Select from the contents diagram on the box.
Pop it in your mouth. Suck it. Suck it...Suck slowly.
On no account crunch it. Do not crunch it.
It is refined, honed. It must melt in the mouth.
Tongue-lift it to your palate. Hold it there.
Let it ooze flavour, aroma, pleasure,
dark bitter sweet or hard and soft centred.
Do not think. DO NOT THINK. Not yet. Not yet.
Let it melt. Then swallow the liquid bliss.
Feel the beat. Feel the beat. And then engage
heart and mind. Seek and you shall surely find
what you will, how you will and when you will.
Select one more from the box or dip in blindly.
No matter what, one more: then scoff the lot.

Tony Johnson

1 AFTER THE OIL RAN OUT/ SOON

After the oil ran out and the wars ceased,
The pony traps sprinted into morning.
The pace was slower than before that end.
Roads stayed good for years and soon we learned
That life was much better lived more slowly.
We wondered how we'd let it get so bad.
We travelled less and marvelled just how much
There was to do at heart of hearth, village
And town. We became stars in our own right,
Bored with others' silly fame and fortune.
The useless cars became our children's dens,
Or were melted down for the shire horses'
Hooves and tackle and metal parts of carts;
Or made great sculptures along the cycle ways.
We learned to walk and late in the evening
Polished the brasses of our brilliant horses.

Tony Johnson

2 ALUM BAY

The people streamed to Alum Bay
To fetch the pretty sands away.
They did not stop to think that if
They scraped and scraped there'd be no cliff.

Tony Johnson

3 ARE THERE ANY SOLDIERS?

"Are there any soldiers?" the four year old asked,
His hair wild as a double-crowned child's should be,
Anxious, cannily alert to his own safety.
"There are no soldiers here now," we assured him.

So he agreed to enter the ruins,
Climbing to the battlements
And watched the tide invade,
Rolling into runnels,
Dulling shining mud.

Short sword Romans, axing Saxons,
Vicious Vikings, ruthless Normans,
Now mere sprites on the swan's road,
Were safely imprisoned in history books.

Soldiers kill and he knew it.

Tony Johnson

4 ART LESSON

A sculpture stark against the sky,
A shaped couple. Male and female?
At each bronze head, inset, a hole,
Circular, through which you see sky.
Lower down, scooped shapes, each a bowl
On its side. One figure shorter.
Set on a stone plinth.

What is it for? What does it mean?

Then a child skips across the grass,
Climbs up, hollers into a scooped hollow.

Her shout frolics and rolls around,
A bagatelle ball bouncing back.
She hears her own voice distorted,
An odd echo of self, singing,
Laughing with the sculpture's pure form.

Tony Johnson

(The sculpture is "Two figures" by Barbara Hepworth
on the campus of Southampton University.)

5 BEST BOY/ THE BEST

Often she would tell him, "You are the best
Boy in all the world." Yet he'd won no contest.
She knew. Every time her words sank deep
To that secret place where what's needed you keep.
Her words were yeast from where self worth arose,
Daily breadfuel against life's coming blows.

Long after she had gone forever, still
Her words lay sleeping in his head until
One day, now old, he caught up from the floor
A small grandson; rummaged in his secret store;
Held fast the crying child against his chest
And sang, "You're the best boy in the world – the best."

Tony Johnson

6 BODY POLITIC

A red light. A beeped alert. Air bubbles!
Light off. An expert fingernail flicks them safe.
Through the cannula, inlet to your punctured vein,
The hatstand's plastic veins drip their poison
Aiming a military strike at a tumour,
Unable to take out the manufacturing plant,
The root cause, in the marrow of the bones,
Hiding, thriving in plain sight in the light
Of the microbiologist's keen eye.

You compare with a friend of over fifty years
The timing of pill cocktails, hair loss,
Chatting away to put the world to rights,

Knowing full well old idiocies persist:
Corporate greed; corruption, the poor poorer;
The poisoned atmosphere; plastic fouling
Of seas and oceans, mutual assured
Destruction. We have lived a day longer,
No matter what. Buoyed up by tea and cake
We watch and wait, watch and wait, watch and wait,
As late glowing embers slow fade in the grate.

Tony Johnson

7 THE BOOT HOLE

In the mucky dark of the well of the stairs,
where fags cleaned their prefects' boots
and shoes, and where prefects tanned your hide
to teach servility, sadism ruled O.K.
You'd grasp the rear rung of the chair,
presenting your rear to the advancing cane
in its short run up and final leap,
as in cricket, to generate extra force.
Six deliveries and it was over.
Grip hard, raise your head, stare at the print
On the wall: Stanley Spencer's "Cookham Rye",
Tranquil, vibrant, quintessential England.
The cane's sharp bite couldn't touch you.
Long ago you'd not cried for much worse.
You'd learned to hide in the deep well within.

Your best friend Squibs lived in Cookham.
He'd seen Spencer trundling easel, canvas and palette
in his old pram through his painful paradise,
the village, where Christ lived among buxom matrons
and angels came from glory to live in paint.
By constant looking during frequent beatings
you'd learned your lesson: in life as in art
pain and pleasure are about a torso's length apart.

Tony Johnson

8 BRANCH LINE 1952

Because my mother made them late, the trains
Were late. Setting out, the salesman hooked her
With cheap lino, and sob story, neatly rolled.
The purchase done, through the alley entry,
Across the square, past the snuff factory
And corn exchange, down the hill and the train
Was in! Then the high-pitched, Halloo oo oo oo!
Wait for me! I'm coming!" The guard's green flag
Poised, always waited, because my mother,
Just because my mother made him wait, the trains

Were late. And we were just on time.

Tony Johnson

9 CANE

In the corner the cane,
nonchalant, thinly
vicious, sadistic,
cruelly aristocratic,
by its superior voice
commanding use,
inhibiting contradiction.

"Use me or
lose authority.
Use me and
keep control.
I am your best ally
and their bane.
An anarchic mob
responds only to fear.
Use me and
gain respect.
The choice is yours.
Do not fear
to inflict pain.
You are not afraid
Are you?"

“ I am not afraid.
Authority is mine.
Not yours.”

The cane was silent.
Then vanished.

10 CAR LOVE

WHAT A GREEN FAMILY WE ARE WE ARE
WE DRIVE ONLY ONE VERY LITTLE CAR
EACH. THE PETROL BLOCKADE WE HAD TO BEAT
OR ELSE WE WOULD HAVE HAD TO USE OUR FEET;
WORSE BE FORCED TO PAY FOR A BUS OR TRAIN;
OR EVEN PUSH Pedals IN THE CYCLE LANE.
SO WE QUEUED FOR AGES TO FILL UP OUR TANKS
AND WITH THUMBS ERECT SIGNALLED HEARTFELT THANKS
THAT NOW WE CAN TRAVEL SO FAR SO FAR
AND NO-ONE CAN NOW SAY WE'RE ANTI-CAR.

11 COCK PHEASANT

Keep still! Quick! Look! Cock pheasant.
Just the other side of the glass doors.
On the terrace. Look at him. Gorgeous.
No. Gaudy more like. Such gaudy vestments
Make him the priest of the bird world.
Look at that absurd red wattle
 On his green head and the grey skullcap.
 Then there's that broadband clerical collar.
And that slow, deliberate, silent, delicate walk,
Studios even, but he does look dim with it.
There's just a hint of self-importance,
But he's not arrogant like a magpie or a crow.
He's the priest among the birds all right.
That reddish-brown chasuble over the purple alb
Is looking a trifle tatty though.
And those tail feathers are absurdly long.

Does he want to come in?
Or is he just looking at his reflection?
Does he see through the glass darkly?

Did the Reverend see just now that greenfinch
Gingerly putting weight on that foot and leg
With the cancerous growth, still eating heartily,
Dying to breed? What comical ears! Look!
His Showiness is quietly walking away.

Keep still! Or he'll only become hysterical.

Tony Johnson

12 COUNTING

Worst subject at school, his maths was a joke
He never quite got. Now white cells proliferate,
Incurably, with compound interest,
Someone else better at sums counts for him.
Works out the answer he's no need to hear.
Quod est demonstrandum. Days are numbered.

Now knees are shot he has need of benches,
Planted on the front for commemoration,
Inviting narcissistic calculation.
The year, month, day of births and deaths of folks
Gone on ahead. He does the sums. Just years.
To keep it simple. His maths was never very strong,
But, with his new obsession, is so improved
He'll soon catch up with those gone on ahead.

13 THE DEADLINE

The deadline is certainly elusive.
As it approaches – some jitters now.
Time management is crucial.
Insignificant details divert the focus.
You've done it along the road to this point:
Avoidance of the inevitable; frivolous frittering.
Cut out killing time: it's killing you.
So stick to the absolute essentials.
You've not worked them out yet?
But you're four score years and more.

Go get a grip of this last bit.
Do something useful, meaningful,
Blissful, beautiful, hair-raising, amazing.
Go start a blaze before the last flicker.

Tony Johnson

14 A DOG WITH SENSE

An older, tired-looking dog wandered into my yard.
I could tell from his collar and well-fed belly that he had a home and was well taken care of.

He calmly came over to me, I gave him a few pats on his head; he then followed me into my house, slowly walked down the hall, curled up in the corner and fell asleep.

An hour later, he went to the door, and I let him out..

The next day he was back, greeted me in my yard, walked inside and resumed his spot in the hall and again slept for about an hour. This continued off and on for several weeks.

Curious I pinned a note to his collar: 'I would like to find out who the owner of this wonderful sweet dog is and ask if you are aware that almost every afternoon your dog comes to my house for a nap.'

The next day he arrived for his nap, with a different note pinned to his collar: 'He lives in a home with 6 children, 2 under the age of 3 - he's trying to catch up on his sleep. Can I come with him tomorrow?'

Tony Johnson

15 FORCE FIVE

Windsurfers ride the force five white horses,
Their white wakes slicing manes to shreds.
A kite surfer lifts off with acrobatic skill,
Pirouetting on the wind, insolently taunting
The sea's frothing madness. "You can't ditch me!"
Dripping cyclists stop to admire the free show.
Middle-aged wet suits chat technique by vans
Like beached penguins stood up in wind and rain.

Old walkers put on late spurts for the car,
Facing the wind and the stinging hints of hail.
Olympians all racing waves and weather
With personal bests at every step, lift and ride
Just to stay upright and to keep going.
One more summer over before it's begun.
Force five and glad to be alive in it.

Tony Johnson

16 FOREST OF DEAN

Do not be fooled. This forest is dangerous:
Look at those foxgloves firing up through ferns;
And that adder winding across the cycle path;
And hear that sudden crackling explosion
Of a huge branch weakened by last night's gale
Falling with thunderous thud to the forest floor.

Down the arched dipple*, holding up that floor, * incline into
See the ghost of the free miner walk to work the drift mine
The narrow seam of coal, then edge his pale frame
Into the narrow ledge to pick it clean
And stuff rock rubble into its empty gob* * space left by
To shore up the roof against a deadly fall. the extracted coal
See those tree roots gripping hard that keystone.

See grey ghosts inhale the smoke and steam
Of the old terraced Dark Hill Ironworks,
Ruined like the men who used to work them.
And watch it now innocently greening
Over where boiler exploded and ore was blasted.
Look at those foxgloves firing up through ferns.

Tony Johnson

17 GAIA'S LAMENT

The Great goddess Gaia rose from her sleep.
A thousand years, as if one night, had passed.
Yet countless times since time began on earth
she'd woke and felt refreshed. This time she sniffed

the stench of poisoned atmosphere. She wept
and coughed and wheezed and retched and wept again
slow tears that fell as rain upon her breasts
and down her flanks. She heard their cries, these men,
who, in their arrogance, could claim to hit
a fly in space; whose choking greed crammed more,
yet more. "They cannot see that less is more
and more is less. When will they ever learn?"
despairingly Great Gaia spoke. No one
Heard nor heeded. "The bees will now succeed
Where man has failed: they are more organised."

Tony Johnson

(In Greek mythology Gaia was the mother goddess of the earth, the ancestral mother of all life. There is a Gaia theory that proposes that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings in a way that helps maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on our planet.)

18 THE GNOME

Raking the crisped brown leaves of the whitebeam,
I glimpsed the pointed pixie hat of the gnome,
Pink except where pockmarked grey.
He's heaving a going nowhere empty wheelbarrow.
His mouth's a mild smile below a broad nose.
His cheeks pink apples. His eyes sightless.
A pink and grey beard covers no neck.
He's wearing an open jerkin,
Sheltering snails have humped his back.

He's listing to starboard with stout effort,
Thrusting sturdy going nowhere legs.
Surprise! Surprise! From under his hat
A sly cowlick Elvis kiss curl for the old girl
Who'd had him indoors for company
With his companions for twenty long years,
They couldn't believe their luck.

Gnomes are naff so I'm told,
Should stay out in the cold.
This one was snug on a widow's window ledge,
Then somehow snuck out to her garden,
Just in time before the big pogrom
By the widow's daughter. They were disappeared
Just in time before the parson arrived
To discuss the funeral arrangements.
Rescued from beneath tangled couch grass.
Although he's out in the cold.
This gnome's a survivor and smiles still,

Tony Johnson

19 GOODBYE

Dead of winter resurrects faces in the trees
Scribbled by the leafless twigs and branches:
Cartoon faces with Pinocchio noses;
Bears with snub snouts, carbuncled angry men,
Always in oak and ash, never in the willow.
Then your face appears there, old friend, eyes downcast,
Pale, bald-pated, and with that neat white beard,
Disembodied on the willow's leafless drooping,
As if engaged in a book or winter search
For sheltering fauna. You are perfectly still.

Sipping tea, I clock the time on my wrist.
Four fifteen. Look up. Light's ebbing. You are gone.

That next morning your daughter phoned. You'd died
The previous afternoon. At four fifteen.
Surely you'd no time to pop in for goodbye
On your way to wherever you were going?
Nor to take a last peek at Chappetts Copse,
Where you'd nursed rare orchids into numbered health
With the same care and gusto you'd applied
To Family, Teaching, Rugby, Burns Nights, Singing,
Sailing and the Sword-leaved Helleborine.

Tony Johnson

20 GUARDIAN ANGELS

Unafraid, the five year old punched her arm
Across her dazzled eyes to shield herself
From a light too bright, too close for comfort.
Its blade pierced her skin, bone, eyeball, soul.
Then, it faded to reveal through chinked fingers
The face, ebony, still as stone, an angel,
Smiling from the bottom of the bed. No wings!

Years later, on a small tropical island,
A tall Caribbean Ella Fitzgerald
Spoke to her in the mellow tones of Ella singing,
"If a child falls asleep in your lesson,
Don't scold. Wake her up and send her to me.
She might have had nothing to eat that day.
That old tennis court that came with my house
Was beyond repair. Would have cost too much.
So we dug it up and planted vegetables.
Now we have food on the go all day long."
Eyes locked smiles mirrored ad infinitum,
As if they had known each other a long long time.

Tony Johnson

21 HARRY PATCH

Other returns included for the BBC's *The Last Tommy* (2005), when he met a German veteran, Charles Kuentz. Patch told the then prime minister, Tony

Blair, that nobody during the first world war should have been shot for cowardice. "War is organised murder," he insisted, "and nothing else." He said that, for him, 11 November was "just showbusiness". Instead, "the day I lost my pals", 22 September 1917, was his true remembrance day. Trench dogs had fought over biscuits snaffled from dead men's tunics, and Patch had thought, "what are we doing that's really any different? Two civilised nations, British and German, fighting for our lives

Patch had always felt, he wrote in *The Last Fighting Tommy*, that "politicians who took us to war should have been given the guns and told to settle their differences themselves, instead of organising nothing better than legalised mass murder"

Listen to Harry's words and mark them well

22 HARVEST HOME ON THE VERGE

The small print

Walkers fresh taste guaranteed, ready salted
in a GOLDEN packet.

Bubble gum time sugar free.

Swizzles drumstick raspberry and milk flavour

Amber Leaf finest Virginia hand rolling tobacco.

SMOKING KILLS includes 50 papers.

Totally wicked, the world's premier e-liquid container.

Please read. In case of accident take this box with you
to the doctor. Toxic if swallowed.

Toxic in contact with skin and eyes seek medical advice.

May cause harm to unborn child. Seek medical advice

Vapours may cause dizziness, drowsiness.

Very toxic to aquatic organisms.

May cause long-term effects in aquatic environment.

This material and container must be disposed of safely

To avoid environmental contamination.

Pictured: Skull and crossbones and a struggling tree.

Monster ripper energy juice. The juice is loose
from the flattened can. Pepsi Max Maximum taste.
in a ring pull can. Made in Great Britain.

Hula-hoops. Original potato rings. Bin your bag.
Dairy lea dunkers jumbo tubes.
Nestlé's Drifter biscuits. 99 calories. Portions
should be adjusted for children of differing ages.

(One week's rubbish on the verge and in the ditch
outside my home and there was more!)

Tony Johnson

23 HARVEST

Pigeonholing brains cannot see the need
For life to feed on sensual muddle.
They strain to drain the sacred ponds,
Nowhere leave a puddle.

We need those who dare to reach
For the moon, who grasp golden dust,
Who plant sacred seed in rough ground
And reap a harvest of stars.

Tony Johnson

24 HOLE

I can dart through a hole of light
In the branches, and in a brief flight
Make swift return through sixty years.
No magic, sweat, regret nor tears.

I mean to filch from yesteryear,
Then flit. What do I always hear?
"Who are you? The boy's gone." Quick! Back!
As a martin's dart-under-eaves-thwack."

Tony Johnson

25 JUST SMOULDERING

Throwing the cigarette through the window,
He watched it gleam like a glow-worm
Through the dark of his reflected body
Then dim and go out...

...And sat down to write.

But his mind remained dark and pedestrian,
Refused to run or leap or fly,
Try as he might. The sounds of supper
Clattered in the kitchen. The television
Performed jauntily in the adjacent room.
A dullness only lodged in his brain.
Too late, too late to start a fire there.

Later checking the flat battery charging
In the garage, among the dry, curled leaves
A smouldering and a thin musk of smoke
Alerted his nostrils. He bent down,
Gently inspired a flame, faltering in the dark.

26 CLAY

The kiln's not been fired a lot lately
And that's a pity because people need a pot.
I fancied it could once more see action
And double as a makeshift crematorium.
The first customer would fire away
To ash, leaving a beautifully baked pot.
The potter then slips on the inscription
Round the rim for future generations:
 "Your clay will rot.
 My clay will not."
The pot could even double as urn for ash.

Imagine far into the future, being found
As precious artefact, a thing of wonder
For scholars to decipher and ponder.
Surely a kind of immortality
In a showcase. The best on offer, perhaps?

Tony Johnson

27 KILNS AND FIRING

1. KILNS

My son once asked his A Level ceramics teacher at his Sixth Form College, "How can I fire my pots in a wood-fired kiln?"

"You build one," came the reply. That was 27 years ago. At the end of the garden there is still a working kiln.

The first two kilns for earthenware were built with loose laid house bricks on a concrete plinth and a single external firebox, creating an updraft. The mortar substitute was our own clayey mud. When firing the first kiln, smoke escaped through gaps in the walls as well as through the chimney top. His teacher and parents helped to slap mud into the nooks and crannies. It worked. These kilns were later dismantled; which was sad in a way, because it was never quite as exciting again as the temperature crept up to the required 1060 degrees.

The third kiln also had a single external firebox, but created a cross draft. It was better built, so required no mud slinging. Indeed, he was able to fire this kiln without assistance after the initial firing. The fourth kiln was built in order to be able to reach 1280 degrees, stoneware temperature, and to avoid the problems of saggars. The mathematics for the calculation of the construction for the top arch of bricks of the chamber of this kiln defeated him, but his brother's degree came to the rescue. The internal chamber was lined with homemade high temperature insulation bricks fired in the third kiln. It achieved the effects of wood firing on the surfaces of glazed and unglazed pots. It has twin internal fireboxes creating a cross draft.

"You can't move now," asserted my son, having moved out himself. Dinner guests would enquire, "What's that structure at the end of the garden?"

"Come and see it."

The kiln was wreathed in a grey mist in the failing light, a ghostly temple to the god of fire, literally an icebreaker. Magical.

"You're so obsessed with fire you'd burn your grandmother," I'd say to my son. However, she passed away some years ago and was buried. But it occurred to me that, now well beyond my allotted three score years and ten, we could save on crematorium costs and fire a few good pots whilst we were at it; and with a certain kind of immortality to boot. What a way to go! What with the ubiquity of gas and electric kilns, I felt that my son's latest kiln was a rarity in the modern world and the product of such hard work and experimentation that it deserved a poem. His grandmother deserved one too as he succeeded her in her profession. I guess the authorities will not allow me to lend one final assistance to fire a few more pots in the garden, so instead of pots a poem: one poem, a sonnet, for both his kiln and grandmother.

28 FIRING

THE FIRING

Her temper was once as hot as a kiln firing.
Hands would box my ears and her sharp voice screeched.
But she cooled after the flash fire peak was reached
And soon her guilty-concerned tone was enquiring,

“Are you all right?” And I felt the fire was out.
Then soft as unfired clay she wetly kissed
My burning skin and loving-hate would twist
My skin away and risk another clout.

Later her temper became October sun
Touching the cooling kiln’s burnt yellow brick.
The heat inside has done its own best trick,
Working the clay’s and running glaze’s fusion,

Leaving the honeyed-coloured solid pot,
Cool-warm and lovely. But, mind! The ash is hot!

29 LASTING

There were those old rugby boots sneaked out,
hidden from wives for that last game of the foolish,
trying to get away with it in more senses than one.
And the dead giveaway of that cut on the bald pate
of your partner in that daft recklessness.
Then the return home after the battle was lost
to the indulgent look on the women’s faces
that said, “Boys will be boys”, making us young -
momentarily. Worthwhile though and memorable.
No harm done, knowing that was finally it.

Then that last game of cricket creaking at the wicket,
desperately straining to reach double figures,
skill remnants lasting to stop the good ball,
hoping the dodgy knee would hold in the swivel
for your famous - on the local scene, that is -
hook shot, and failing to get after the full toss,
invisible fours going begging,
wishing game over and you were in the pub.

Time to hang up another pair of boots.

Then that last acting part (those old army boots
of Lance corporal Jones's were killing),
playing the silly old man once again.
At least there were not so many lines to learn.
If only you could insert a memory stick!
Just creak about the stage and avoid the prat fall.
Yet later on you managed to hit the deck hip first.
Acting is very dangerous the doctor said.

Who cares about rugby, cricket and the stage?
There's singing, reading, talking, writing, walking,
Waiting. Ah yes! Waiting. And lasting!

Tony Johnson

30 LIVING ROOM

It must have seemed like an outbreak of war.
The lawnmower engine tattered the peace
Of the Sunday siesta and scattered
The guinea pigs behind the wire mesh
In several directions to one destination,
Their hutch, lebensraum, an illusion
Of domestic safety from the larger world
Of domestic illusion, compounded
Of sly mutual insecurities,
Masquerading as strength. Soon the light
Is gone and night pours murder, death by crash,
Rumours of war from the television,
Window on the larger world outside,
Into the living room. There is nowhere to hide.

Tony Johnson

31 O JERUSALEM, JERUSALEM

(How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a
hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!)

Matthew 23.37

We left those dominant churches higher up

And started down the Via Dolorosa,
(For some surely the wrong way round)
Wondering where, going up, Christ had stumbled
And Simon, the Cyrenian, had picked up the cross,
Then set Him on his feet to trudge His way to death.
Continuing down, we turned a corner
And stopped in awe as we saw
The shining gold of the Dome of the Rock
With its delicate blue tiles and truly human scale.
Beside its beauty all else was dross
In this apartheid city of walled concrete hate,
Where no one is safe, unless tears rain peace,
Until tears rain peace upon it.
O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...

Tony Johnson

(‘Jeru’ derives from an ancient word meaning
‘early rain’ and ‘salem’ (shalom) means ‘peace’)

32 OUR NANNY

Our Nanny never held our hands
As we climbed up the stairs.
She never tucked us up in bed,
Nor made us say our prayers.

But Nanny saw that we were fed.
She never flew around,
Or rode a broomstick like a witch.
Her feet were on the ground.

Our Nanny taught us how to read
And gave us milk at breaks.
She saw we had a dinner cooked,
’Cos some were thin as rakes.

She made us do a dotty test,
Which told her we were bright.
She packed us off to grammar school.
We didn’t feel quite right.

We thought nannies cared for rich kids
Not us who'd lost a dad.
But Nanny gave us bed and board,
The best teachers she had.

We worked and played and passed exams.
We made it to a college.
Nanny paid the fees for our degrees,
That stuffed us full of knowledge.

Nanny was proud. How well we'd done!
Prof. Pete, the medical man,
Electronic Tom and teacher Ted
Pay back the best we can.

We knew she cared, but not her name.
We were not left to Fate.
Grown up, we found out who she was.
Her name was Nanny State.

Tony Johnson

33 POVERTY

Poverty can break you.
Poverty can make you.
Poverty can mar you.
Determination can shift you.
Determination can lift you,
Given the chance.
Given the chance.
Given the chance.
Poverty scours the mind,
Devours free knowledge.
Knowledge empowers you.
Knowledge can enrich you.
Riches can make you.
Riches can mar you.
Riches can break you...

Tony Johnson

34 POWER CUT

Damn! Power cut. Lights off.
Where did we put the candles?
Matches. Matches Ah! Candlelight

Look at that flame.
Blue light at the base.
Green tinge beyond the blue.
Dark lozenge of grey inside,
Enclosed by yellow
That pulls upwards, sinks back,
Seeking more fuel
In the bowl of white hot wax.
Ah! Candlelight:
Colours of life.

Lights back on.
Harsh electric light.
Monochrome.
Snuff the candle.
No churchy snuffers hereabouts.
Primitive technology only:
Spit, finger and thumb.
Snuff it. Don't blow. Don't blow.
You'll get thin grey smoke.
Out, out, brief candle.

Tony Johnson

35 RED –BERRIED LOVE

The firelight brought a touch of summer sun
To your shoulders as you knelt on cushions
After love on a frosty February evening.

You knelt there, silently, smiling at me.
Flames flickered in your eyes.
Red-berried love grew in the evergreen space between.

Tony Johnson

36 A REED BENDING

A bruised reed shall he not break
And the smoking flax shall he not quench.
Isaiah 42.3

The auburn wig is too young
For the wrinkles rivering her face.
Young girls laugh at her,
Not knowing the time of her life
Is not yet over. She fought
All the way through two wars,
Surviving the orphaning.
When trodden down she went on,
Until she came to the place
Where there is still singing.
Even the devil loneliness
Cannot break her spirit.
She remains soft and heart-pliable,
A smoking flax, a reed bending.

Tony Johnson

37 THE RETURN

They say you should not go back, but I did;
And walked again the rutted, tussocked lane.
It was raining. They were all gone, the birds:
Bantam, Rhode Island Red, Muskovy duck
From the muddy dip where the lane petered,
Then bridged the swollen stream and rose a path
To nowhere in particular, just country.
The birds were gone. A hedge had been grubbed out,
Usurped by a triple rustic garage,
The holy hedge where I'd searched for warm eggs.
Builder's rubble, sand and shingle cluttered
Ground where once my first spuds had flowered.

The kindly owner, proud of his extensions,
Walked me round the back. The apple had gone.
No sign of wintering bean sticks wigwamming
Around its trunk. Gone the thirsty standpipe
Gulping hot libation to cough down cold.

Gone the privy's merciful wooden seat.
Gone the garden's saving wartime bounty.
Through glass a bespoke rustic kitchen gleamed
Where fires in the black-leaded range had glowed.
No oil lamp to singe a homeworking head.

No sweat! It was worth it to stretch old legs;
Trudge the lane; know I'd lifted those warm eggs.

Tony Johnson

38 REUNION

CLASSROOM EXAMINATION

2a Price's School 1966

These ageing men were boys I used to teach.
Now, rôle reversed, I listen and I learn,
For one boy's now the canon come to preach
To attentive silence more than I could earn.

They were the cunning masters of mayhem,
Of artful doodle and of daring daydream.
Such fine bubbling brains! No one could stop them
From acting like a loose anarchic team.

Memory draws a classroom castle in the air,
Where appear thirty brilliant pairs of eyes,
Which stalk the ether and begin to stare.
To scrutinise, assess, and analyse.

Are you weak? Are you strong? You cannot bluff.
We can shave off a beard or rip off a mask.
Who are you? Do you care? D'ya know your stuff?
Answer! Before you set us any task!

39 SAND AND WATER

All children love sand and water.
All children love sand and water.
Whether you have son or daughter,
All children love sand and water.

All children love water and sand.
All children love water and sand.
Whether they are planned or unplanned,
All children love water and sand.

Hand in sand and feet in water:
Hand in water and feet in sand
Whether you have son or daughter
Whether they are planned or unplanned
All children love sand and water
All children love water and sand

Should you not love sand and water,
Try not to have son or daughter.
When children come planned, unplanned
Plant them just as soon as you can
Plant them gently in water and sand,
Then watch them grow as they oughtta.
All children love sand and water
All children love sand and
All children love,
If you give them sand and water.

Tony Johnson

40 THE SCAR

The scar surfaced very quickly from the road
To nose by way of a piece of aggressive flint.
Nine stitches later the scar acquired a tint
Of healing blue, something like ancient woad.

As a boy, proud of my scar I used to lie:
“An eagle’s talon tore it when I disturbed its nest.
We were on jungle patrol. Aw! The pain! Honest!
The knife just cut the bone, but missed the eye.”

As a man your scar retains a dangerous musk,
Alley cats think you are fighting tom,

A psychedelic man with a mushroom bomb.
Or a raunchy boar with a ripping tusk.

Symbolic? Sexual? Or psychological?
The scar is a simple surface scar - that's all.

41 SOLDIER BOYS

Aged thirteen and a boy's neat foot
Crammed into a bright-bulled boot.
Aged thirteen and learning to drill:
Some were thrilled and drilled with a will.
Aged thirteen and handed a gun:
Some sensed power and thought, "What fun!"

But there was the deadbeat platoon.
Their instinct was this was too soon.
Just out of short trousers they sang
Bawdy songs and their voices rang
An earful for the drilling barker
As they mock-marched onto the marker.

Once one paraded in full school kit.
He'd lost his khaki: didn't fit.
Next he dressed as if for cricket.
Still not enough to work his ticket.
They were Fred Karno's ragtime army.
Misfits. Bolshie. Peaceniks. Conchie.

Aged thirteen and forced into khaki
In this sceptred isle, land of the free.

Tony Johnson

42 SOWING THE DRAGON'S TEETH

Were knights of old thugs,
medieval bover boys,
lusting for a fight?

Were they the dragons,
killing for their lust and spite?
Were damsels just raped?

Did they scatter teeth
as seed on furrowed earth
for armoured war's birth?

43 THE STUMP

Call in the grinders and have done with it.
What's left of an old man's will won't shift it.
Admit defeat. Know when you are beaten.
Go on. Put your wedges and your axe away.
Stop gritting your teeth as if you'd just bit
into a bitter sloe and at every blow spat out
a lodged stone jolted from your inmost core.
It won't budge. Your stubborn will served you well
in the past. Give it a decent burial.
Iron leverage has failed to crack it.
Admit defeat: it's more stubborn than you are.
Don't waste more precious time and sweat. Go on.
Give in. Right. A couple more whacks for luck?

Tony Johnson

44 SUNFLOWER

The sunflower's an old lady past her prime,
Who packs a secret punch to cheat on Time.
Her heavy head is bearing down her spine,
A spine once strong, but now a brittle sign
That autumn's ageing sun's a tropic curse

As rodding rain and alphabet storms strain worse.

Her broad green leaves decayed to dirty rags,

Yet still she stands – the lady – by her bags.

Her treasure's stored from the sun's hidden rays

That powered her growth and soon will end her days.

Her secret force is in her deep-lined face,

A beauty mathematical – fine as lace,

An arching alchemy that turns decay to life:

White seeds packed and primed for death to spill – rife.

Tony Johnson

45 THE LIE

When she said she had lied
her lightening words ripped his trunk.
He shrivelled inwards.
Love died.

Coiled in his intestine
like an enormous tapeworm
on the soul's excrement
Hate fed.

He stared like a vacant guy,
stuffed with straw and shredded paper,
was a square-eyed head case,
Straw-crammed,

a zombie doomed to wander,
not hoping for release,
nor finding clear path home.
Rootless.

He wrote, cut back dead wood,
Grubbed out ivy by the root
Restored the pith.
Sap rose.

Tony Johnson

46 THE ONION SANDWICH

Circa 1944

Four years old and far from the battle, the child,
Skinny, anxious, alert, stole part way down
 Dark stairs, pressed her forehead on a banister,
Listening to her mother's quiet crying
Into the dry bread and raw onion sandwich.
In the grate the last glow of the last coal,
A cocoon of weak light, gave false comfort,
 The house briefly safe after the last bomb blast.
Far from the battle, the child crept back to bed,
Her face marked by the turned wood's impress,
Silent sorrow, fears, tears, the onion sandwich.

Tony John

47 THIS CONE/ FIR CONE

The cone's a symbol, so I'm told.
 Eternal life. No less.
This cone is sixty-two years old,
 Kept safe, I must confess

To hold the time of childhood lost,
 Tight-folded in this cone,
Clamped up against the winter's frost,
 When youth and years have flown.

Tony Johnson

48 A TRIO OF TRIOLETS

THE SHED

I'm trying to find some space to write,
And it's trying me. I'll try the shed.
But it's full of junk. A terrible sight!
I'm trying to find some space to write.
To put it right will take all night:
Time that's wasted is Time that's dead.
I'm trying to find some space to write,
And it's trying me. I'll try the shed.

SCRIBBLE

I'm trying to find some Time to write,
But Time's writing me: I'm wrinkled.
The scribble of Time is black as night.
I'm trying to find some Time to write.
When retirement comes then I might.
What was that bell I heard tinkled?
I'm trying to find some time to write,
But Time's writing me: I'm wrinkled.

PAPERY WORDS

I'm trying to make my writing deep.
Papery words are flat and thin.
I need pickled words that will keep;
Orchestral words that make you weep:
Ball grabbing words that make you leap.
I'm trying to make my writing deep.
But the deep well has just caved in.
I'm trying to make my writing deep.
Papery words are flat and thin.

Tony Johnson

49 UP THE LINE

The line's been closed longer than it was open
We cycle on the hottest day of the year,
Up the line's slow incline and down again.
In the cool gloom of the trees' churchy shade
On the back of the navvies' slog and wasted bones,

Our bones shaken by proud roots rattling wheels.

The line's a lifeline now, safe corridor,
Linking bird and mammal, plant and insect.
But keep your mouth shut as you pass the cloud
Of manic dung flies panicked into motion.

When you pass horse and rider, dog and walker,
Other cyclists pushing hard for fitness,
Old-fashioned country courtesy still rules,
Far from road hog Toad's speed-honking madness.
Don't hanker after steam: your line's still open.

Tony Johnson

50 WESTERN SOLENT

(Caedmon and Cenewulf, ferries plying between
Lymington and Yarmouth, are named after Anglo-Saxon poets, who often
called the sea the swan's road.)

Yesterday the sea was green lumps,
Thumping our tacking bow,
Bumping us down the Western Solent,
Salting our stanchions,
Our mast alarming.
Double-reefed, we'd skedaddled for shelter.

Today Caedmon and Cenewulf flatly
Glide on the swan's road
Collide only with their own images.
Hurst Castle's a mirage.

The spit's lost in this early mist,
No breath to inspire a sail hoist,
Old wool tell-tales a perfection of limp,
A low tide and mud glistening.

Now the sun's gold line easterly reckons us home.

Tony Johnson

51 WHAT'S NEW?

Another day. Put the kettle on. Warm the pot.
She's asleep. For tea in bed she'll wake up.
What's that on the grass? Another damned rabbit?
Too big. Mother and offspring, perhaps? Surely not
A hare? Quite still. Dead? Something brownish coiled
Like a dog in a basket. Asleep? ...Fox!
Resting... Then lifting himself up. Proud. Tall.
Limping off slow. Old. And somewhat mangy.
But full of old life for another day.
Lame he may be, but life is still worth it.
Tail up. Easing through a hole in the hedge.
Exit. Enter next-door's garden. What's new?

Tony Johnson

52 WHATEVER NEXT?

The night the leg pierced the floorboards,
Tilting the bed and tipping those in out
On to the floor of the rotten room,
High-pitched laughter pierced the thin wall.
"Ooh! Er! Whatever next? Help! Help!"

I heaved up the bed, stood the leg
On a cheap tin tray to spread the weight,
Crept back to my cupboard room,
And slept through our improvised night.
Whatever rotten hand would Fate deal her next?

I learned a good lesson that night:
Whatever was next, laughter was the key.

Tony Johnson