

Shades of Green: Poems
Akros, 2005

TRANSPORT: RACING GREEN

CHEAP FLIGHT HOLIDAYS
Villanelle for the Vapid

What do we mostly chat about at work?
Our holidays: the ones we've had or plan
when we escape beyond the daily task.

For cut price flights, we only have to ask,
transport us to a patch of sea and sun
worlds away from all our chat at work.

The car that smiling waits with loaded tank
will whisk us dangerously toward a tan
where we can balm away the daily task.

Who would stay here in the semi-dark,
explore the treasure islands around Scotland?
What could we find to talk about at work?

Midges, and the drizzle, mud and murk –
who wants to walk or struggle up a mountain?
that sounds too like another kind of task.

Who wants to catch a ferry, ride a bike
when bars and clubs and beaches offer fun
provide a stack of jokes to tell at work?

Untaxed in fuel the many planes take off
like flies that multiply and cloud the sun –
we'll have so much to chat about at work after
we've escaped the daily task.

I TOOK THE CAR TO THE DENTIST
(and my teeth are a bit crooked)

I parked the car in a hurry
plenty of room I thought
fed a generous fee to the meter

Plenty of time I thought
for the dentist to check me up.
It was. I started back
and began to drive away
nice day I thought –
when something caught my eye.

A notice stuck to the windscreen
Surely not? I did everything right –
I thought.
but no. I'd parked a bit squint
not exactly within the lines
and such is an offence
that would cost me thirty quid.

It can't be I thought.
does this carelessness offend?
offend whom? I thought:
the sky? the earth? the neighbourhood?
the cats? the birds? the trees?

Never mind I thought
I did wrong and I should be punished
I should have come by bus
should have set my alarm earlier
and left more time I thought.

I expect to do too much
in one morning. I should make
the dentist my day.
I expect to do more than
one thing in a day I thought
and that is unreasonable
in the 21st century.
I am living in the past.

I'll make myself ill, I thought
I'll end up with a heart
attack I thought, *I'll end up*
neurotic and boring I thought,
I'll end up dead.

Take my time, what's the hurry
I thought to finish myself off
more quickly?
I even still have my teeth.

*And all I do today
for good or ill I thought
will be forgotten tomorrow when
I return to dust – then I thought –
Let's hope they don't park me squint!*

SHALL WE HAVE A BABY?

verse for this adversity

A baby coming – *thinks*: CAR SEAT
my work, a school, the supermarket
how on earth will we manage it –
another life on this crowded planet?

Thinks: mortgage, then thinks loss of great
free-wheeling life-style; money – lack of it
a baby coming – *thinks* CAR SEAT
my work, a school, the supermarket.

Thinks: decorating, nappies, cot
convenient timing for the birth
that conference to save the earth?
the horoscope, a lucky date?
name for a baby, *thinks* CAR SEAT.

TOURISM: LOVAT GREEN

BROCHURES

A drop in the bucket

A walk through history
A ride through culture
The Tuscan Trail
The Way to Assisi

Five hundred pounds a day
an adventure holiday

*You are met at lunchtime
by a landrover
and one of our famous picnics*

* * * * *

Five pounds buys a blanket
clothes, food, soap, tools, cooking pots

**Give water to the aged, the women
who wander in search of it
five years it hasn't rained**

* * * * *

Franciscans want to restore the church
continue their works of charity

but St Francis has appeared to declare
that churches and charities cease
and justices begin – not least
for brother beast and sister bird

How much should I give for a drop in the bucket?

OIL: SERPENTINE GREEN

ALARMING TIMES
haiku round the clock

An alarm clock rang
I fell asleep again
when I woke it was too late

A clock loud ticking
in my sleeping head
I woke and thought it was a dream

Our planet changes
we know this happens
at times it changes faster

Species get knocked out
like Neanderthals
adapted to frosty woods

What sort of being
will survive, emerge
from massive global warming?

A small desert rat
with a human brain
scuttling down sandy hovel?

some amphibian
plying savage seas
in sun-powered frog-skin vessel?

Or robotic node
consuming knowledge
in collective thought-machine?

SAVING THE PLANET *something to die for*

To die: to give up life for
to die for means to live for
would we want to die for what
we would not live for?

We cannot die for ourselves since death is the end of us
we cannot live for ourselves since that is absurdity
we die for what we can give and abandon generously.

Here is what we die for:
our family name and honour
our children and children's children
the principle of beauty in truth
a working mind and heart
humans who live with the planet
who thrive on thrift
who love to share and build
more life, life to die for.

WOUNDED DANCER *the earth as holy ground*

The dancer holds her breath

homo-would-be-wise walks the earth
boots up and strides the earth
which now lies inert
the dancer hurt

In throes of anti-matter we
participate in misery
while fragments of freedom
emerge from cracked ground

Out of death and dereliction
anti-death and resurrection
the dancer unbound
as we throw off our platform soles
to tread on sacred ground

Which feeds but is not consumed
burning does not burn
speaking does not denounce
providing does not denude
withers but does not perish
like rock, like grass, like air, like water,
like ideas like love like us, us
creatures made of stars for Earth,
planetarians for this planet
world without end amen.

HEALTH: APPLE GREEN

WAXWINGS IN THE PARK *variety is the spice of life*

A flock of waxwings in the sycamore
sycamore in February in the park
park green and windswept in the city
city grey yet glistening in the east
east coast of Scotland facing Europe
Europe, Scandinavia and Siberia
Siberia which sends its icy greetings
icy greetings holding back the Spring
Spring to come, longer light and walks
walks in the park perhaps to glimpse
crested waxwings banded on the boughs.

In Scotland *occasional winter visitors*
visitors who wear distinctive colours
colourful from head to yellow tail
yellow tail and sealing-wax red tip
to every feather of the wings, wings
for chasing insects, beaks for berries
beret chestnut with the jaunty crest
pinstriped through in charcoal black
and black around the throat and blazing eye.

My eye surprises me in looking up
looking up and welcoming the migrants
migrants among our crows and starlings
our gulls accustomed to the slanting sun.

MY CHEST HURTS

specialism

My chest hurts when I walk fast uphill.
I keep on walking. I'm in a hurry.
Within that year
my husband was ill: anguish and dread
my husband died: grief
my mother died: numbness
I retired from my work, work of my life –
and my chest hurts when I walk
uphill fast.

I hear it said: women have hearts
that give little warning before an attack.
Mine is warning. It hurts.
I phone the doctor and ask for a check.

The nurse at the clinic asks questions
draws blood. Pressure normal
cholesterol not abnormal
but they send me to the consultant.

In the hospital I wait
with the obese, the pallid, diseased.
I wait an hour, another.
At last my name is called.
I tell the story and
tread the mill

wired up and plugged in
yes – walk until the chest hurts.

Wait again. Summoned again.
The consultant is brief:
'Your heart is OK'.
Relieved, I ask
'but what of the pain in my chest?'
He has no idea: 'All I can say is
I find nothing wrong with your heart.'

I go home with the hurt in my chest
which is not my heart.
I have it still
when I walk fast uphill.

CHOICES

the Goldilocks principle

Travel light heart is lighter
own less room is larger
eat less body is freer
buy less purse is fuller
less information head is clearer
fewer clothes get dressed quicker
fewer books love them truer
play cd's listen to them
less dashing slower living
sleep deeper dream longer
walk further walk around
breathe easy feel happy
why not?
Does 'choice' mean we can choose
how to live or only the colour of
some new machine?
Goldilocks knew the golden mean
(too big too small, too hot too cold)
the value of the in-between:
that just-right balance knife-edge keen
for human equilibrium.

HOUSING: GRASS GREEN

CHILDBIRTH

Sonnet of a sort

Jesus born in a stable. Sakina's baby
too, born for seclusion in the cattle
section of her clean-swept dung-washed home
built of sun-baked mud bricks beside
the well beneath the peepul tree; or
in Lewis in her blackhouse Mairi's son
born amid the peat-smoke safe and warm
born into a family, a creature among creatures.

Pity the palace child, the castle bairn
wetnursed and forced to 'play the man'
Or 'be a little lady'. Pity the child
Born to suit the diary of a working
Mum or celebrity-addicted parent, delivered
Like a product ordered on the internet.

CHANGING STANDARDS

Imaginary homes

House and garden were our idyll
roses at the door, swallows in the eaves
cabbage patch and river running near
or farmhouse with hens and pigs
eggs and bacon naturally
peas and beans and barley-o
soup and home-made beer.

Then an elegant apartment
was what we most desired
with the latest style in furnishing
and colour-scheme or mock-
Victorian for the chic;
festoons of indoor plants or
window-boxes look so enchanting.

Now some seek a castle ruin
with heritage lottery funds to make
it habitable plus solar panelling?
Or a ruined croft with three acres
of thistle and sand to grow

potatoes start a craft shop –
dropped out of city life.

But anything will do for most of us
a room to rent, a basement flat
a barn, a yurt we build ourselves
steaming the hazel saplings
sewing th canvas, sleeping
on the clammy ground with old
rugs and blankets anything.

ECO-HOUSE SPEAKS

a garment to wear

I'm displayed as an eco-house:
not many of us yet, we are
hand-built, crafted in detail
with every latest invention
up-to-date, state of the art,
no two alike, we are each
unique, built less to last
than to be adaptable you could say,
organic you could say, breathing
you could say, a living system.

Take walls and structure:
as with clothes it is the layers than count
for warmth and we have layers
and cavities. Take roofs: the slope is
not so much to drain off the rain,
more to catch the sun in solar panels.

We keep heat in, we let damp out;
we have a circulation like the body;
we have a heart that pumps renewable
energy; we have waste disposal systems
that recycle waters, make compost,
dispose of nothing that has another use.

Light and free to live in, we stretch out
our arms in moveable positions, our
legs in swinging doors. As for windows,
they are made from whisky barrels
for letting in the subtler spirits.

We insulate
and use the ceiling space. Our kitchens
are partly garden or so it feels: herbs
growing, vegetables cooking, salads
appearing, grains and pulses heaped
in abundance; slow food, good food, languid
home-made wine, home-made bread
with its own metabolic cycle.

We have no heavy tread upon the earth;
our footprint is hardly traceable
though we are firmly grounded
and can withstand storms and
hurricanes like a reed in the river.

To live in an eco-house is to wear a garment.
We are not machines for living in, as
Le Corbusier manufactured.
Machines are too demanding;
we are intuitive and gentle;
we save you from alienation within
yourself, between yourselves and from
Nature you long to know better and
cannot avoid any longer without
tantrums; this very place, any particular
kind of place, a certain chosen milieu,
that's where we belong as eco-houses,
belong and belonging transform.

POLLUTION: BOTTLE GREEN

PLASTIC BAGS

the planet eats plastic

Is that a bird or a plastic bag?
Cat in the tree or a plastic bag?
Snow on the hill or some plastic junk?
Duck on the pond, kite in the air
or some swirling, whirling plastic?
Is that a slippery fish or submerged
not again – yes – plastic bag?

Hérons gulp them, gulls and cormorants
choke on them, cattle munch them,

babies suffocate, yet we carry on
carrying out and carrying them around
as if they were convenient *and* harmless,

We even buy books to put in them,
advertise on them and put our rubbish
in them before we chuck them out –

Out where? Into the bin, onto the dump;
we dump the plastic for the earth to eat
and suffocate, for the sea to drink and drown,
for the planet to absorb and become
terminally ill, as a matter of harmless
convenience.

CARBON TRADING

regular verbs

I pollute you pollute he/she/it pollutes
we pollute you all pollute they pollute
in the present tense day after day
and in the past I have polluted
you have he/she/it has you all have and
they have polluted
but in the future we'll have carbon-trading:
I shall pollute and you will sell your credits
like coffee beans among baby-sitters;
they will pollute with impunity
having planted a few trees. We'll pollute
with sanitary towels nappies cleaning bleaches
aerosols chemicals our fossil-fuel burning
our nuclear waste
our artificial clothing our trash consuming
our luxury goods and fashion-fawning
our factory-farming our throwing out
of old computers.

You and I

plod on with heavy footprint on
the earth's eroded soils and over
several times the earth's whole compass
while the poor tip-toe barefoot through
our toxic rubbish-heaps and drink
from contaminated waters breathe
our manufactured fumes beneath the

blackening clouds of global dimming.

Would that I had not you would not
he/she/it might not you all would never
dream of they would cease at once
from all declensions and conjugations
of the user-friendly active regular verb: *to pollute*.

PILL AND POTIONS

noughts and crosses

Once there were diseases
malaria, polio, TB
smallpox, cholera, dysentery
typhoid, plagues and leprosy.

These raged mostly in distant lands,
where we send doctors with band-
ages cheap pills, new expens-
ive vaccines that we want to test.

In Britain it's hearts and asthma
aids, cancer, and addictions;
to change our lifestyle would be a nightmare
and someone profits from our afflictions.

The market, the economy,
making money, celebrity
while an abyss of deep dis-ease
opens within our society.

Toxic waste contaminates
even the unborn foetus
but what is a human life
compared with share-holder status?

While diseases play noughts and crosses
our hospitals are riddled through
with mutated bugs and we haven't a clue
what in the global world to do.

THE SEA: SEA-GREEN

WHITE SANDS OF THE WEST

feed our creels

Alexander's surviving cohorts after campaigning for years in Central Asia, yelled 'the sea! the sea!' and pranced about like goal-scoring footballers as they threw off their trappings and ran down to embrace the wine-dark Aegean.

Had they lighted upon Luskentyre or Valtos,
the long-white western beaches of the Uists,
Eigg's singing sands, Barra's cockle strand,
Iona's north sands or any shell-blached *Camus* in the west –
they would have known they'd reached the Tir nan og
where Ulysses set sail beyond the sunset:

Jade, turquoise, emerald, luminous, the Gaelic *glas fhairge* –
colours wildly pure that strike and change to deep gentian
as first sunset streaks then moonlight shimmers a path
directly shafted to the entrance of our spellbound hearts.

'Sea-roads of the saints' and of the Viking plunderers –
Columba's expert mariners sailed alone to bring
their tough survival skills to rock cliffs and coasts
where they built their humble citadels. Living off goats
and seagulls, sheltered by solid stone, they fished those
churning whirling waves along with seal and whale,
dolphin, and porpoise, diver, cormorant, and gannet;
they gleaned the shores along with otter, heron; they
gathered herbs and sea-weeds to make medicines and
then illustrated all in gospel manuscripts of stories
from the east, transferring them into a creed or manual
on god-in-sea-nature:

Lir, Mannanan, tide and current,
wind and storm, mountain and cloud, gulf stream and
jet stream, tectonic plates and sea-bed shifts
bless us, today, tomorrow, our going out and coming in:
destroyer and provider, send the shoals and feed our creels.

EARLY MORNING WALK

ALONG THE SANDS OF EAST LOTHIAN

Sea Idyll

Old red sandstone outcrops
pods and strings of seaweed

yellow sand and scuttle of running bird-life;
ranks of oyster catcher
redshank, greenshank, dunlin
raft of eider duck floating in the shallows.

Graceful tern, kittiwake
sandpiper and curlew;
rock pools full of yellow-brown periwinkles;
limpets scrape our bare feet
red anemones wave
or close, while a hermit crab edges homeward.

Where the tide's retreated
jelly-fish, men of war
studded along the ribbed and wormholed margins;
watch out for bits of glass
plastic bottles, old shoes
dead gulls; bones and feathers in oily patches.

THE SHANTY TOWN KIDS OF KARACHI *day-outing 1968*

The Shanty-town kids of Karachi
that great port
had never been down to the beach
a good hour's drive from the city
where the rich
owned weekend chalets and where
giant turtles crawled up the sands
at hightide midnight in Spring
to lay their hoard-hole of eggs.

The children lived in a dusty encampment
with one water pump in heat and disease;
their parents swept the marble floors of the rich
or the airport halls
and children minded the babies while their parents
minded the babies of others.

In rags and shoeless, the shanty-town kids
eighty or more
went down to the sea one day in a hired bus.
Sheltered in a beach hut by special arrangement
we took them down to the water;

they waded in with their clothes on
soon dried again in the heat;
they frolicked and played and laughed and cried
then fed and tended we drove them back
to their hovels.

THE SEABIRDS' PROTEST

non-violent resistance to extinction

The birds of the sea convened a parliament at St Kilda;
from Orkney and Shetland, the Small Isles, the Outer
Hebrides they gathered one week in late summer
when chicks could fend for themselves, though few chicks
had hatched that year or the year before or the year before.

Manx shearwaters skimmed the waves, gannets glided
on wide wings, arctic terns soared
from the north; puffins, guillemots, razorbills and
even a pair of albatross, who acted
as moderators. The talk was mostly of climate change
and how it was altering the relative temperature
zones of the sea and convection currents, affecting the fish.
The skuas shrilly denied this, squawking 'No proof' and then
'Climate is always changing, the earth has always moved
and we have always managed to adapt.'

But the lack of sand-eel supply due to factory ships
which dredge the least living thing that moves in the sea;
chemicals oozed from salmon farms; oil escaped
from tankers and the huge disturbance of deep drilling;
the dwindling of cod and whitefish with trawlers forced to dump
them dead in the depths again after catching them
for fear of being over quota; seals, dolphins, whales
suffering a similar fate; submarines
prowling and fouling, prowling and fouling, prowling and fouling –

'Silence' cried the albatross, 'Order, order!'
The chatter and cries were tumultuous, so that none
was properly heard. 'It's time to take a vote and resolve
on action: either we become extinct
or we leave the coasts of Scotland for good and find
another home. We might persuade the humans
to pay attention to their seas and make new rules
for their protection, as they have begun

to do to save their land?' With a show of a thousand wings
it was agreed a protest must be made,
that birds of every species would gather on Arthur's Seat
to darken the windows of the parliament
and drown with their cacophony even the grind of traffic
even the drone of debating within the chamber.
'We'll fly around encircling them and swooping lower
closer and closer. They'll remember Hitchcock
and become afraid!' – 'How will fear make them act
when reason has not prevailed all these years?'
'Fear and pity for their descendants who will never
watch a gannet diving or a puffin
landing or the arctic tern in a pearl-grey sky.'

Thus it was arranged and final flocking took place
for three weeks in October. It was noted
in Edinburgh that the sky was black with birds from the sea.
'Return to the waves', the people shouted, 'or
we'll have to drive you back.' It was in vain, in vain.
The birds continued in non-violent resistance;
they waited over the winter as one by one and then
in their tens, in their hundreds, in their thousands they perished,
large and small, littered the parliamentary precincts
with their delicate feathered souls and desperate beaks.

TREES: FOREST GREEN

THE GREAT OAK

Sonnet for a chieftain tree

The Great Oak stands stalwart at Eardisley
first recorded in the Domesday Book
a royal forest and a royal oak
a tree for kings, itself a chieftain tree.

Within the trunk's capacious hollow core
King Charles' men could hide or locals flee
who knew the secret of the ancient tree –
and children picnic on its mossy floor.

Beetles make their home and butterflies,
fern and lichen, fungi, weasel, stoat,
the woodpecker, the flycatcher, the bat,
a thousand and another thousand years.

With earthen roots as deep as heavenly height
balance *above below*, darkness and light.

THE MAGIC APPLE TREE

'Comfort me with apples'

*Cherry blossom pink and apple blossom
white or apple blossom's deeper pink
as in Samuel Palmer's magic apple tree
created for immortal Avalon
or for a taste of wisdom from the muse
from Venus, Friday's child, with Strongbow cider
fermented for a feast at harvest home.*

Now hidden on a misty Scottish coast
old apple trees survive and are restored
each one to give its quintessential taste
in gardens of Lindores, its ancient abbey:
a gift to every sense and to more life
for birds, flowers, insects, thriving where
the apple reigns, cherished, venerated.

THE WISHING TREE

*'this lone, wind-blasted hawthorn in the wilds of
Argyll is one of the few known wishing trees in Scotland'*

*Grant me a wish O ancient thorn
Queen of the land maiden and crone
grant me a wish as I beseech*

Every inch of your twisted limbs
studded encrusted pressed with coins
each one somebody's fossilised wish

*What is your wish, replies the tree
as it rests in its own infirmity
Speak to me of your heart's entreaty*

*I wish for a Scotland green and free
a world and its peoples in harmony
where humans and creatures share the earth*

*I wish for seasons and climate at peace
sun air water lands and seas
an equilibrium poised alert*

*I wish for my poems to share a story
for my children's children's true destiny
for ripening death and rebirth*

The wind was keening the tree was silent
clouds were luminous shoots were greening
blossoms were budding from every coin

Tree of the May, Queen of the Light
berries of blood and blossoms white
my wishes are granted by this sign.